

HONORIS CAUSA

PEOPLE, and peoples, will often act, and still more often claim to act, because, as they say, their honour demands it. If a war be engaged in, whatever be the immediate motive of economic interest, imperial ambition, or fears for national security, members of the nation are encouraged to believe that the national honour is at stake, and examples in plenty are not far to seek in our own and other countries of the strong appeal which this motive makes to the heart of man. History indeed is not wanting to show that the defence and preservation of honour can become, under the subtle habituation of artificial convention alone, a most powerful influence even in private life. Intermediate between that and the actions of the public person of the State, the military and in their own way other professional corps have, and have always had, what are known as their codes of honour, for which men who have been bred in them will risk their money, their social standing, their very lives. At times, undoubtedly, the keeping of his honour undimmed is the only motive present to a man's consciousness, so trained can one become to act in that light without hesitation, and as it were by instinct. But if we want to see the full power of attraction which it can exercise, we must look at the book where human aims are writ large, in the political sphere, in which the motions of desire are more striking, the risks run more easily appreciable, the effects more widespread, than in the lives of individuals.

A constant effect which the acceptance of the real or imagined demands of honour produces is irradiation of the course of action to be pursued with a glow of nobility. Mere acknowledged self-aggrandizement can hardly be accompanied by more than the proverbial honour among thieves; but only substitute the genuine article as the de-

clared immediate object, and all misgivings, meanness, even reason itself will be caught up in the blast of flame that magically engulfs a whole country. There can indeed be no doubt that honour is something good. Only something good can exercise such a wholly natural, always elevating invitation to man's desire. It is just because it is so good, just because it is so irresistible, that we ought to understand what it is and when and how it should be obeyed. The possibility which everyone experiences in himself of a response to the call of honour which may easily forestall, and can therefore go counter to the imperial rule of reason, is a powerful motive, beyond that provided by the intrinsic goodness of honour, for discovering what place is best apportioned to it, so that it may not roam piratically over the length and breadth of a domain to which it has no sovereign right.

One cause of the dangerously deceptive power which honour has is that it is an immaterial good. It is expressed indeed in material ways, and may well be held imperfect if it does not take tangible form, but it is something of which the mere perception satisfies. We soon learn by experience how suspect we ought to feel the enticement of what satisfies only or chiefly our senses; but when presented with something that appeals to our spirit, something in which no gross element can be readily detected, something again which we have been taught to entertain as a decisive and admirable influence on the formation of a character that is to be conspicuous for virtue, it is not so easy to question its right of entry before abandoning ourselves to its control. Another and far more potent cause of self-deceit is that it is accorded to, is in fact by definition the acknowledgment of, excellence and pre-eminence. To vindicate one's honour, therefore, implies insistence on one's own excellence and on the reverence which one considers due to it.

It needs no elaboration to show how wide a field for error and deception is there. Our own excellence is a

natural object of complacency, and when others bear testimony to it, we feel our own good opinion of ourselves enlarged and established more firmly and justifiably. And not only may this desire for honour be disordered through grasping at it where it is not due, but also by stretching out after more than is due. Excellence, personal or national, may be there in plenty, but there will still be a limit imposed by reason to our own contemplation of it, and to the signs of appreciation which we can expect others to make. But if all such signs be absent and the would-be recipient is not sufficiently sure of his own worth, who does not understand the urge to show that he is capable of eliciting a tribute which at the least will assuage the wounds of vanity? In all these cases there is, as it were, an excuse either within us or in the object of desire itself. Pride and honour are not easily either detected or dethroned when they usurp the place of reason.

The capital error, however, is to treat honour as something to be wished for for its own sake. In the language of the moralist, honour is paid to ends, for things worthy of honour are the best things; but it is not an end in itself. We have already seen one case in which this is clear; that in which honour is sought as a means of self-assurance. In our supposition we used the general term excellence as the object of honour; we wished to use as wide a term as possible, to avoid for the moment any especially moral connotation, and to allow for this object being possibly undeserving of respect on simple rational and moral grounds. But whether we are considering some pretext for reverence which is not due, or the virtues and virtuous acts which make a man simply and without qualification a good man, and which are the proper object to which honour should be shown, or yet again excellence of some particular kind to which it may be paid, in any case it is only desired that we may be surer of our goodness. The witness will be most sure when it comes from those who are themselves virtuous; they alone have that knowledge which enables

them to judge perfectly, and which entitles them above all others to a hearing.

In any region of science or action it is dishonest to parade the praises of ignorant men as a supreme advertisement of worth and eminence. Nowhere is it more difficult to reach a just estimate of this than in the national and international life of the world. Leaving aside for the moment the question of absolute goodness, or virtue, let us take as an example the often heard debate as to whether the English are a musical people. Clearly those who are themselves musical are the only ones properly qualified to judge; and we shall be the more certain of their impartiality if they are not English themselves. Transfer this to the political sphere and a question of justice, and how much more difficult it becomes. We have seen some of the possibilities of deception in this matter; now the difficulty is to find one from whom we can feel assured that honour is worth receiving. But the all-important thing to be remembered at such a juncture is that it is not the applause of ourselves or others that we are to want for its own sake: always it is only rationally and rightly sought when it is sought as a means, in this case as a means of confirmation of rectitude; and its acceptance in a given instance involves a cool moral judgment on the credentials of the donor.

Another thing for which honour may be desired is some actual gain over and above it, and to be obtained as a result of it. Or it may actually be paid in order to elicit some benefit from the party whose worth is thus recognised. And thus in the giving and receiving of tokens of respect and appreciation a mutual traffic can spring up which, if the honour is due and the demands of justice observed, need by no means be condemned. Here again the aim of our actions, which determines for them their measures of time and place and quantity, must not be honour itself, but those benefits which we hope to derive from it, and those in turn must be endowed with the certificate and seal of reason. It is the defectibility of our human freedom which

enables us to turn means into ends and so go astray in the pursuit of things which we recognise to be good in themselves. That defectibility often provides an answer to those many people who are puzzled by scholastic formality. We have already noted how some do beyond all doubt act from the sole motive of honour; yet St. Thomas sees and says that it is not *per se* desirable. These two statements are not contradictory; being defectible we can fail to 'measure up to' the requirements of the objects of our desire. Those who consider themselves emancipated sometimes think that this disregard of objectivity in morality is a perfection and an increase of power; in reality it is a weakness, an inability or failure to rise to the standards which the nature of things imposes. In the intellectual order, which is also subject to the claims of morality, we recognise this more easily. A mistaken adjustment of the faculty and the object is universally recognised to be in certain circumstances blameworthy; the same is true of maladjustment between the appetitive faculties and their objects.

To act habitually under the inspiration of a motive which is but a means to an end will be, in many instances, to take a short cut to the ultimate goal. But to act for the sake of honour, without thought of anything beyond, is liable to lead us far off the path of wisdom, because of those powers of self-deception which we have seen ourselves to possess in this regard, and by reason of the unreliability of those who may have something to gain by paying tribute to our course of action. We must, then, at all times be certain that the prestige which we wish to vindicate, whether for ourselves or for our country, is genuinely estimable, and not an excuse for a self-seeking which we hardly like to admit. And secondly we must not allow ourselves to be stampeded, animal fashion, in the pursuit of a position of supposed superiority to which we can in no wise rightly lay claim.

To insist thus on the necessity of passing judgment on

the appeal which honour makes, is not to belittle the worth of that which St. Thomas proclaims as the greatest of exterior goods. On the contrary, it is the blind followers of it, who do not view it in the light of a superior end which alone gives it validity as a moral force, and alone illuminates it with its true meaning, who by their foolish or vicious courses cause the term to become equivocal, and thus affect others with their own imperviousness to truth and rightness. But to those who are jealous of their honour, in the sense that they consider it as the meed awarded to virtue by those who are best qualified to judge its deserts, namely those who are themselves virtuous, the conception of honour will appear in increasingly purer and more definite form, and will become a constantly more trustworthy guide.

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