

## FEATURE ARTICLES

# Living Honorably

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The mission of the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) is “To educate, train and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the U.S. Air Force and Space Force in service to our nation.” The present program of character development, the Leader of Character Framework, is organized along three dimensions: living honorably, lifting others, and elevating performance (CCLD, 2011). These dimensions correspond to the three core values of the U.S. Air Force: integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. In order to build, teach, and assess an effective curriculum for the cultivation of leaders of character, we must explain precisely what we mean by each of these elements. In this paper, we will describe the first element: living honorably.

Unfortunately, the reality is that for many USAFA cadets and graduates, the phrase *living honorably* has a negative connotation. This is because many view USAFA’s honor system and honor code in a largely, if not wholly, negative light. They see the honor system, at best, as a legalistic system of burdensome punishments to be feared and, at worst, as a merciless and unjust system of harsh penalties for failures to live up to unreasonably high standards. This negative view of the honor system was recently highlighted for us when we learned of some USAFA graduates who, when they were touring Polaris Hall for the first time, did not want to step foot inside the Wing Honor Board Room, where cadets who have been suspected of violating the Honor Code face the judgments of their peers. Indeed, for many USAFA cadets, honor is not a goal to which they strive with heads held high, but a threat that they try to avoid by keeping their heads down.

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As we will explain, however, living honorably within a good honor community can contribute to our flourishing as human beings and to the success of our profession. We all have room for growth in virtues like honesty, integrity, wisdom, and respect. Belonging to an honor community that holds us accountable to high moral standards can help us to live out these virtues in our personal and professional lives, thereby helping us to become the best version of ourselves. Developing a moral character that is worthy of honor is one of the greatest pursuits of human life. Moreover, while honor communities that are professions, at times, will have to reprove those who violate the community's standards and even remove serious offenders from their ranks in order to maintain the trust of those they serve, both the profession and those members reprov'd can be improved and strengthened in the process.

In an effort to explain and defend the value of living honorably, in the following pages, we will sketch an account of what we take that phrase to mean. Unfortunately, the words honor, and honorably are vague and equivocal in ordinary English usage. What one person means by honorable living is often quite different from what another person means. As a result, we must do a bit of linguistic, historical, and then philosophical work before we can think together about how living honorably can serve as an appropriate goal for leaders at the Air Force Academy.

## Linguistics

As we noted above, the word honor in modern English is imprecise and equivocal. In court, *Your Honor* is a title of respect for a judge. On a résumé, *honors and awards* denote impressive performance. At schools and universities, an *honor code* is a list of principles and rules outlining moral and especially academic propriety. Collected together, this assortment of uses does not readily suggest an all-purpose concept. At the same time, we will not find help in the ancient world: in Greek, the word that we translate as honor is *τιμή*, which has just as many variations as its modern English equivalent. The Latin word *honoris*, from which we get honor, yields the same diversity.

Suppose instead that we parse the expression in ordinary English. For example, living honorably could mean living in a way that is worthy of honor. In other words, people who live honorably is one who receives honor or praise in virtue of the way that they live. The advantage of this approach is that we can focus on tangible evidence in rendering our judgments. The disadvantage is that we risk confusing the way one lives with the praise that one receives for the way that one lives. Moral philosophers have long recognized the challenge of distinguishing real moral excellence from the mere appearance of moral excellence. If we focus on the appearance of moral excellence—as we do when we focus exclusively on outward signs such as

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record and rank, we risk the cultivation of leaders who value the appearance of honorable living more than the honorable living itself, who see honorable living as a mere means to an end, and who might be tempted to take shortcuts to the rewards, if the opportunity arose. This interpretation therefore seems unacceptable, especially in the context of military leadership. This distinction between the reality and appearance of moral excellence is found in the wit of the Prussian military tradition, in which soldiers were called to “be better than they seem to be” (Huntington, 1981).

Alternatively, we might parse living honorably in ordinary English as, living well, where explained in terms of the moral life, as we might find it prescribed in the best of our philosophical and religious traditions. In other words, living honorably simply means living morally or living ethically. The problem with this approach is that it fails to deliver an account that reflects the special and exclusive nature of the moral demands of military service. Members of the military think of their profession as calling them to a moral standard that is more demanding than that which applies to ordinary citizens. Such a higher standard, thought to be required, given that the public entrusts the military with defense of the state, and especially with the tools required for defense of the state: the weapons of war. With the tools and permission to employ lethal force comes a special and higher responsibility in the use of that force. Insofar as living honorably must express this higher responsibility, defining it merely as moral or ethical living will not be sufficient.

## History

Leaving ordinary English usage behind, consider instead an interpretation informed by the history of honor in the armed forces, especially as told by

Samuel Huntington in *The Soldier and the State* and Kwame Appiah in *The Honor Code* (Huntington, 1959, Appiah, 2010). An advantage of this approach is that it connects our current practices with the history and tradition of military service, providing a rich set of events and figures from which to develop an account. A disadvantage is that we may not like what we find in the history of the concept. In particular, the concept of honor found its way into the Western military tradition through European aristocracy (cf. Huntington 1959: 19-59). Officers in the 1700s were typically landed noblemen or the sons of noblemen, who purchased

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their commissions and their rank advancements out of their inherited wealth. The concept of honor they brought with them from the context that the practices and virtues of the landed elite, together with the privileges of title, derived from aristocratic rank. At the same time, in the 1700s, honor was alien to the enlisted and conscripted corps, who served because—in one way or another—they had to.

While we must be wary of this auspicious beginning, this is not the end of the story. In the 1800s, the professionalization of Western military service transformed the officer corps. Meritocracy replaced aristocracy as the basis of commission and advancement. Professional and standardized military education replaced the idiosyncratic and uneven programs of gentlemanly cultivation. At the same time, the core elements of the honor culture of Western aristocracy were preserved: military service remained a noble profession, but not because the officer corps was

comprised of noblemen. The renovated culture of honor fit nicely with the emerging culture of professionalism. Professional culture, with roots in the medieval guild concept that emphasized apprenticeship, expertise, self-regulation, and public service, dovetailed nicely with an honor code that emphasized hierarchy, excellence, self-command, and noblesse oblige (i.e., the obligations to help others that come with positions of privilege). (Huntington 1959: 53-54, Snider 2015: 16-18). In other words, the transformation of an aristocratic officer corps into a professional officer corps did not require throwing off aristocratic honor culture altogether—the best and most defensible elements remained.

The concept of honor that emerges at this time, both in professional military institutions as well as in a variety of other social and political organizations, has a clear structure (Appiah, 2010: 20). At the most general level, a distinctive community, marked by shared culture that is governed by a shared code, characterizes it. This account supplies our initial definition of living honorably:

Living honorably = following a shared honor code as a member of an honor community.

Honor communities are socially distinct from society at large. Membership is exclusive, demanding, and advantageous for flourishing, as the community understands it. Honor codes require more of their honor community members than morality requires in general. At the same time, these codes are all encompassing. They:

- a) supply moral rules,
- b) define the good life for the community,
- c) name the rituals, rules, and virtues required to achieve this shared vision of the good life, and
- d) provide for systems of apprenticeship,

enculturation, and accountability among members.

While only a few of these communities have survived, it seems to us that the organizational structure of the 19th century honor community, especially as it was developed in the context of military service, remains an attractive and defensible model for contemporary military service. The appeal of this model becomes clear when compared with the variety of contractual, corporate and bureaucratic rivals that one encounters today. These alternatives, with their focuses on behavior, appearance, efficiency, and transaction, fail to attend to some of the most important dimensions of professional character in the military profession: loyalty, gallantry, discipline, humility, judgment, forbearance, and grit. The honor community with its honor code, on the other hand, considers the cultivation of character traits such as these to be of the first importance. In this way, we believe that the honor community/honor code approach is the best fit for the modern military professional as well as the best place to start an account of living honorably.

## Philosophy

Tentatively then, the person who lives honorably belongs to an honor community and lives according to an honor code. But what are we to make of the Barbary pirate, the Nazi officer, and the Taliban warlord? On this account, must we say that they live in honor communities marked by honor codes? Are we required to say that they are living honorably? We think not. On the one hand, it is certainly true that these individuals are committed to distinct sets of norms and they are members of norm-governed communities. Moreover, it is true that, at least in some cases, they believe that their community norms are consistent with objective moral values. However, on the other hand, they are clearly mistaken. For example, pirates have no respect

for property ownership, Nazis are wrong on race, and the Taliban are wrong on women. At the same time, as we noted above in discussing the ordinary meaning of honorable living, we take it that in military service, leaders are to live by a higher standard. A higher standard is not a different standard; it is a standard that falls within the domain of objective moral value. This point is framed perhaps more clearly in terms of the *supererogatory*. Supererogatory actions are those that are morally commendable, but not morally required. Examples might include bystander first aid, serendipitous charity, and social deference. In the context of military service, we ask soldiers to take risks, undergo hardship, and subordinate their interests all in ways that go beyond what we take to be the moral duties of the ordinary citizens. However, when considered narrowly in the context of the service itself, these actions are expected. In this way, we give substance to the idea that military service members are held to a higher standard. With this in mind, we offer the following, more nuanced account of living honorably:

Living honorably = following a shared honor code as a member of an honor community, where this code and community reflect moral standards that include and exceed those of ordinary morality.

## A Model of Honorable Living

In the remainder of this paper, we will add substance to this model. We begin with an exposition of the code and the community. We then note two important qualifications on the overall account, and conclude with a summary of what it means to live honorably in the military.

### *The Code*

An honor community is structured by an honor code. However, notice that for an entire community to

be structured by a code, this code must be extensive and complex. To be sure: such a code might include explicit proscriptions such as we find in some academic settings today (e.g., imperatives not to cheat). A code sufficient to structure a community will also include a vision of flourishing for individual members and the community as a whole. It will include a catalog of virtues that thought to both constitute and contribute to individual and community flourishing. It will include a distinctive set of habits, practices, rituals, and standards (e.g., appearance, dress, living, and more) that set apart the honor community from society in general. It will also include curriculum, pedagogy, and doctrine: the shared vocabulary and instrumentation that provide touchstones for the education and conservation of the community.

Many elements of the code will be explicitly stated in a set of documents, depending on the extent to which the honor community is institutionally organized. There may be core documents that outline the mission, vision, and values of the community. There may be procedural documents that describe the institutional workings of the community. There may be legal documents that organize the community in the context of the state. Communities with a rich set of institutions will also have bodies of scholarship and deliberation, through which we can trace the contours and development of an honor code across generations. These communities will also have teaching resources (e.g., textbooks and pedagogy) that help define the extent of the code. Of course, honor codes are not written down in their entirety. Some elements are implicit: matters of convention, deliverances of oral tradition, and informal rituals.

Let us consider in greater detail, the honor code in operation at the United States Air Force Academy. In the first place, it would be an obvious mistake to think

that the code consisted only of the pledge on the wall: “We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does.” Certainly, these are elements of the code, but there is much more. The foundation of the code is the core values of the U.S. Air Force as a whole: integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. These core values are elucidated in a series of statements and documents. At the Academy, these statements and documents include, but are not limited to, the Leader of Character Framework, the Honor Oath, the Oath of Office, the Institutional Learning Outcome white papers, and the Cadet Standards and Duties instruction. Education and training materials, together with explicit procedures for remediation and punishment, supplement these documents. Overshadowing the statements and documents specific to USAFA are those, which envelop them in a broader context: Air Force instructions, Department of Defense policies, the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), International Humanitarian Rights Law (IHL), and the United States Constitution. Moreover, beyond these explicit elements of the code, there are also implicit elements. These include the actions of historical exemplars (e.g., Lance Sijan, James Doolittle, Amelia Earhart, Frederick Gregory), unwritten rituals (e.g., inter-academy rivalry, graduation fountain plunges), and the evanescent interplay of tradition, popular culture, and cadet life.

Given the description above, one might worry that the honor code of the U.S. Air Force Academy is disorganized or haphazard. On the one hand, this impression should be tempered by the recognition that the code as a whole is grounded in a clearly defined set of core values in the context of clearly defined organizations, with clearly defined purposes. On the other hand, the discombobulation, imprecision, and open-endedness of the code is a sign that it is alive for those attempting to live according to it. Robots require

precise instructions for a well-defined environment. In contrast, human beings—and military leaders in particular—must think and act across ill-defined environments with a constant barrage of new and unexpected challenges. As a result, honor codes and their communities must be flexible and susceptible to argumentation and revision in light of our experiences. Moreover, the longer an honor community persists and flourishes; the broader and deeper its code becomes.

### *The Community*

Honor is a relational and communal concept. An honor code comes to life inside a living community of adherents. As defined above, honorable living is essentially a concern to live up to the code that is established and sustained—we might say championed—by one’s honor community. As Peter Olsthoorn (2015) has argued, such a concern for honor can be an important moral teacher and moral motivator. When we belong to an honor community and internalize a concern for honor, the thought that some action or attitude might bring dishonor (shame) to the community, or to oneself in the eyes of the honor community, can be a powerful deterrent against performing that action. Likewise, the thought that some action or attitude would uphold the standards of honor set by the community can be a powerful motivator to engage in that action or adopt that attitude.

Morally speaking, the concern for honor is a double-edged sword. When the values and goals of an honor community—codified in its honor code—are objectively good, then the concern for honor can lead to morally good actions and even the development of virtue (Appiah 2010: 170-204). A concern for honor embedded in an honor community that upholds the value of serving the needs of others over self-preservation and self-promotion will inform and motivate self-sacrificial acts of service. When the values



and goals of an honor community are objectively bad, then the concern for honor can lead members of that group to engage in immoral actions and even to develop vicious moral character (cf. Appiah, 2010: 139-155). A concern for honor embedded in an honor community that is committed to racism or misogyny can motivate racist or misogynistic behavior and ultimately, to the development of vicious character.

If we desire to foster a virtuous honor community, therefore, our concern for honor must be tethered to objectively good moral values and goals. At the very least, any good honor code must include a commitment to respect the human dignity of all people, even those who do not belong to the honor community. This commitment to respect the dignity of all people serves as a bulwark against some of the worst kinds of moral violations—sexual assault, slavery, apartheid, genocide, ethnic cleansing, religious persecution—that have been committed in the name of honor throughout human history (cf. Appiah, 2010: 175-178).

## Practical Challenges

Given the accounts developed above of honor codes and communities, there are two additional characteristics required for honor communities to persist and flourish in the long term. They must be dynamic and accountable. Think of these qualities as practical necessities for challenges that every honor community should expect to face.

### *The Dynamic Community*

When we say that an honor community must be dynamic, we mean that it must be marked by a continuing intergenerational inquiry into its ends, as well as the means, to achieve those ends. The content of honor code is, at least in part, an aspect of the means for achieving the ends of the community. For any

community, its shared identity and shared account of the good must be the focus of a continuing argument. Membership depends on recruiting, and recruiting depends on argument. Neophytes must be persuaded that the goods in question, together with the means to achieve them, really are good and, that it is good for them to join a community with higher moral standards and the aims particular to them. On the one hand, this argument is easy. Military organizations defend the state from threats to its existence and flourishing. Some citizens will easily recognize the importance of this mission and therefore be interested in joining an organization dedicated to it. On the other hand, the threats faced by the state are always changing, and the means by which these threats might be confronted are always changing. The substantive content of the military mission, including the appropriate means for achieving it, will therefore always be a matter of continuing inquiry and argument. If that inquiry devolves into ideology or that argument gives way to dogma, a military organization, to include its membership and capabilities, will be increasingly mismatched to the threats faced by the state. These vulnerabilities increase the risk of real tragedy, as can be seen at Lexington and Concord (1775), Jutland (1916), Vietnam (1965-1974), and in many tactical encounters across the history of modern warfare.

### *The Accountable Community*

When we say that an honor community must be accountable, we recognize the risks posed to individuals in a community characterized by loyalty, hierarchy, and shared identity. As we have seen in the Boy Scouts of America, USA Gymnastics, as well as in modern military organizations themselves, unless these vulnerable elements of the community are balanced by systems of accountability that protect against abuse, exploitation, and corruption, we are likely to see honor

communities degenerate. We are all morally flawed individuals. The benefit of belonging to an honor community is that it can help us to live according to a higher moral standard than we naturally would hold to ourselves. Left on our own, we are all susceptible to temptations to sacrifice our most deeply held values—indeed, our integrity—in order to satisfy baser desires. When we live accountably to others who share our most important moral commitments, we can borrow strength from our honor community to live according to a standard of moral excellence that we are often not able to achieve on our own (Evans, 2021).

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Although we often speak of holding people accountable in contexts where someone has violated moral standards, we must not think of accountability as a purely negative or punitive concept. While some types of failure may require discipline or expulsion from the community, many transgressions of the code may present opportunities for remediation and growth. A flourishing and virtuous honor community is not one in which everyone is perfect—such a community would not be human. Instead, a flourishing and virtuous honor community is one that pays attention to the organic and developmental nature of human beings and human community. We acquire strength and resilience or better, antifragility, through stress and challenge (Taleb, 2012). A flourishing honor community will therefore welcome stress and

challenge, meeting the failures that these produce with appropriate accountability. This accountability includes our accountability to others within the group, a kind of internal accountability, and our accountability as a group to the broader community we serve, a kind of external accountability.

According to a long ethical tradition, living virtuously is constitutive of living a flourishing human life. This long ethical tradition has recently found some preliminary empirical support from positive psychology, although there are significant challenges for empirically studying the relationship between virtue and flourishing (VanderWeele, 2021). Those challenges notwithstanding, insofar as living virtuously contributes to our own flourishing as individuals and the flourishing of our communities, being held accountable to high moral standards by others who care about our well-being, and who are willing to forgive and help us correct our failures; can help us to live the best life available to us. Living honorably and living accountably thus leads to living well.

This philosophical-psychological truth was borne out in the life of one of our former cadets, whom we will call Paul for anonymity. Paul was a talented member of one of the Air Force Academy's inter-collegiate athletic teams and he was very much looking forward to playing his sport during his senior year. But late in his junior year Paul committed an honor violation. He did not attend a large group gathering at which his attendance was required. Then, when his commander asked him whether he had attended the event, he said that he had. Despite being confident that he would not be caught in his lie, Paul's honorable desire to do the right thing prompted him to admit that he had lied and accept the consequences. Paul's admission led to a period of honor remediation and probation, which made him



ineligible to play his sport during his senior year. While he was very disappointed to miss his senior year on the team, shortly before graduating, Paul reported to us that he was very glad he had decided to admit to his lie. He recognized that he had grown in honesty and integrity through the honor process and he was proud of his moral growth. In the course of our conversation, he also expressed gratitude for the way that being held accountable to an honor code had helped him to grow in virtues that would help him to live more honorably in the future, not only in his professional career as an Air Force officer, but in his personal relationships as well.

## Summary

What does it mean to live honorably as leaders in the military profession? Given the discussion above, we can say the following. Leaders living honorably belong to a virtuous honor community (the military organization) with a unique and specific good (defense of the nation), a hierarchical organization (the system of rank and advancement), and an honor code. Leaders living honorably live by this code. They follow its rules (UCMJ, Rules of Engagement, Law of Armed Conflict, IHRL), adhere to its practices (customs, courtesies, skills, drills), cultivate its virtues and the qualities of character thought to contribute to the achievement of the goods of the profession—integrity, bravery, loyalty, respect, accountability, etc.. Leaders who practice living honorably will debate and revise honor code rules and content as needed, teach it to new members of the community (e.g., military academies, Reserve Officer Training Corps, Officer Training School, etc.), and hold one another accountable for their practices under the code. Accountability sometimes takes the form of discipline for members who fall short of the standards of the code (e.g., disciplinary hearings, courts martial, and/or discharge). Other times accountability is a life giving and community building tool that helps

members correct their mistakes and grow in their flourishing. The overall result, when successful, is a sustainable professional military honor community that is worthy of the trust that citizens place in it for their defense.

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