

MORALITY, HONOR AND BROTHERHOOD

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By

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A funny thing happened to me on the way to retirement after forty years of teaching philosophy at Washington and Lee University: Captain Rabern asked me to apply for the Floyd D. Gottwald '43 Visiting Chair in Leadership and Ethics, in order to teach a course on Honor. I applied, and here I am, a Rat Professor, learning about VMI from my students. It is indeed an honor to be here. I am happy to see so many “volunteers” from the Second Class in the audience—to hear a Philosophy talk during Ring Figure week no less! (I am grateful for your attendance, and I hope I will make good use of your time.)

This fall I have been learning a bit of “Old Corps lore”: e.g., “Doc” Carroll (whose name graces the building where I have an office) allegedly said: “VMI isn’t what it used to be—and never was!” When asked at Parade “How many students are there at VMI?,” “Doc” pondered awhile and then supposedly replied: “Perhaps three.” I also learned from the “Young Corps” of the “respect” they pay when passing the statue of Cyrus McCormick on the W&L campus under the cover of darkness...

But enough lore. I want to talk to you today about the three concepts in my title: Morality, Honor and Brotherhood. They are often confused or conflated, but while they are all important, and especially important at VMI, they are also importantly different. I begin with a particular man at a particular time and place, take philosophical flight, and touch down to the particulars of life here at VMI.

Douglas MacArthur (26 January 1880 - 5 April 1964) was one of the most celebrated military leaders in US history. First in his class at West Point in 1903 (which he later served as Superintendent), a Medal of Honor winner (following his father), seven Silver Stars, a veteran of both WWI and WWII, a Field Marshal in the Philippine Army, and

Douglas MacArthur (1880 - 1964)



“Duty,
Honor and
Country” (1962)

a 5-star US Army general, General MacArthur returned to West Point in 1962, in failing health, to receive the Silvanus Thayer award, and to deliver a celebrated speech entitled “Duty, Honor and Country,” the motto of West Point. He thought these three concepts coincided, and elaborated his theme with eloquence I cannot hope to match. Instead, I intend to generalize from MacArthur’s three concepts to obtain a wider, more philosophical perspective.

Morality has been variously construed: as principles of duty, such as by MacArthur, or as rules of right and wrong. I will think of morality in terms of respect; morality is respecting others: but respecting whom and how much? Morality, I believe, is universal; it holds for all and applies to all,

in every time and place; morality is “absolute,” not relative. But, secondly, moral principles hold equally: they hold for all moral agents (who are under moral obligation) and apply impartially to all moral “patients” (those to whom respect is due). In other words, all persons are of equal moral worth, and deserve equal moral respect. Further, since everyone is both moral agent and moral patient, moral respect should be mutual. (There are other ways to put these points: e.g., every person is an end in himself, not merely a means to others’ ends; every person is not a thing merely to be used; respect is deeper than features of people we merely like or esteem; persons possess infinite value=moral worth.) So morality is matter of equal mutual respect for everyone.

Two important preliminary points about honor: The honor worth considering in our context is not reputation or status or recognition or achievement or trust or commitment—these are all interesting and widespread concepts of honor, but they are not our central concern. Rather, our central concern is with what I call “personal honor,” and it is what MacArthur

Morality

Universality +

Equality +

Mutual Respect

= Equal Mutual Respect for All



Personal Honor

v. Reputation,
Status,
Achievement

Concept v. Conceptions

meant by “honor” as well. Second, we must distinguish between concepts and conceptions of honor: Each of the concepts of honor I just mentioned can have various specifications, some good and some bad: e.g., reputational honor can be earned or not, deserved or undeserved; there are different ways of achieving and realizing reputation; and so there are different conceptions of reputational honor. Similarly, there are different conceptions of personal honor, including the one General MacArthur illustrated and the one found at VMI today.

Personal honor is what I call a Janus concept. Janus was a Roman god represented as having two faces; posted on the lintel of a doorway, he illustrated inside and outside, inner household and outer community; or perhaps past and future. Janus concepts look in two “directions,” as it were,

essentially combining two things or features or aspects. I construe personal honor as involving both individual and group, as well as members and code. To explain: Personal honor is always something found in and through a group, an honor group; there is no such thing as personal honor in isolated individuals, unless as remembered connection to an honor group. But at the same time personal honor requires individual responsibility for achieving and maintaining one’s own honor; personal honor cannot be coerced or enforced from the outside. Likewise, personal honor involves trust of and loyalty to other members of the honor group as well as commitment to a shared set of principles, the “honor code.” Without mutual relation to specific other people, there is no honor; and without commitment to shared principles, there is no honor. Idiosyncratic principles or unilateral loyalties, no matter how faithfully maintained, are not matters of honor until they are shared. Moreover, relation to honorable others and to honor code is thoroughly public—others recognize one’s shared commitments and loyalties, and again this recognition is mutual.

Putting all this together, we may say that personal honor is equal mutual trust and commitment—but only for all members of the honor group. Every member of the group counts the same (all are equal), all are committed to the same honor code, and all are vitally aware of each other’s similar commitment. But those outside the group may receive different treatment.

Personal Honor

A Janus concept:

Individual and Group

Members and Code



**= Equal Mutual Trust and
Commitment (within the
honor group)**

Brotherhood is what brothers share. But I am going to generalize the notion beyond genetic males. (“Brother Rats” can be male or female, e.g.) There are two types of brotherhood: First, there is brotherhood based on shared inheritance: the same genes, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or native country, to state just a few examples.

Here both genetic brothers and genetic sisters would count as “brothers” in my extended sense. There is a brotherhood of all those who share this inheritance. (This is, I think, a better way to put the matter than to speak of a “community”).

Second, there is brotherhood based on shared experience, such as that shared by those who waded ashore on Normandy beach in June 1944. This experience is often stressful, painful or dangerous, but it becomes a powerful means of forging a brotherhood.

(Putting these two types together, of course, creates something even more powerful. But the two types still need to be distinguished—e.g., it is not only those who share male genes and certain experiences who can be “brothers” in my extended sense.)

How should we characterize the relation of brothers to one another? There must be a deep trust of one’s brothers, and a deep loyalty to them, based on shared inheritance or experience. I have learned from my VMI students to call this “bromance” (without sexual connotation) for one’s “buds” or “bros”. So brotherhood is bromance for bros.

Now for some comparisons and contrasts of our three concepts. The first point to notice—and it is an important one, often missed—is that morality $\neq$ honor $\neq$ brotherhood. They are different concepts, and form the

Brotherhood

Two types:

Shared Inheritance

Shared Experience

= **Bromance
for Bros**



Comparisons and Contrasts

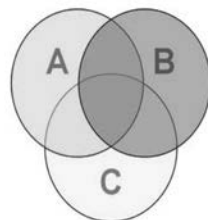
Morality

$\neq$ Honor

$\neq$ Brotherhood

→ Possible Overlap

→ Possible Conflict



bases for different types of groups. Morality is equal mutual respect for all; while honor is equal mutual respect only for other members of the honor group; and brotherhood is bromance for bros, a kind of respect that may or may not be equal but is only for “brothers.” The next two points depend on these essential differences.

First, these three concepts are not incompatible; in fact, their conceptions may largely overlap, e.g., one’s brotherhood may follow principles of honor that never contravene morality; in such a case, the particular conceptions of brotherhood, honor and morality are fully consistent, if not quite resting on the same basis. Gen. MacArthur honestly believed the West Point motto, “Duty, Honor and Country,” was an instance of a complete overlap.

But, second, the three concepts are not coincident, and they may even conflict: loyalty to the brotherhood of a country might conceivably clash with fidelity to morality, and neither need always square with honor. The potential clash is clear in honor groups that act contrary to common morality, e.g. groups that deliberately kill innocents or mistreat some (women, perhaps). But the same tension is also found in MacArthur, where there is an unrecognized tension between fighting with honor and winning (it is not honorable to win at all costs).

Another way to put these points: some conceptions of morality, honor and brotherhood are mutually consistent, but not all are—some conceptions of honor or brotherhood, e.g., are immoral.

Now let’s come down from the philosophical stratosphere to earth, to this place and time: VMI today. We will apply the general concept of morality to local conceptions of honor and brotherhood. First, morality is and remains for everyone—for students, of course, but also for faculty, administration, staff, town and gown, and beyond. The respect owed morally is owed by all equally to all, without exception.

Honor is for the Corps: There is an explicit honor code, plus myriad unwritten principles and loyalties. Commitment to the honor code is an essential duty for all cadets, and likewise loyalty to all the

VMI

Morality for
everyone



Brotherhood for
the Class



Honor for the
Corps



members of the Corps, none more than others.

Brotherhood exists in various ways and corners of VMI; I will highlight just one: The term “Brother Rat” resonates at so many different levels, but there are at least brotherhoods based upon a common Rat-line experience. This experience varies from year to year, and so there is not a single Rat experience, but somewhat different experiences for each Class. So each Class constitutes a brotherhood.

We come now to some questions that might be asked about morality, honor and brotherhood at VMI. Clearly I am not a VMI insider, so I raise these issues with some diffidence. You will have to apply my concepts for yourself—and also raise your own questions.

1. Do morality, honor and brotherhood ever conflict at VMI? More concretely, do loyalties to Corps and Class ever conflict with morality, much less with each other?
2. When they do not conflict (and I assume this is the most common case), what prevents them from conflicting?
3. When they do conflict (and I assume they sometimes do conflict, however infrequently) how are the conflicts resolved? Does any one of the three necessarily prevail?
4. Does VMI have as an ideal the coincidence of morality, honor and brotherhood—the ideal of a morally decent honorable brotherhood? (Another way of asking this: What kind of a community, on what basis, does VMI strive to be?)
5. If there is such an ideal present at VMI, how effective is that ideal? What institutional forces and structures are in place to work towards its realization?

In conclusion, I thank you for your patience in listening, and now it is your turn: What are your questions?

