

PHILOSOPHY

I

Honour and Vulnerability

1.

In Hamburg in 1834, a handsome young army officer named Baron von Trautmansdorf challenged a fellow officer, Baron von Ropp, to a duel. The precipitating offense was a poem that von Ropp had written and circulated among his friends about von Trautmansdorf's moustache, stating that it was thin and floppy and hinting that it might not be the only part of his physique to which those adjectives could be applied. The feud between the barons had originated in their shared passion for the same woman, Countess Lodoiska, the grey-green-eyed widow of a Polish general. Unable to resolve their differences amicably, the two men met in a field in a Hamburg suburb early on a March morning. Both were carrying swords; both were still short of their thirtieth birthdays; both would die in the ensuing fight.

In this last aspect, the event was no exception. From its beginnings in Renaissance Italy until its end in the First World War, the practice of duelling claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Europeans. In the seventeenth century, duels were responsible for some five thousand deaths in Spain alone. Visitors to that country were advised to take extra care when addressing the locals, lest they accidentally offend their honour and end up in the grave. "Duels happen every day in Spain," declares a character in a play by Calderón. In France, meanwhile, Lord Herbert of Cherbury reported in 1608 that there was "scarce any man thought worth the looking on, that had not killed some other in a duel," and in England, it was widely held that no man could be termed a gentleman unless and until he had "taken up his sword."

Although occasional duels were sparked by matters of objective

importance, the majority had their origin in small, even petty, questions of honour. In Paris in 1678, for example, one man killed another who had said his apartment was tasteless. In Florence in 1702, a literary man took the life of a cousin who had accused him of not understanding Dante. And in France under the regency of Philippe d'Orléans, two officers of the guard fought on the Quai des Tuileries over the ownership of an Angora cat.

2.

For as long as it lasted, duelling symbolised a radical incapacity to believe that one's status might be one's own business, a value one decided on and did not revise to accord with the shifting judgements of others. In the dueller's psyche, other people's opinions were the *only* factor in forming a sense of self. The dueller could not remain acceptable in his own eyes if those around him judged him to be evil or dishonourable, a coward or a failure, foolish or effeminate. So dependent was his self-image on the views of others that he would sooner die of a bullet or stab wound than allow unfavourable assessments of him to go unanswered.

Entire societies have made the maintenance of status, and more particularly of "honour," a primary task of every adult male. Whether called, as in traditional Greek village society, *tīmē*, as in Muslim communities, *sharaf*, or as among Hindus, *izzat*, honour was expected in all cases to be upheld through violence. In traditional Spanish communities, to be worthy of *honra*, a man had to be physically brave, sexually potent, predatory towards women before he was married and loyal thereafter, able to look after his family financially and authoritative enough towards his wife to ensure that she did not have sex or even engage in flirtatious banter with other men. Dishonour was the penalty not only for infringing on codes oneself but also for failing to respond with appropriate fury to an *injuria* inflicted by

another. If one was ridiculed in the market square or given an offensive look in the street, doing anything short of soliciting a fight would only confirm the offenders' point.

3.

While we may look askance at those who resort to violence to answer questions of honour, we are nevertheless liable ourselves to share the most significant aspect of their mind-set—that is, an extreme vulnerability to the disdain of others. Like the most hotheaded of duellers, we are likely to base our self-esteem on the value we are commonly accorded. Duelling is merely a helpfully far-fetched historical example of the more universal but equally thin-skinned emotional disposition that almost all of us exhibit in matters of status.

The intense need to be viewed favourably by others may still be foremost among our priorities. The fear of becoming what the Spanish termed a *deshonrado*, or "dishonoured one"—a category whose contemporary connotations might best be captured by the chillingly contemptuous word *loser*—may today be no less haunting than it was for the characters in Calderón's and Lope de Vega's tragedies. Being denied status—for example, because one has failed to reach certain professional goals or is unable to provide for one's family—may be as painful for a modern Westerner as a loss of *honra*, *tīmē*, *sharaf* or *izzat* was for a member of a seemingly more hidebound society.

Philosophy and Invulnerability

Other people's heads are too wretched a place for true happiness to have its seat.

SCHOPENHAUER, *PARERGA AND PARALIPOMENA* (1851)

Nature didn't tell me: "Don't be poor." Nor indeed: "Be rich." But she does beg me: "Be independent."

CHAMFORT, *MAXIMS* (1795)

It is not my place in society that makes me well off, but my judgments, and these I can carry with me . . . These alone are my own and cannot be taken away.

EPICETUS, *DISCOURSES* (CIRCA A.D. 100)

1.
On the Greek peninsula, early in the fifth century B.C., there emerged a group of individuals, many of them bearded, who were singularly free of the anxieties over status that tormented their contemporaries. Untroubled by either the psychological or the material consequences attendant on a humble position in society, these men remained calm in the face of insult, disapproval and penury. When Socrates, for example, saw a pile of gold and jewellery being borne in procession through the streets of Athens, he exclaimed, "Look how many things there are which I don't want." As Alexander the Great was passing through Corinth, he sought out Diogenes and finally found him sitting under a tree, dressed in rags, with not a drachma to his name. When the most powerful man in the world asked the philosopher if he could do anything to help him, Diogenes replied, "Yes, if you could step out of the way. You are blocking the sun." Alexander's sol-

diers were horrified and steeled themselves for the inevitable outburst of their commander's famous anger. But he only laughed and remarked that if he were not Alexander, he would certainly like to be Diogenes. Antisthenes, for his part, when informed that a great many people in Athens had started to praise him, demanded, "Why, what have I done wrong?" Empedocles evinced a similar scepticism regarding the intelligence of others. He once lit a lamp in broad daylight and announced, as he went around, "I am looking for someone with a mind." And Socrates again, on being insulted in the marketplace, asked by a passerby, "Don't you worry about being called names?" retorted, "Why? Do you think I should resent it if an ass had kicked me?"

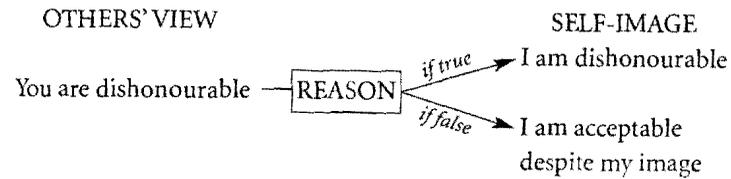
2.

These philosophers had not ceased to draw distinction between kindness and ridicule, success and failure; rather, they had settled on a way of responding to the darker half of the equation that owed nothing to the traditional honour code. They implicitly refuted its suggestion that what others think of us must determine what we may think of ourselves, and that every insult, whether accurate or not, must shame us.



Philosophy introduced a new, mediating element into the relationship between internal and external opinion. This might be visualised as a box in which all public perceptions of a person, whether positive or negative, would first be deposited in order to be assessed, thence to be either sent on to the self with renewed force (if they

were true) or else (if they were false) ejected harmlessly into the atmosphere, dispersed with a laugh or a shrug of the shoulders. The philosophers termed the box "reason."



According to the rules of reason, a given conclusion should be deemed true if, and only if, it flows from a logical sequence of thoughts founded on sound initial premises. Taking mathematics as the model of good thinking, philosophers began to search for an approximation of that discipline's objective certainties within the context of ethical life. Thanks to reason, one's status could—these thinkers proposed—be fixed through the agency of an intellectual conscience, instead of being abandoned to the whims and emotions of the market square. If rational examination revealed that one had been unfairly treated by the community, one should be no more perturbed by the judgement than by the ranting, say, of a deluded stranger bent on proving that two and two amounted to five.

Throughout his *Meditations* (A.D. 167), the emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius, moving in the unstable world of Roman politics, continually reminded himself that any comment made about his character or achievements had to be subjected to the test of reason before he allowed it to affect his self-conception. "[One's decency] does not depend on the testimony of someone else," he insisted, thereby challenging his society's faith in an honour-based assessment of people. "Does what is praised become *better*? Does an emerald become *worse* if it isn't praised? And what of gold, ivory, a

flower or a little plant?" Rather than be seduced by others' flattery or stung by their insults, Marcus aimed to take his bearings from the person he knew himself to be: "Will any man despise me? Let him see to it. But I will see to it that I may not be found doing or saying anything that deserves to be despised."

3.

We should not deduce from the foregoing that the condemnation or censur  of others is invariably undeserved. Leaving the assessment of our worth to an intellectual conscience is not to be confused with expecting unconditional love. Unlike parents or lovers, who may value us whatever we do and however great our faults, philosophers do seek to apply criteria to their love—just not the shaky, unreasonable ones that the wider world is in danger of resorting to. There may indeed be times when an intellectual conscience will demand that we be harsher on ourselves than others are on us. Far from rejecting outright any hierarchy of success and failure, philosophy instead reconfigures the judging process, lending legitimacy to the idea that the mainstream value system may unfairly consign some people to disgrace and others to respectability. In the case of an injustice, it also helps us to hold on to the thought that we may be lovable even outside the halo of others' praise.

4.

Neither does philosophy deny the utility of certain kinds of anxiety. After all, as successful insomniacs have long suggested, it may be the anxious who survive best in the world.

Yet if we concede the worth of some feelings of anxiousness in helping us to find safety and develop our talents, we may be entitled to challenge the usefulness of *other* emotions in relation to precisely

the same goals. We may feel envy, for instance, over a condition or possession that would in fact make us unhappy if we secured it. Likewise, we may experience ambitions unconnected to our real needs. Left to their own devices, our emotions are just as apt to push us towards indulgence, uncontrolled anger and self-destruction as they are towards health and virtue. Because it seems characteristic of these emotions to either undershoot or overshoot their targets, philosophers have counselled us to use our reasoning faculties to guide them to appropriate ends, asking ourselves whether what we want is really what we need and whether what we fear is truly what there is to fear.

In his *Eudemian Ethics* (circa 350 B.C.), Aristotle offered examples of the extremes towards which human behaviour will, when left unexamined, typically run. He also outlined an ideal, or golden mean, as stolid as it is wise, towards which we should aspire to direct that behaviour with the help of reason:

-	PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAL	+
Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Stinginess	Liberality	Profligacy
Spinelessness	Gentleness	Rage
Boorishness	Wittiness	Buffoonery
Surliness	Friendliness	Obsequiousness

To these we might add:

Status lethargy	Ambition	Status hysteria
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Intelligent Misanthropy

1.

If we have accepted well-founded criticism of our behaviour, paid heed to targeted anxieties about our ambitions and assumed proper responsibility for our failures, and yet if we continue to be accorded low status by our community, we may be tempted to adopt the approach taken by some of the greatest philosophers of the Western tradition: We may, through an unparanoid understanding of the warps of the value system around us, settle into a stance of intelligent misanthropy, free of both defensiveness and pride.

2.

When we begin to scrutinise the opinions of others, philosophers have long noted, we stand to make a discovery at once saddening and curiously liberating: we will discern that the views of the majority of the population on the majority of subjects are perforated with extraordinary confusion and error. Chamfort, voicing the misanthropic attitude of generations of philosophers both before and after him, put the matter simply: "Public opinion is the worst of all opinions."

The great defect, for Chamfort, consisted in the public's reluctance to submit its thinking to the rigours of rational examination, and its tendency to rely instead on intuition, emotion and custom. "One can be certain that every generally held idea, every received notion, will be an idiocy, because it has been able to appeal to a majority," the Frenchman observed, adding that what is flatteringly called common sense is usually little more than common *nonsense*, suffering as it does from simplification and illogicality, prejudice and

shallowness: "The most absurd customs and the most ridiculous ceremonies are everywhere excused by an appeal to the phrase, *but that's the tradition*. This is exactly what the Hottentots say when Europeans ask them why they eat grasshoppers and devour their body lice. *That's the tradition*, they explain."

3.

Painful though it may be to acknowledge the poverty of public opinion, the very act of doing so may somewhat ease our anxieties about status, mitigate our exhausting desire to ensure that others think well of us, and calm our panicked longing for signs of love.

The approval of others may be said to matter to us in two very different ways: materially, because the neglect of the community can bring with it physical discomfort and danger; and psychologically, because it can prove impossible to retain confidence in ourselves once others have ceased to accord us signs of respect.

It is in relation to this second consequence of inattention that the benefits of the philosophical approach best reveal themselves, for rather than allow every instance of opposition or neglect to wound us, we are invited by the philosophers first to examine the justice of others' behaviour. Only that which is both damning *and* true should be permitted to shatter our esteem. We should forever forswear the masochistic process wherein we seek another's approval before we have even asked ourselves whether that person's views deserve to be listened to—the process, that is, whereby we seek the love of those for whom, as we discover upon studying their minds, we have scant respect.

We might then start unrancorously to disdain certain others as much as they disdain us, planting our feet in a misanthropic stance for which the history of philosophy is replete with the most fortifying models.

4.

"We will gradually become indifferent to what goes on in the minds of other people when we acquire an adequate knowledge of the superficial and futile nature of their thoughts, of the narrowness of their views, of the paltriness of their sentiments, of the perversity of their opinions, and of the number of their errors . . . We shall then see that whoever attaches a lot of value to the opinions of others pays them too much honour," argued Arthur Schopenhauer, a leading model of philosophical misanthropy.

In *Parèrga and Paralipomena* (1851), the philosopher proposed that nothing could more quickly correct the desire to be liked by others than a brief investigation into those others' true characters, which were, he asserted, for the most part excessively brutish and stupid. "In every country the principal entertainment of society has become card playing," he remarked with scorn. "It is a measure of the worth of society and the declared bankruptcy of all ideas and thoughts." The card players themselves, moreover, were usually sly and immoral: "The term *coquin méprisable* ['contemptible rogue'] is also applicable to an unholy number of people in this world." And even worse, when people were *not* evil, they tended to be plain dull. Schopenhauer summed up the state of affairs by quoting Voltaire: "*La terre est couverte de gens qui ne méritent pas qu'on leur parle*" ("the earth swarms with people who are not worth talking to").

Ought we really to take the opinions of such people so seriously? asked Schopenhauer. Must we continue to let their verdicts govern what we make of ourselves? May our self-esteem sensibly be surrendered to a group of card players? And even if we manage somehow to win their respect, how much will it ever be worth? Or as Schopenhauer put the question, "Would a musician feel flattered by the loud applause of his audience if it were known to him that, with the exception of one or two, it consisted entirely of deaf people?"

5.

The disadvantage of this otherwise usefully clear-eyed view of humanity is that it may leave us with few friends. Schopenhauer's fellow philosophical misanthrope Chamfort admitted as much when he wrote: "Once we have resolved only to see those who will treat us morally and virtuously, reasonably and truthfully, without treating conventions, vanities and ceremonials as anything other than props of polite society; when we have taken this resolve (and we have to do so or we will end up foolish, weak or villainous), the result is that we will have to live more or less on our own."

Schopenhauer, for his part, accepted this possibility resignedly, affirming, "There is in the world only the choice between loneliness and vulgarity." All young people, he believed, should be taught "how to put up with loneliness . . . because the less a man is compelled to come into contact with others, the better off he is." Fortunately, after spending some time working and living in society, anyone with any sense must, suggested Schopenhauer, naturally feel "as little inclined to frequent association with others as schoolmasters to join the games of the boisterous and noisy crowds of children who surround them."

That said, deciding to avoid other people does not necessarily equate with having no desire whatsoever for company; it may simply reflect a dissatisfaction with what—or *who*—is available. Cynics are, in the end, only idealists with awkwardly high standards. In Chamfort's words, "It is sometimes said of a man who lives alone that he does not like society. This is like saying of a man that he does not like going for walks because he is not fond of walking at night in the forêt de Bondy."

6.

Dispensing advice from their isolated studies, philosophers have recommended that we follow the internal markers of our conscience