

*Liberalism  
with Honor*

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## *Liberal Inspirations*

Why do men and women sometimes risk their necks to defend their liberties? One thinks first of soldiers who defend the collective liberty against foreign enemies, but in liberal democracies individual liberties sometimes need defense as well, and from internal aggressors rather than external ones—think of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s defense of civil rights for blacks, for example, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s defense of women’s suffrage. For all its advantages, democracy is distinctly vulnerable to the problem of majority tyranny. Hence democratic peoples must attend to the defense of individual liberties within the polity even as they protect the collective liberty from foreign enemies. Both types of defense rest on strong exertions of individual agency, the capacity for intentional, self-initiated action. What sustains this capacity for agency in soldiers and activists such as King and Stanton? What inspires the spirited defense of liberty, especially when the risks are high and the benefits uncertain?

The spirited defense of liberty once was explained as a point of honor, as when the first Americans pledged to defend their independence with “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”<sup>1</sup> But we rarely speak of honor today. The language of honor went out of fashion with the French Revolution, along with powdered wigs and silk hose with breeches. These days honor seems quaint and obsolete, even frivolous, and it makes us vaguely suspicious.<sup>2</sup> Honor has always received mixed reviews, of course, arousing admiration, envy, and contempt all at once, with the result that those receiving honors today are forever in danger of being run out of town tomorrow.<sup>3</sup> And modern democrats even more

than others have reason to distrust honor, because the distinctions it draws seem to run afoul of democratic equality.

Honor is a multifaceted phenomenon that includes (a) *public honors* in the form of external recognition; (b) *codes of honor*; and (c) honor as a *quality of character*, the ambitious desire to live up to one's code and to be publicly recognized for doing so. In spite of our contemporary distrust, the various facets of honor still play a role in American democracy, even capturing center stage from time to time. "Honoring F.D.R." is how one newspaper headline described the recent dedication of a new presidential memorial, for example. Similarly, we have a postal stamp that "honors" Rosa Parks, and the parents of schoolchildren who make the honor roll sometimes brag about it by displaying bumper stickers on the rear fenders of their cars: "My Child Is an Honor Student at Central Junior High School." The practice of building monuments, awarding prizes, and displaying bumper stickers in recognition of special achievements is not unfamiliar to us. Public honors reward excellence. They are pleasant for their (living) recipients and they are good for the rest of us, who thereby are shown a high standard and given an incentive to pursue it. And public honors seek to win us over to the high standards they reward by a policy of attraction rather than coercion; they make difficult achievements desirable but not mandatory. Public honors are *inspiring* in the literal sense that they arouse the spiritedness in us, stirring up the ambitious desires that drive extraordinary efforts. In this sense, public honors offer a truly liberal form of education: they teach us without commanding us.

Yet if public honors please our liberal attachment to freedom, they are less friendly to our democratic love of equality. Public honors are always distributed unequally. Not every parent is entitled to display an honor-roll bumper sticker on the rear fender of the family car; not all presidents are endowed with monuments. Most of the time, most of us accept distributive inequalities like these. We know that equalizing public honors would result in either coercion or insignificance. Either we would need to force everyone to meet standards that are higher than most people could or would choose to meet, or we would need to lower the standards to a level that would make their achievement automatic for everyone. Yet if public honors were automatic they would have as much appeal, and as little to teach us, as our social security numbers. Public honors can inspire us only if they are distributed unequally.

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Public honors in the form of external recognition are not the only familiar form of honor today, either. We have other uses for the word, as when the occasional college exam is administered on the basis of an “honor code.” The honor code is an obligation, not an award, and it articulates a rule of conduct. In the context of a college exam, adhering to the honor code means resisting the temptation to cheat. This usage also implies a quality of character: the student who adheres to the honor code has an honorable character, or she possesses the quality that we call honor. In contrast to public honors, honor as a quality of character is an internal phenomenon. One can be true to the code without receiving public recognition for it. In fact, the honor code typically is invoked to restrain us from temptations when no authority is present to supervise, or recognize, our actions. After all, no honor code is needed for exams that are overseen by official proctors who check identity cards, keep time, and watch for wandering eyes. Instead, the honor code is called upon when an exam is to be taken without supervision, when the student must oversee herself. She is responsible for ensuring that *she* takes the test rather than hiring someone else to take it for her, that she stays within the time limit, that she refrains from looking up the answers in her textbook, and so on. The honorable student adheres to the honor code out of self-respect, not from fear of reprisals or the promise of public approval. She owes it to herself to live up to the code; to do otherwise would be to let herself down. Her reward is personal gratification, the pleasure of having resisted the allures of the ring of Gyges.

The student who resists such temptations for the sake of her self-respect displays a special kind of independence. She shows herself to be in command of herself and not commanded by her lowest impulses, or the opinions of others, or fear. Her independence is the mark of individual agency, the power to act rather than merely to be acted upon. It calls to mind Kant’s notion of autonomy, but it is not the same as autonomy, partly because one who abides by the honor code accepts its standard (“Don’t cheat”) as given. She submits her will to the authority of a standard that is external to her will, and so she is not the author of the code that guides her as Kantian autonomy requires. Yet because of the cloak of invisibility under which her action takes place, she herself must enforce the standard. She must be her own authority figure rather than depending on someone else to supervise her into right action. Honor as a quality of character implies self-command.

If honor in this form bears a (limited) resemblance to autonomy, it also looks something like virtue. Like virtue, honor is in part a quality of character and a form of excellence. And honor motivates the honorable student to adhere to the honor code because of the pleasure of self-respect that it produces. The idea that there is a pleasure (self-respect) that is higher than the pleasure of an unjustly high grade recalls Aristotle's account of the hierarchy of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>4</sup> Virtuous actions produce a kind of pleasure in us, Aristotle says, one that is more complete and more noble than the pleasures of the body, albeit less perfect than the pleasure of contemplation. The pleasures produced by virtue make it desirable and so motivate us to act, and to act well. Like virtue, and unlike Kantian autonomy, honor is desirable in the sense that it rewards us with a form of pleasure, and it uses our desire for pleasure as a way of motivating our action. The pleasures produced by honor, like those of virtue, rise above the pleasures produced by the satisfaction of the appetites. It is because of the promise of pleasures that stand above the appetites that honor can sometimes forsake simple self-interest to pursue principled ends.

The resemblance between honor and virtue makes one wonder why we speak of the honor code rather than the "virtue code." The idea of a virtue code is almost nonsensical, however, for a code articulates general rules of conduct whereas a virtue refers to a particular excellence of character. On this basis we distinguish ancient "virtue-centered" theories of moral and political obligation from modern "rule-governed" ones.<sup>5</sup> A rule is a command or a general obligation imposed from the outside; an excellence of character is a particular right desire within. The form of honor implied by the honor code does not fit easily into either category because it draws on both. Honor is both a quality of character and rule-governed. It is the quality of character that makes one wish to live up to certain rules of conduct, a particular desire to uphold a general obligation. And whereas rules tell us what to do, virtues articulate ways of being. It is true that virtuous ways of being also issue in action. Honor and virtue converge in their emphasis on action and agency. Yet to be virtuous one should study how the best person meets a variety of particular situations, rather than follow a fixed set of general prescriptions. To be an honorable student, by contrast, one need only adhere to the general tenets of the code, which apply universally, or at least to all students. Consequently, there is no mean with respect to following the

honor code. Honor has a categorical quality: either you follow the rules or you are a cheater. And the rules apply in the same way to everyone who takes the exam, unlike a virtue, where the mean that constitutes the virtue is in some measure relative to the individual and the circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Looking up the answers in the textbook is a violation of the honor code under any circumstances. Honor is more than a virtue because it combines a quality of character, a particular right desire, with general rules of conduct, and consequently cannot be collapsed simply into the category of virtue.<sup>7</sup>

The form of honor that is at stake in the honor code is grounded in an obligation to oneself rather than a duty to others, which distinguishes it from contemporary conceptions of civic virtue. The civic virtue that political theorists sometimes invoke today emphasizes citizens' duties to one another and the political community, rather than to themselves. Civic virtue conceived in this way means putting oneself aside for the sake of the whole, sacrificing one's individual interest to the common good, or at least identifying one's interests with the common good. By contrast, one abides by the honor code not primarily for the sake of others but for one's own sake: one owes it to oneself to take the test fairly, to meet the challenge and master it. And whereas a failure of civic virtue does harm to others and to the whole, one fails *oneself* when one violates the honor code. Cheaters may inflate the curve and this could disadvantage other test-takers, but the real harm that comes from violating the honor code comes to the cheaters themselves, who then must live with themselves without grounds for respecting themselves. It is true that the honorable student may suffer a real loss if her honest performance yields a lower grade than what she could have had by cheating. Yet the sacrifice she makes in this case is not for the sake of others. Instead, she sacrifices what she considers to be a lower good so that she may win a higher one. It is her own good that she has in mind, and despite the loss of the higher grade the honorable student feels herself to be a winner in the end because of the good of self-respect she gains. On the whole, it is good for everyone if everyone abides by the honor code, but the intention that lies behind obedience to the code is not the good of others or the common good but one's own good, the good of self-respect. Even though the honor code implies a common standard and serves a common purpose, the motivation that drives it is self-serving and its direct aim is individualistic, the personal desire for self-respect.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, there are other forms of virtue that do not involve the collectivism of contemporary civic virtue but center instead on duties to oneself. The Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity is one example, which is defined as “complete virtue” directed toward oneself.<sup>9</sup> The magnanimous man cultivates the moral virtues for his own sake, because he sees that being magnanimous is a more complete and so more desirable way of living. He owes it to himself. We admire him for the completeness of his character because in him we see all forms of moral excellence shine forth. By contrast, we admire the honorable student not for the completeness of her character so much as for her strength of character; not because she displays all the virtues but because she demonstrates self-command. She will not be overcome by the impulse to cheat, whatever the consequences, because she will not be the slave even of her own interests. The student who lives up to the honor code prefers her principles to her interests, or lets her interests be guided by her principles. She acts, rather than simply reacting to the pressures of her circumstance. She may not be generous or temperate or friendly or witty or truthful or munificent or virtuous in any other respect, but she is her own mover. Being honorable, in contrast to being magnanimous, results in self-mastery rather than the perfection of the soul.

Honor does presuppose a certain teleology, if only a partial one. It implies distinctions between higher and lower, especially the distinction between living free through the power of self-command, or the exercise of individual agency, and acting as the instrument of someone else’s will, or one’s own necessities, or the impersonal forces of circumstance. There is something intrinsically admirable in the ambitious desire to live up to a principled code of conduct, in seeking self-respect on principled grounds, in aiming to fulfill what one takes to be an important duty to oneself. Honor as a quality of character engages more of the complex capacities that distinguish human beings from other creatures than does, say, the unreflective pursuit of appetite. The capacity for honor is among the things that distinguish human beings from the rest of nature, and individual acts of honor distinguish a few human beings from the rest of us. Of course, the capacity for evil is also distinctively human. It, too, engages complex capacities unknown to the lower animals. Malice is more fully human than careless disregard. To say that one action is “more fully human” than another, then, is to give only an incomplete account of its moral worth. The goodness and justice of any particular

form of honor necessarily depend on the moral content of its codes. But when its codes are good and just, honor is more than good and just: it is also noble. This is the sense in which the teleology that honor entails is only partial. Honor presupposes that self-command is better than its opposite, but it does not presuppose comprehensive knowledge of the human good or the perfection of the soul. The teleology of honor places self-command above subservience but it does not itself define the ends toward which the self-commanding agent aims. Perhaps because honor is not a mark of perfection, we pay our respects to honorable individuals (as when we visit the Lincoln Memorial or the Washington Monument) but we do not pray to them. Similarly, “honorable mention” is worth noting but is not the highest prize; and when one’s team makes it into postseason play one can say that it made an honorable showing even if it did not go all the way. Insofar as honor supports individual agency without promising or requiring the perfection of the soul, it is compatible with liberal forms, purposes, and character.

The substantive content of particular codes of honor may not always contain principles that are compatible with liberalism, however. Honor can serve illiberal as well as liberal ideals, as the case of honor and slavery in the American South explored in Chapter 4 suggests. More generally, to say that honor is compatible with liberal purposes and liberal characters is not to say that liberal thinkers have always treated honor warmly. Early liberals (and quasi-liberals) such as Hobbes and Locke saw the love of honor as a contributor to the ills of humanity’s natural condition, on the grounds that it may make persons quixotically idealistic and even warlike. The desire to be a hero may turn into a desire to slay dragons, or to search perpetually for (and even invent) opportunities for heroism. It is not only democrats, then, who have had occasion to object to honor. Yet as we shall see, moderate forms of honor guided by liberal codes not only are compatible with both liberalism and democracy, but have an irreplaceable role to play in liberal-democratic politics.

If we rarely speak of honor today, and then only with some discomfort, we have reason to reconsider it, because individual agency in the United States is in need of liberal inspirations. Despite our present prosperity, there is a widespread sense today that Americans are losing control of the forces that govern their lives.<sup>10</sup> Our beleaguered sense of agency cuts across the familiar cleavages of race, class, and gender. The

inner-city poor may feel especially disenfranchised, but they are not the only ones to feel disempowered. In the face of a globalizing economy, big-money politics, escalating environmental crises, entrenched racial tensions and disparities, pervasive gender inequities, and the alarming deterioration of public education, the suburban middle class, too, seems to regard itself as subject to forces that elude its grasp. Rich or poor, white or black, male or female, today we are all, it seems, victims of our circumstances.

Or rather, it *seems* to us that we are the victims of our circumstances. We have lost faith in ourselves as the agents of our destinies. Perhaps this partly accounts for the dramatic rise of communities of faith in the United States in the last generation, especially fundamentalist religious denominations.<sup>11</sup> The rise of faith-based communities reflects, at least in part, a lost faith in individual agency and an effort to recover it through spiritual resources. To replenish the faith in our capacity for agency that is the precondition of constitutional democracy and individual liberty, we need new inspiration. And we ought not rely only on religious inspiration, which, particularly when it is fundamentalist in origin, may threaten the toleration, diversity, and individual liberty that are the cornerstones of liberal democracy. To restore faith in the strong capacity for agency that supports liberal democracy in America, Americans need liberal inspirations.

## Political Agency and the Need for Inspiration

A strong capacity for agency is important to liberal democracy because, as James Madison said, political power is “of an encroaching nature.”<sup>12</sup> The American founders agreed with Montesquieu that “every man who has any power tends to abuse it. He goes until he finds some limits.”<sup>13</sup> Today we have Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, Whitewater, independent counsels, and congressional ethics committees to remind us of this ineradicable feature of political power. And the problem of encroaching power is even more complex in modern liberal democracies than it was for the old regimes that Montesquieu knew. For in liberal democracies, Madison said, “it is necessary not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but also to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part.”<sup>14</sup> The specter of majority tyranny always haunts governments that are based on the principle of popular sovereignty. Along with overreaching executives and unscrupulous legisla-

tors, then, we must be on our guard against such developments as Jim Crow laws or Colorado's Amendment Two targeting homosexuals, efforts by one part of the society to restrict the individual liberties of another part. In the United States, a Constitution of separate powers, federalism, and the Bill of Rights all set formal limits on the will of majorities and the powers of government. Yet the formal limits specified by our Constitution are only "parchment barriers"<sup>15</sup> without the springs of individual agency that set them in motion: American liberties need spirited guardians.

Formal liberties, then, can be effective only where there is a will to use and defend them. But what is the character of this will? What motivates the spirited defense of individual liberties, especially in the face of obvious risks and indeterminate benefits? This question has been largely neglected in political theory in recent years, as efforts to specify the meaning of justice and political legitimacy have taken center stage. To the extent that political theorists do attend to the question of motivations today, they divide between the proponents of rational choice theory, who emphasize the motive of self-interest, and those who defend some form of obligations to others. The latter group admits of significant diversity.<sup>16</sup> It includes the communitarians and civic republicans who recommend civic virtue as well as the liberals who invoke "liberal virtues," or the Rawlsian "sense of justice," or Scanlon's "agreement motive." On the civic-republican view, it is a love of the common good or a sense of civic duty that moves citizens to act in politics.<sup>17</sup> Thus to ensure that individuals obey good laws and resist bad laws, it is necessary to cultivate the virtues of citizenship. This means that government must engage in the formation of citizen character. Statecraft is soulcraft, or at the very least statecraft is "selfcraft."<sup>18</sup> One problem with communitarian and civic-republican theories of virtue, as has frequently been noted, is that they run the risk of submerging particular identities in a collective identity and may require the state to play a strongly formative role in the cultivation of virtue. This can threaten the diversity and the individual liberty that are the hallmarks of liberal democracy. And while civic virtue accounts for the shared habits, common identity, and collective vision that support participatory democracy, the collectivism of civic virtue does not easily accommodate individual ambition or support the spirited defense of individual liberties when they contravene the collective (or majority) will.

In an effort to avoid the risks of communitarian and civic-republican

virtue, a few liberal theorists have offered their own accounts of “liberal virtues.”<sup>19</sup> Liberal virtues are qualities of character that sustain a minimal level of civility in pluralistic societies and support the institutional procedures of liberal government. Toleration often is mentioned in this regard, along with self-restraint and respect for persons. These liberal virtues largely do avoid the problems of exclusion and coercion that attend communitarian and civic-republican conceptions of virtue. Yet important as they are for liberal-democratic government, these liberal virtues also are incomplete. Toleration and self-restraint cannot explain what Rosa Parks did, for example; they do not account for the motivations that animate risky and unusually ambitious forms of action. They are not robust enough to explain great exertions of individual agency.

Despite the differences between them, and leaving aside the particular problems attendant on each one, civic-republican and liberal virtues are alike in being obligations to others. In this respect, the liberal sense of justice and the agreement motive are no different. John Rawls defines the sense of justice as “the willingness . . . to act in relation to others on terms that they also can publicly endorse.”<sup>20</sup> The agreement motive likewise moves us to carry out “what we owe to others,” which is to live together with them on terms that no one could reasonably reject.<sup>21</sup> These motives are troubled in their own ways by problems of exclusivity and reliability,<sup>22</sup> but the main point for present purposes is that the liberal sense of justice and the agreement motive are obligations to others, and they share their other-regarding orientation with civic-republican and liberal virtues as they are commonly conceived. No sensible person would deny the importance of obligations to others in liberal democracy or any other regime. The sense of duty to others provides a crucial corrective to the potential narrowness and egoism of self-interest, qualities that can make living together difficult or render impossible the large-scale collective projects that political life often requires. Yet the obligations to others implicit in the sense of justice and the agreement motive rest on a measure of altruism that is at odds with the self-centered ethos of modern liberalism.<sup>23</sup> And altruism is notoriously unreliable in politics. In the impersonal arena of the public sphere, where the “others” whom we owe are mainly strangers, the particular bonds of love, friendship, solidarity, and the like, which sustain altruism in other arenas, are largely unavailable. Outside these particular relations of care, what we owe to others tends to have, on the whole, a weaker pull than what we

owe (or think we owe) to ourselves. Altruism is perfectly possible, to be sure; most of us have some firsthand experience of it. But altruism is undependable. This familiar fact is one reason for the modern rejection of political systems that require altruism to sustain them, a rejection that unites such otherwise diverse moderns as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Kant, and Madison.

The conflict between self-interest and the sense of obligation to others has fueled an increasingly polarized debate within political theory between the “realist” proponents of rational choice theory, who seek to explain action on the basis of self-interest alone, and the communitarians, civic republicans, and liberals who emphasize the importance of various duties to others. The strict division of motivations between self-interest and duties to others is a familiar feature of contemporary thought but it is not a particularly productive one. Too often today, our thinking on matters of moral psychology is confined within the limits of these dichotomous categories: interests are what we do for ourselves, it is thought, whereas obligations are what we owe to others. Yet what we do for ourselves ought not be limited to our interests, and what we owe to others does not exhaust our obligations. The contemporary dichotomy leaves out a whole class of motives based on the sense of duty to oneself, of which honor is one. And while honor sometimes requires the sacrifice of certain interests, as a duty to oneself it never renounces self-concern. Thus it does not rest on altruism, which makes it friendly to the liberal way of life. At the same time, honor can animate actions that self-interest, at least conventionally conceived, never would allow, including actions that put one’s life in jeopardy in the name of principled ends. It is more reliable than altruism but also spirited and courageous, which makes it a powerful source of individual agency.

The incompleteness of contemporary political theory on the subject of moral psychology is not limited to the neglect of obligations to oneself. Also missing is an acknowledgment of liberal democracy’s need for heroic qualities of character—if only on occasion and only in a few. The motives most frequently mentioned by political theorists today rest on qualities that are held to be (if only by the theorists who recommend them) common. Civic virtue, liberal virtues, the sense of justice, and the agreement motive are egalitarian, even though they rely on altruism. They are demanding because they conflict with self-interest, but they are equally demanding and demanding in the same way for all of us. Excep-

tional qualities and extraordinary efforts are not thought to be required; one need not be a hero to have civic virtue or a sense of justice. These obligations represent societywide ideals, and the regimes they serve can only operate successfully if they motivate all citizens on a regular basis, or at least most citizens most of the time. Consequently, in a well-ordered civic republic there is nothing distinctive about a virtuous citizen, and nothing exceptional in a Rawlsian liberal democracy about citizens with a sense of justice. Such citizens are no more and no less than what one would expect.

Even in well-ordered polities, however, the encroaching nature of political power means that things sometimes can go wrong. Moreover, American liberal democracy is a hybrid regime, which holds in balance the potentially conflicting principles and practices of individual liberty and popular sovereignty. The balance is not exactly precarious because it has the backing of a written and revered Constitution, but neither is it perfectly impervious to assault. When things go wrong, as they sometimes will, and individual liberties come under threat, something more than what is usually expected of citizens may be required of them, or of some of them. In these moments, extraordinary exertions of individual agency may be called for. So even though liberal democracy normally can get by with good or even mediocre citizens, on occasion it needs great ones. The particular combination of qualities intrinsic to honor support heroic action: high and principled ambition, courage, pride, and the desires for self-respect and public esteem. It is neither necessary nor possible for this combination of qualities to be universally held. And however much it needs great citizens, liberal democracy does not need every citizen to be great; indeed, an abundance of heroic types could only be a mixed blessing to any polity.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, while most Americans are decent folks, few of us could match the shining examples of a Lincoln, or a Washington, or a Frederick Douglass, or an Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Such exceptional citizens protect and serve our liberties, and they also vindicate our faith in individual agency. We ordinary citizens are reminded by the examples they provide that we, too, are more than the victims of our circumstances. If most of us never will fully realize the extraordinary capacity for agency such individuals exemplify, nevertheless we can aim in that direction. They inspire us to reach for the exercise of agency that too often seems to elude us, and in so reaching we may become more fully the agents of our destinies and defenders of our

liberties than we otherwise would be.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, honor can inform the lives of all democratic citizens, but unlike some other qualities (such as egalitarian civic virtue, for instance) honor is not a characteristic that is likely to be held in equal measure by all citizens, even though in modern democracies it is open to all.

The qualities inherent in honor that sometimes animate great exertions of agency are irreducibly aristocratic if only in the sense that they are not commonly held, although anyone may hold them and in democratic societies all of us can reach for them. Liberal democracy's occasional need for great citizens is one reason to resist the myth that "modern man" can do without aristocratic honor, at least honor that is aristocratic in this sense. It is a common belief that in the wake of the French Revolution the newly minted modern man traded his honor for the universal status of democratic dignity and never looked back.<sup>26</sup> No one can deny that the modern period ushered in changes in how we conceive of human identities. Whereas premodern cultures and polities identified the individual with his or her social role and institutional status, modern politics regards the "solitary self," devoid of roles and status, as the ultimate ground of personal identity, at least in the political context.<sup>27</sup> "Modern man is Don Quixote on his deathbed, denuded of the multicolored banners that previously enveloped the self and senses," as one interpreter writes.<sup>28</sup> Honor in the old regime was in large part an expression of external status, of one's place in the fixed hierarchy of traditional society, and one's sense of honor was constitutively tied to the particular social role that one inherited. By contrast, individuals in the modern world are not identified with any social roles in particular, especially not hereditary roles. At least we are not, in principle, politically identified with such roles. Social roles and the expectations that go with them continue to exert a powerful influence on individuals today. But most of our roles are chosen rather than inherited, and our political status is independent of all of them, based instead on the ideal of intrinsic human dignity, which applies universally to all persons and establishes a rudimentary equality between them. Because the modern ideal abstracts from (at least in principle) the socially imposed roles and norms that gave content to honor in the old regime, this ideal and the new conditions it serves are said to have led "to the liquidation of honor altogether."<sup>29</sup> The only place for honor is thought to be the now repudiated world of "intact, stable institutions where individuals possess certain at-

tachments between their identities and the institutional roles that society assigns them.”<sup>30</sup>

It is true that the role of honor is more circumscribed in modern democracies than it was before the French Revolution. Honor is not *the* spring of modern democracy as it was in the Old World—the passion, as Montesquieu said, that made all the parts of the body politic move. In the new regime, honor competes with a range of other motives, some of which are more consistently supported by democratic institutions and practices than is honor. But the fact that honor is more rare today does not diminish its importance, since even rare instances of honor can have wide and lasting effects. And there should be nothing mysterious in the fact that liberal democracy sometimes leans on motives that it does not regularize. More to the point, the myth of honor’s obsolescence is based on an incomplete understanding of what honor is. It reflects a mistake to which Tocqueville drew attention in *Democracy in America*, which is to confuse one type of honor (old-regime or feudal honor) with the whole of it, not seeing the variability of honor, its capacity to adapt and to serve different regimes and the personal identities they inculcate. The modern abandonment of hereditary social roles and fixed, hierarchical status liquidates one form of honor but it does not entail the wholesale disintegration of honor. The sources of personal identity have changed, and they now include the ideal of democratic dignity, but honor in the modern world partially incorporates this change and is by no means wholly undone by it.

The reason that honor can incorporate changes in personal identity is that honor has roots in human nature that run deeper. There is more to human nature than personal identity, including the capacities for courage, pride, high and principled ambition, the sense of duty to oneself, and the desires for self-respect and public distinction. These capacities, which are central features of honor as a quality of character, survive changes in the cultural factors that help shape personal identities. Honor as a quality of character is partly conventional because it interacts with conventional aspects of personal identity, but honor also rests on features of human nature that are more than merely conventional. Far from destroying honor, the personal identity of modern man denuded of social roles and institutional positions supports its own form of honor, as the American founders emphatically asserted. In fact, the founders regarded the fixed social roles and political inequalities associated with the

old regime as affronts to what they called “the honor of the human race.”<sup>31</sup> They associated honor directly with the dignity of the individual and the democratic self-rule it justified. The American system, they said, “vindicates the honor of the human race”<sup>32</sup>—not by upholding standards attached to some particular social role but by demonstrating the human power of self-determination, which is a universal phenomenon. The American experiment vindicates the honor of the human race by showing that there is more to humankind than its circumstances and its conventional identities. In the process, it demonstrates that there is more to honor than institutional roles and social status.

The fact that honor is more than roles and status, that as a quality of character it engages fundamental human capacities, distinguishes honor from the ideal of intrinsic dignity that is said to have replaced it. Charles Taylor describes this ideal as “the modern notion of dignity, now used in a universalist and egalitarian sense, where we talk of the inherent ‘dignity of human beings,’ ” the underlying premise of which is that “everyone shares in it.”<sup>33</sup> This ideal is the founding principle of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for instance.<sup>34</sup> Dignity in this sense is a given, not an achievement. It is a fixed status that attaches to all persons. Everyone has dignity and has it in the same measure inherently, which means independently of one’s particular conditions and actions. Dignity conceived in this way is impossible to lose. One need not do anything distinctive to keep or claim one’s dignity; indeed, one need not act at all, for there is no necessary connection between dignity as an intrinsic status and action. Brave or timid, ambitious or lethargic, awake or even asleep, one is in possession of one’s intrinsic worth as a human being, or one’s equal dignity.

It should be clear from this description that honor as a quality of character and the ideal of intrinsic dignity are fundamentally different sorts of phenomena, and that comparing them is akin to comparing apples and tennis racquets. The assertion of honor’s obsolescence is based in part on the faulty premise that a quality of character can be exchanged for and replaced by an ideal of fixed status. The mistake is understandable, because besides being a quality of character the term honor also can refer to public honors, which are tied to status and so are on a par with the ideal of dignity as a form of status, and because in the old regime the external aspects of honor as status had a tendency to predominate over honor as a quality of character. Although the mistake is un-

derstandable, however, it is misleading. Dignity cannot simply replace honor because the two are not equivalent terms; there is a remainder between them comprising the courage, pride, high and principled ambition, and the rest that constitute honor as a quality of character.

The idea of inherent dignity provides a valuable justification for equal political rights and universal human rights as well as a standard for assessing the legitimacy of the laws and public policies of particular governments. As such it is irreplaceable, and in liberal democracies the standard set by democratic dignity should never be forgotten. Yet sometimes this standard must be surpassed, if only because the defense of the principle of equal dignity itself occasionally requires unusually spirited forms of action. After all, even if one's intrinsic dignity can never be lost, it may not always be respected. The intrinsic dignity of humankind sometimes must be vindicated, and for its vindication the universal ideal of intrinsic dignity relies on the presence of qualities of character that are more than merely intrinsic and not at all universal. The ideal of intrinsic human dignity is impotent to bring about its own vindication because of the fact that no necessary connection exists between intrinsic dignity and individual agency. The ideal of dignity is a normative standard, not a motivation, or a quality of character, or a source of agency. And the acts of dignity that rise to defend the ideal have more in common with honor as a quality of character than with the ideal of intrinsic dignity itself.

The need to go beyond the standard set by the principle of equal dignity is reflected in another common usage of the word dignity today. Today we can distinguish "dignified" actions and persons from "undignified" ones. We may characterize someone whom we admire as a person of "great dignity." Dignity in this sense is neither universal nor equal. It may be lost or forfeited and it admits of degrees. It is a mark of distinction, not something that inheres intrinsically in everyone. When the word dignity is used in this way it is a democratic euphemism for honor, because it is tied to exceptional action, high achievement, and extraordinary character. To be a man or woman of great dignity one must do something, or many things, to distinguish oneself, and so dignity in this form must be earned. Similarly, we sometimes speak admiringly of the "sense of dignity" that inspires great acts. King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" refers to such a sense of dignity as an important motivation for black civil rights activists.<sup>35</sup> But the sense of dignity is not some-

thing that is distributed equally, even if dignity in principle adheres equally in us. The sense of dignity goes beyond and rises above intrinsic dignity as a universal status. Some people have a stronger sense of dignity than others, as their different actions attest. Few of us could match the strong sense of dignity that inspired Rosa Parks to hold her seat on the bus, for example. The sense of dignity is not democratic but aristocratic in precisely the way that honor as a quality of character is aristocratic. It is uncommon, even extraordinary, rather than automatic, and so it belongs only to a few, even if it may be achieved by anyone. Thus while all are entitled to have their equal dignity respected, not everyone is entitled to be called “dignified,” and not everyone possesses the strong sense of dignity that can inspire risky action. The ideal of intrinsic dignity cannot replace honor because there are features of honor that democratic dignity cannot capture and that liberal democrats should not neglect. Indeed, the democratic ideal of intrinsic dignity could not long survive without the aristocratic sense of dignity, or the quality of honor, that rises to defend it when necessary.

The use of democratic euphemisms to mark aristocratic qualities does a disservice to American democracy. The democratic ideal of intrinsic dignity has an important place in our regime, to be sure, and the language of dignity is perfectly legitimate when applied to this ideal. Too often, however, the language of equal dignity is unreflectively extended to qualities of character (such as the sense of dignity) that are anything but equal. When this happens, the extraordinary character of these qualities is obscured from view. This results in the vague but misguided impression that because in principle we all enjoy the equal status of intrinsic dignity we also intrinsically possess—and so can be relied upon automatically to enact—the extraordinary qualities of character needed to support the principle. The language of honor is better suited to these qualities because it reminds us that the democratic ideal of intrinsic dignity is not self-activating but leans on aristocratic (in the sense of uncommon) supports.

Democratic euphemisms can make remarkable qualities appear to be undistinctive, but they also can make us think that undistinctive or common qualities are the only ones available to us. Calling honor what it is rather than employing democratic euphemisms makes us aware of the aristocratic qualities or capacities in ourselves that have survived the rise of modern man.<sup>36</sup> If the French Revolution vanquished the old or-

der, it did not fundamentally alter human nature. Even the old order itself, while largely undone, was not entirely eradicated. At least since Tocqueville, historians have found vestiges of the old regime in the political societies that survived its overthrow. Indeed, some of the central features of modern liberal democracy—including individual rights, the voluntary associations of civil society, and the separation of powers—have been traced to aristocratic origins.<sup>37</sup> The boundary line between the Old World and the New is more permeable than sometimes is thought. This is true partly because some of the foundations of modern democracy rest on the remains of aristocratic society but also because of the enduring quality of certain aspects of human nature. To the extent that we obscure our own aristocratic capacities and liberal democracy's aristocratic elements, we deny ourselves potentially powerful sources of individual agency and withhold crucial support for individual liberties.

Rawls's idea of "self-esteem" provides an example of this danger. Rawls notes that individuals must have a high opinion of themselves to be forceful agents, and he acknowledges that those who think too little of themselves are easily subjugated in politics. Without self-respect, he says, nothing would seem worth doing and men and women would lack the will to act.<sup>38</sup> Citizens need self-respect in order "to care about their basic liberties and opportunities" and to use and defend their liberties.<sup>39</sup> For this reason, Rawls includes the social bases of self-respect, what he calls "self-esteem," among the primary goods of distributive justice. Self-esteem is the most important primary good, Rawls says, because it enables individuals to make use of other goods.<sup>40</sup> Thus self-esteem is a good to be distributed, according to Rawls, and in a just society it will be distributed equally. Self-esteem even can be guaranteed, he maintains, if only the principles of justice are executed properly. Indeed, "by arranging inequalities for reciprocal advantage and by abstaining from the exploitation of the contingencies of nature and social circumstance within a framework of equal liberty, persons . . . insure their self-esteem."<sup>41</sup> Rawls's concept of self-esteem democratizes the proud self-respect internal to honor by making it equally applicable to all. Self-esteem even can be guaranteed to all as a matter of equal distribution because all that matters for self-esteem is that one's endeavors be "confirmed" by one's associates. The absolute level of one's achievements is irrelevant. All that is needed for self-esteem is the appreciation of others, who are obliged (in a just society) to provide it.

Yet the disjunction between the concept of desert and the sense of one's own value undermines the power of self-esteem as a source of political agency, however unwittingly, especially when it comes to risky and difficult forms of action. In practice, one gains confidence in proportion to the gains one makes in mastering some skill or situation; one's confidence increases with one's abilities. By disconnecting abilities from self-esteem, Rawls makes self-confidence into an assertion rather than an achievement. You might be able to muster a measure of confidence simply by asserting it or having it asserted for you by others, independently of any real abilities or achievements. But surely this would be a false confidence, liable to get you in over your head and apt to crumple under the pressure of the first real challenge. The confidence needed to sustain risky and difficult action in defense of individual liberties (think of what Martin Luther King, Jr., did, for example) cannot be spun from air or from good intentions. Risks like these rest on confidence that is equal to the challenge because it is girded by the experience of achievement. Self-respect cannot simply be asserted or distributed; it must be won, at least if it is to withstand challenge in the toughest cases and so to support strong exertions of individual agency. Moreover, if one can be made to esteem oneself regardless of what one does, what incentive do we have for taking the risks and making the efforts that the defense of liberty sometimes, if not always, requires? Self-respect, which is a necessary condition of agency, cannot be guaranteed without undercutting agency. We must have enough self-respect to have the desire for self-respect, but not so much that we no longer need to reach for it. Rawls means to support agency by democratizing self-respect in the form of equal "self-esteem," but in fact he undercuts agency.

If the democratic ideal of intrinsic dignity and the democratic distribution of self-esteem cannot replace honor, neither can the practice of reciprocal recognition that sometimes is said to have supplanted it. It is the inequalities of recognition entailed by honor that make it objectionable from the standpoint of modern democracy.<sup>42</sup> According to Taylor, for example, these inequalities run counter to the principle of intrinsic dignity, and therefore honor in democratic societies must be replaced with the reciprocal recognition that accompanies "the politics of equal dignity."<sup>43</sup> Yet Taylor's presumption that reciprocal recognition can stand in for honor, like his argument for dignity, is based on an incomplete characterization of honor. He sees only honor's external dimension, its

quest for distinction, and does not acknowledge the internal dimension, honor as the quality of character that makes one wish to live up to principled codes of conduct. Or rather, Taylor collapses the two dimensions of honor together, much as Rousseau did, casting honor simply as the quality of character that makes one wish to be recognized. But honor means more than this. The honorable person wants to be the kind of person who lives up to her code of conduct. She also may wish to be *seen* as the kind of person who lives up to her code, but her concern with appearances does not diminish her allegiance to a set of independent principles and the inner desire for self-respect.

Much as Taylor's characterization of honor misses its internal dimension, so too does his recommended replacement. Recognition is not a quality of character, after all. The only basis of recognition, as Taylor construes it, is public opinion or the state, since in order to have recognition one need only—and one must—be recognized by others. It is true that public honors can inspire honorable actions and so support honorable characters. But honorable actions (abiding by the honor code on a take-home exam, for instance) sometimes can go unrecognized and still be honorable, whereas it is always impossible to be recognized without being seen and appreciated. The problem with substituting Taylor's concept of recognition for honor is that it depends too much on public opinion and on political authority. By contrast, honor's attachment to codes of conduct and principled self-respect gives it a measure of independence. One can defend one's principles and thereby respect oneself even when one is unpopular, or officially unrecognized. This makes honor a more powerful source of individual agency, especially for the members of the marginalized and minority groups with whom Taylor himself is most concerned, those persons who are least likely to be on the winning end of public opinion and the political authorities that distribute recognition.

Democratic alternatives to honor, such as recognition, or self-esteem, or the ideal of intrinsic dignity, cannot replace honor as a source of individual agency. Indeed, they may contribute to the dispiriting of agency by detaching self-respect from achievement and dignity from action, and by making self-respect and dignity too dependent on public opinion and the state. Liberal citizens must be able to stand up against public opinion and political authorities on occasion. The reputed obsolescence of honor therefore is something of a myth. There is some truth in it, as old-

regime honor has indeed been eclipsed; and in some respects this is a very good thing. But the enduring features of honor as a quality of character that support individual agency are not obsolete. The nature and sources of agency in modern life are more complex than contemporary political theory allows. Only by coming to terms with the mix of aristocratic and democratic elements in the soul of “modern man” can political theory hope to restore the lost faith in individual agency that characterizes contemporary democratic life. Political theory is not responsible for the beleaguered sense of agency that pervades America today, but the remedies it offers are incomplete because its understanding of agency is limited. The concept of honor challenges us to think more expansively about agency and to probe more deeply into the moral psychology that animates it.

### Excavating Honor

In this book I explore the meaning of honor and its power to inspire individual agency in the context of liberal constitutional government. The study is philosophical in nature. Others have examined honor empirically using the tools of modern sociology and anthropology.<sup>44</sup> Their work demonstrates the variability of honor to which Tocqueville alluded and identifies examples of honor in societies far removed from old-regime Europe, its most common association for us today. Honor also has been documented by historians, who show both shifts and continuities in honor in different countries and periods.<sup>45</sup> In approaching honor from the standpoint of political philosophy, I treat it not as an artifact of particular cultures and eras but as a lens through which to view fundamental features of human nature and politics, particularly the nature and sources of individual agency. The results of this philosophical investigation should in principle be consistent with the findings in other domains of study, but it does not aim to reproduce them all.

My analysis draws primarily on sources from modern philosophy and politics, and considers honor mainly in the context of liberal constitutional government. The project is animated by the troubled condition of individual agency in American liberal democracy today, and in seeking philosophical resources to meet this condition, it looks relatively close to home in notions of honor that are explicitly tied to liberal or modern democratic purposes and institutions. Montesquieu’s concept of honor,

with which the analysis begins, establishes direct connections between honor and the idea of a separation of powers in government, the notion of ambition counteracting ambition, civil disobedience, and the defense of individual liberty. Similarly, Tocqueville's defense of aristocratic qualities of character is intended to serve the regime of modern democracy. There is, of course, a rich ancient literature on the theme of honor as well, to which I occasionally refer but which I do not examine at length. My work does not aim to provide a comprehensive catalogue of the various treatments of honor in the history of philosophy as a whole, but rather to illuminate the particular relationship between honor and liberalism.

If the study looks for honor in sources that are relatively close to home, it does not look for them only at home. We do see some manifestations of honor in American public life today and hear the occasional reference to it, and I have argued that despite being modern and democratic we carry the possibility of honor within us. Yet to get a clear picture of honor and its connections to individual agency, one must look beyond contemporary American democracy. The reason is that honor in the United States today very often operates undercover, draped in the language of democratic dignity and obscured by its service to democratic freedoms. Unlike the *honnêtes hommes* of the old regime, honorable Americans who rise to defend individual liberties against encroaching power are more likely to make reference to their human dignity than their personal honor, and they rarely claim superior positions or special distinctions. For the most part, they want for their fellows what they claim for themselves, and their goals are in this sense egalitarian rather than exclusionary.<sup>46</sup> Yet their very actions distinguish them from the rest of us and attest to the superiority that they will not claim. The exceptional qualities of character that drive them to defend their dignity (and by extension ours, too) make them in this respect more than merely equal to the rest of us, and these qualities are closer to honor than to any other single motive.

The concealment of honor today is more habitual than intentional. Montesquieu once remarked that "man, that flexible being . . . adapts himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of others," with the result that he "is equally capable of knowing his own nature when it is shown to him and of losing even the feeling of it when it is withdrawn (*dérobe*) from him."<sup>47</sup> We have lost the feeling of the aristocratic ele-

ments in our nature. And not only that, we have so fully embraced the dichotomy between self-interest and self-sacrifice that we have forgotten how to see in ourselves and in others the motives that join personal ambition with principled higher purpose. Part of the aim of this study is to unmask these elements, to reveal honor in its contemporary manifestations, to peel away the concealing layers of democratic euphemisms and so to illuminate the aristocratic foundations and mixed motives frequently implicit in individual agency, which we rely on but no longer see. Yet precisely because of our tendency to conceal from ourselves the instances of honor nearest to hand, it is necessary to begin our exploration of honor at some remove.

We turn first to Montesquieu, who understood the strong sense of agency that supports risky action in defense of liberty. Although he was not in favor of revolution or even sudden reform, he thought that spirited resistance to the abuse of power was crucial for individual liberty, and he saw honor as the spring of such resistance.<sup>48</sup> Chapter 2 explains Montesquieu's idea of honor, showing how the ambitious but principled desire for distinction motivates disobedience to encroaching political power. This analysis serves as a point of departure for the study of honor and liberalism more generally. Four features of honor as a quality of character are elaborated: its high ambition, the balance of reverence and reflexivity, partiality, and the mix of recognition and resistance. The substantive content of codes of honor may vary from one political society to another, as do systems for distributing public honors. The formal features of honor as a quality of character elaborated here are more enduring, however. These aspects of honor remain relatively constant in different contexts. They also illuminate the nature and conditions of political agency in a more general sense.

Honor as Montesquieu presents it is a "human passion"—a desire, not a cognition. Yet honor is not limited to the lowest forms of desire, for while honor is self-serving, it is more than simply self-interest; it is a desire, but more than an appetite. With the concept of honor, Montesquieu meant to restore the higher desires that made ancient virtue such a powerful form of motivation and a rich resource for human agency. But he meant to restore this motivational force without the metaphysical presuppositions or teleological ends of ancient virtue, of which he was both philosophically skeptical and politically suspicious. Therefore in contrast to Plato and Aristotle, Montesquieu approved of "false honor," or

honor detached from moral virtue, at least in the regime of constitutional monarchy. In this context, he thought, the ambitious quest for distinction, pride, and the desire for self-respect could serve liberty by motivating the tumults between crown and nobility that limit political power. As an institutional matter, his concept of honor is intended to have instrumental value even if it lacks moral worth. To emphasize this point, Montesquieu draws attention to the unsavory aspects of “false honor,” which can easily degenerate into the “vanities” of the courtier class. But when he describes the individual resistance of the Viscount of Orte to the abusive power of his king, an early example of conscientious objection, Montesquieu clearly means for us to admire honor for its moral content as well as for its instrumental value. An ambiguity about the relationship between honor and moral virtue runs throughout Montesquieu’s analysis because this ambiguity is endemic to honor itself, as we shall see. Honor is tied to virtue but it is not identical to virtue.

Chapter 3 explores honor through the lens of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville shows the consequences of democracy that generate its resistance to honor, but he also shows why democracy needs honor and where in American society supports for honor may be found. To support individual liberty against the twin dangers of majority tyranny and “mild” despotism, Tocqueville seeks to inspire in the democratic character qualities associated with aristocratic mores and tied to old-regime honor. Courage, pride, high and principled ambition, the desires for distinction and self-respect, the sense of duty to oneself, and the love of liberty as an end in itself all prove to be crucial supports for democratic freedom on Tocqueville’s account. Today Tocqueville’s interest in these qualities tends to be neglected in favor of the more egalitarian and collectivist aspects of his civic virtue.<sup>49</sup> Yet Tocqueville’s portrait of democracy in America points to the unavoidable conclusion that the aristocratic qualities tied to honor are at least as important to democratic freedom as the egalitarian and collectivist civic virtues that are so widely championed in our day. The spirit of individual resistance, not simply participation or fraternity, is the core of liberty for Tocqueville.<sup>50</sup> To sustain it, something more than civic virtue is needed, qualities closely associated with traditional honor.<sup>51</sup> And while Tocqueville emphasized that the relationship between honor and democracy in America was far from harmonious, he did identify a specifically American form of honor, and he made it clear that a range of qualities associated with traditional

honor could be found in the United States, even if they were not the predominant motives of the new regime.

Many of the traditionally aristocratic qualities associated with honor that Tocqueville championed have in fact helped to sustain democracy in America from the beginning, as Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate. Chapter 4 examines the meaning and role of honor in the United States at the time of the founding, and then explores the nature of honor in the antebellum South. The founders invoked the concept of honor in the Declaration of Independence, as we have noted, and the word was not infrequently on their tongues. Tocqueville in 1830 identified more honor in the first generation of Americans than in subsequent ones.<sup>52</sup> We shall look for honor first where he found it, in the words and deeds of men such as Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, and John Adams, and consider how they viewed honor and what role they accorded it in their own actions. We also consider honor's close cousin, the love of fame, which Hamilton called "the ruling passion of the noblest minds." The love of fame is another democratic euphemism for honor, or a partial euphemism. It means to capture the high ambitions and the quest for distinction that are such powerful engines of political agency without raising the specter of entrenched hierarchy or the external trappings of Old World nobility. *The Federalist* is consulted for evidence of the founders' views on the institutional role that honor and its cousin fame were intended to play in the new American system.

Whereas the honor of the founding generation was explicitly tied to the principles of liberty and equality articulated by the Declaration of Independence, honor in the antebellum South was based on a rejection of these principles. Southern honor more closely resembles the feudal honor of the old regime with its ascriptive social status, entrenched hierarchy, emphasis on lineage and blood ties, dueling, and the exercise of mastery over others as a condition of self-command. It also was deeply implicated in the institution of chattel slavery. In examining this form of honor we see honor's darkest side and some of its gravest dangers. In particular, southern honor shows what can happen when honor as a quality of character serves codes of honor that are deeply unjust and when it is combined with unchecked power. Southern honor makes it clear that honor is not always admirable or just, nor necessarily liberal.

Perhaps because of its associations with the old regime and the military, honor has politically conservative, even reactionary, connotations

today. Chapter 5 reveals the limits of these familiar associations. Even the honor of the founders was more innovative than reactionary. Indeed, honor in the founding generation was more than merely innovative; it was revolutionary, and revolutionary in the largest sense of the term, as it served to defend an entirely new form of political order “never before seen among societies of men,” as *The Federalist* said. From the very first, though not exclusively so, American honor has been invoked in defense of reform and progress, and it should not be surrendered to political reactionaries. Honor in the United States also illustrates a more general shift away from the exclusive association between honor and military valor (or physical prowess) toward a new relationship between honor and political courage, or the courage of conviction, often resulting in reform. We shall examine honor’s contributions to democratic reform in the United States by considering several American reformers who exemplify key features of honor, including Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Honor as it emerges in these pages is tied to what Elizabeth Cady Stanton called “self-sovereignty,” the proud assertion of one’s capacity to rule oneself rather than acquiesce to external rule, whether it be the rule of another person, an overreaching political authority, one’s own unreflective appetites, or even the impersonal forces of nature and history. Honor here issues in political activism, reform, conscientious objection, and civil disobedience—the distant progeny of Montesquieu’s rebellious nobles and Tocqueville’s independent aristocrats. Those with honor above all refuse to believe that they are the victims of their circumstances. Honor is somewhat boastful in this respect, as it depends on circumstances, or fortune, more than might first appear. Extraordinary exertions of agency in defense of liberty emerge mainly in moments of crisis, for instance, and so depend on fortune to call them forth and provide a field of opportunity.<sup>53</sup> And because honor involves public recognition, it depends in some measure (though not entirely) on the cooperation of one’s peers and the fortuitous recollections of posterity.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, honor requires equipment, which is why Montesquieu emphasized the importance of the nobility’s structural and economic independence from the crown. I concentrate on the moral psychology of honor, but political and sociological factors affect honor (and individual agency) as well. American honor relies on equipment in the form of civil

and political rights, liberal political institutions, access to education, social recognition, and the opportunity to rise. There is a circle here but not a vicious circle. Honor as a quality of character and the conditions that make it possible are reciprocally reinforcing. Yet honor's need for equipment reveals that its proud assertion of self-command is somewhat overstated. Honor rests on a boastful self-forgetting of its own conditions and an exaggeration of its independence from the power of circumstance. Still, the boastful exaggeration of human independence is an honorable response to the real power of circumstance, because it makes resistance—therefore agency, and ultimately self-government and individual liberty—conceivable.

The examples offered here by no means exhaust the instances of honor in the United States, but they illuminate some of its variety and many of its continuities, and they show honor to be a potentially powerful spring of political agency even for modern democratic citizens. Great acts of honor in the United States resemble the actions of Montesquieu's *honnêtes hommes* and Tocqueville's liberty-loving aristocrats in some respects but they differ in others, and they admit of significant diversity even among themselves. One difference between American honor and its old-regime predecessors has to do with the character of its codes. The principles of liberty and equality articulated by the Declaration have formed the core of one common code of honor in the United States. In contrast to honor codes in the *ancien régime*, this one is based on universal principles of abstract right rather than concrete rules governing particular spheres of conduct, and it is attached to a shared national political identity rather than sited in the extrapolitical intermediary associations of honor in the old regime. This is not the only form of American honor, but it is an important one. Other, more partial forms of honor tied to more particular codes can be found in the many intermediary associations of American civil society, as Chapter 6 shows, but the form of honor tied to the American Declaration has been particularly important to democratic reform in the United States, and it provides a point of special focus for the study. This form of honor itself admits of some variation. For example, although the Declaration provided a common code of conduct for most of the Americans considered in Chapters 4 and 5, the self-proclaimed honor of the planter class in the antebellum South was based on an explicit renunciation of the Declaration's principles. Democratic reformers of the mid-nineteenth century also challenged the

meaning of the American code, not by denying its principles but by asserting that the Declaration's promise of liberty and equality should apply not only to propertied white males but also to black men and all women. Such challenges represent shifts in the meaning of honor in the United States even as they reflect underlying continuities. They also show that despite being tied to a shared code, honor not infrequently struggles against the prevailing moral consensus or certain elements of it; indeed, honor's power as a source of democratic reform grows directly out of such struggles.

The new honor and the old honor also differ in that while American honor engages aristocratic qualities of character, it is not tied to political inequalities or an hereditary social order as was honor in the old regime. In the United States, public honors must be won rather than inherited, and when one wins public honors one is not thereby entitled to an extra vote or a political office. Democratic forms of honor coexist with political equality and a rough equality of opportunity in society.<sup>55</sup> This difference in how public honors are distributed affects honor as a quality of character by emphasizing individual action and conscience over status, and these features rise to prominence in American honor as compared with honor in the old regime. This difference is accentuated when public esteem is especially unreliable, as among the members of marginalized groups, with the result that the conscience-related aspects of honor, especially the sense of duty to oneself and the desire for self-respect, predominate among the women and black reformers examined in these pages.

Despite the differences, key features of honor as a quality of character remain relatively constant, both with respect to the transition from the old regime to the new one and with respect to changes within the American polity. First, honor consistently combines personal ambition with principled codes of conduct. The substance of the codes may vary, but a defining feature of honor is that the ambitious desire for distinction is limited, directed, and elevated by reverence for a set of principles that are independent of will or appetite. Yet although honor is a principled motive, it cannot be equated simply with the exercise of impartial reason. Codes of honor may be subjected to the scrutiny of impartial reason, but honor itself is never truly impartial because it always remains attached both to personal distinction and to a particular set of principles. And however universal the principles contained in one's code,

honor as a quality of character retains an irreducible partiality in the further sense that it regards the defense of one's principles as a condition of one's own self-respect. The partial desire for self-respect reflects the underlying self-concern at the heart of honor, which distinguishes honor from altruism, however general its codes may be.

A second constant feature of honor is the element of courage, especially courageous resistance to encroaching power. In Montesquieu, this aspect of honor was associated primarily with the nobility's defense of its political prerogatives against the crown. Tocqueville's account of modern democracy draws explicitly on the legacy of honor in this respect, emphasizing the need for the aristocratic or heroic courage associated with honor to defend democratic rights against the tyranny of majority opinion and the specter of mild despotism. American honor preserves the pride that is a remnant of the old nobility's sense of self-importance, which supports courage. Pride tends to be understated in democratic honor, cloaked in the frequently humble beginnings and egalitarian purposes of America's honorable citizens, and mitigated by the "decent regard" for the opinions of their fellows that they commonly express. If the demeanor of honorable Americans tends to be more self-effacing than that of the *honnête homme*, however, their actions nevertheless reflect the "high opinion of oneself and of humanity" that Tocqueville thought so important to the preservation of democratic liberties. Although no longer the exclusive prerogative of a fixed social caste, honor still belongs only to a few, the natural aristocracy of individuals who can summon extraordinary courage in defense of principle when the moment of crisis comes.

The third feature of honor that remains constant is its emphasis on the sense of duty to oneself. Honorable actions are understood in terms of duties or obligations rather than interests, although there are important connections between honor and interest. Both are self-regarding, for instance, and both give priority to individual concerns and individual judgment. They are alike in that neither one pursues the general will or the collective good directly. But there are important differences, too. The sense of honor is in certain respects categorical, rather than merely instrumental. There are some things that the honorable person simply will not do—or must do—as a matter of principle, whatever the consequences may be. By contrast, however expansively the motive of interest may be construed, it always remains unambiguously instrumentalist. Al-

though there are dimensions of honor that may be construed in instrumental terms, such as the desire for the self-respect and public recognition that come from living up to one's code, these aspects of honor are inseparable from the noninstrumental, categorical sense that living up to one's code is something one *must* do. And this points to another important difference between honor and interest, which is that unlike interest, honor intrinsically entails an attachment to principle. Interests may be connected to principles, but they need not be, whereas honor without principle would not be honor.

Still, honor (like interest) is always concerned more with what one owes to oneself than with what one owes to others, which is why it resists the altruism implicit in so many contemporary theories of obligation. And unlike conscience or integrity, to which it bears a family resemblance, honor retains a distinctly public persona: it is guided by public codes of conduct (not merely internal standards of right), seeks public recognition, and is especially oriented to public action. It is true that as honor becomes more democratic in the transition from the old regime to the new one, the relative weight accorded its internal and external dimensions shifts. More generally, the democratization of honor with its attendant emphasis on conscience brings honor closer to integrity and to moral virtue, especially the instances of honor that embody political courage or the courage of conviction. Yet even here honor cannot be simply equated with virtue. Honor remains distinct partly because, in contrast to virtue, honor is tied to general rules of conduct, partly because it never fully transcends personal ambition and the concern with external public distinction and partly because it does not imply the perfection of the soul.

The forms of American honor identified here combine aspects of the old and the new regimes. They transcend the great divide introduced by the revolution that spawned "modern man." Or they partly transcend this divide. American honor is *American*, and in this sense particular and different from old-regime honor, but American honor still is *honor* and therefore remains consistent and identifiable in key respects. Honor as it is conceived in the chapters that follow also transcends the partisan divide between Left and Right in contemporary American politics. Because it both requires equipment and calls forth heroic qualities, the concept of honor helps us to conceive political agency in ways that avoid what one commentator has called the "great weakness of the Right—its fail-

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ure to believe that institutional or social conditions really affect our choices and life chances—and the analogous failure of the Left to imagine how people living under conditions of great adversity and oppression can nevertheless create a space of freedom within which they act to change their lives.”<sup>56</sup> Honor unsettles the expectations of both the Left and the Right. It is transpartisan in the manner of Tocqueville, who sought to infuse modern democracy with certain aristocratic qualities—not for the purpose of undoing democracy but for the sake of sustaining it. Honor reminds us of the aristocratic capacities in ourselves that have survived the advent of modern man and calls us to confront liberal democracy’s need for them. It transcends another divide as well, which is the contemporary dichotomy between self-interest and self-sacrifice. Honor is especially instructive for us today because of the way it connects personal ambition to principled higher purpose, making right action desirable. It thus brings into view a wider class of motives that add depth and complexity to current thinking on matters of moral psychology and political agency. But if the concept of honor offered here transcends many divides, it nevertheless remains partial as an account of agency. Honor does not claim to provide a comprehensive solution to the dispirited sense of agency that pervades the United States today. It cannot replace motivations such as self-interest, civic virtue, solidarity, faith, friendship, love, or any of the many other sources of human agency. Honor cannot replace them but it can add to them. And what it adds is important both philosophically and politically because it recalls us to aspects of ourselves and our polity that we have forgotten or ceased to understand, qualities on which our liberties cannot help but depend.