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## SOME MISCONCEPTIONS OF THE HONOR SYSTEM

**I** ASSURE you that I consider it a privilege and an honor to address you on this occasion. I particularly appreciate talking to such a large group of students about student government. And it has seemed to me that I can make no better use of the time set apart for my discussion than to present for your consideration what I regard as certain misconceptions of the honor system.

Among my many duties as a teacher of philosophy is the very delightful one of conducting each year a course in logic. On one occasion while conducting this course I assigned to groups of students the task of working out and bringing in illustrations of the dilemma as a form of argument, and the various ways of meeting this particular form of argument. The dilemma brought in by one of these groups was most interesting. It had to do with the honor system and was designed to show that this institution ought to be abolished. As I recall it, the argument went somewhat as follows:

If those who live under the honor system are possessed of a high sense of honor, the system is unnecessary and ought therefore to be abolished; and if those who live under this system do not possess a high sense of honor, it is impossible to maintain the system, and it ought therefore to be abolished. But those who live under the honor system either do or do not possess a high sense of honor. So that in either case this institution ought to be abolished, either because it is unnecessary or because it is impossible to maintain it.

All of which sounded very formidable, indeed. But the arguments advanced to meet this formidable dilemma were quite equal to the occasion. On the one hand,

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it was contended that the alternatives proposed by the dilemma are not mutually exclusive, inasmuch as a student body is, as a matter of fact, composed of both honorable and dishonorable types of students, and that if only the former are in the majority, the honor system can and ought to be maintained to the gradual elimination of those who are unfit to live under it. On the other hand, it was argued that the alternatives of honorable or dishonorable student bodies are not only not mutually exclusive, but that these alternatives are not exhaustive, inasmuch as there is a third possibility, namely, a student body composed of those who are neither entirely honorable nor dishonorable, but composed, rather, of those who are in process of becoming honorable or dishonorable, as the case may be; and that with reference to any actual student body, made up as it is of such immature and unformed persons, the function of the honor system is not only to regulate, by eliminating the unfit, but also and more especially to educate by helping to create an environment which is most favorable to the development of honorable traits and honorable behavior.

Now it occurred to me as I considered the pros and cons of this debate, that these two ingenuous methods of meeting what was no doubt a purely academic attack on the honor system are typical of two more or less distinct conceptions of the nature and function of this institution. One of these conceptions is that the honor system is primarily, if not exclusively, a form of student government; and the other is that, because no form of self-government can be permanently adequate unless it is educative as well as regulative in its effects, the honor system must aim at producing such effects in the characters of those who live under it

if it is to regulate their conduct in a permanently effective manner. It is the former of these two conceptions, namely, the conception of the honor system as being essentially regulative rather than educative in its intent, that I regard as a misconception. And it is this misconception of the honor system that I wish you to consider first.

And let us begin by distinguishing between two meanings of the term "honor" as used in connection with the honor system, which have not always been carefully distinguished by those who have thought on this matter. In the first place, then, "honor" may be said to have an ethical connotation in that it refers to those standards of action which are considered by the members of any student community as being indispensable to the welfare, if not to very existence of that community. But the term may also be said to have a psychological connotation in that it refers to the traits in the characters of those who make up the student community which dispose them to conform to such standards of action as being matters of honor, and which we therefore think of as constituting their "sense of honor."

Now the standards of action regarded by any generation of students as being matters of honor may or may not be truly objective, that is, truly representative of their best interests; but in either case the sense of honor which many students bring with them to college will on the whole fall short of the requirements of the honor code under which they must live. The reasons for this are obvious. The student's sense of honor is not inherited; it is acquired. And it is acquired in some specific environment. It is, therefore, relative to that environment. But the environments in which students are reared and in which they acquire the sense of honor they bring with them to college are apt to differ from the college environment in one or the other, or in both of two respects. On the one hand the ideals of the former may be inferior to those of the lat-

ter. On the other hand the two sets of ideals may simply be different in that they have developed with reference to dissimilar situations and types of interest. And in any case, influences must be brought to bear on the immature student to improve, or if that be unnecessary, at least to modify and expand his "sense of honor" in appropriate directions.

Now it is my conviction that the honor system is, or at least should be, one of the educative influences thus brought to bear on the immature student. This is possibly not the traditional conception of the nature and function of this institution. The traditional conception would seem to be that the honor system is essentially a regulative instrument and, incidentally, a device for separating the sheep from the goats, or a sort of sieve for sifting out the good grain from the worthless chaff. The presupposition back of such a notion of the honor system is a static view of human nature, and more especially of those elements in human nature which constitute a "sense of honor." But for a college which pretends to be an educational institution to subscribe to a system of student control which itself makes no pretense to being educative in its effects, and for the college to deal with students as being immature or undeveloped with reference to knowledge and yet as being finished products with reference to morals, would seem to be, to say the least, a contradiction in terms.

And so I think we must conclude that the college is logically committed to the conception of the honor system as being essentially educative and not merely regulative (or shall we say eliminative?) in its intent and result. But what difference will this conception make in the administration of the honor system where it is consciously grasped and put into practice? In other words, how is the honor system to function as an institution whose aim it is to help create an environment which is favorable to the development of the sort of honor

required of one who is to conform successfully to its code? Time will permit of only two or three suggestions in this connection as illustrations of the sort of measures which may be employed to accomplish the end I have described.

The first of those suggestions is that the freshman's acknowledgment and acceptance of the honor code can be made somewhat less perfunctory and mechanical than is usually the case. When a student matriculates in a college where the honor system is in operation, there is an implied agreement on his part to uphold its standards. But this technicality might well be supplemented by a solemn and impressive ceremony, conducted by student representatives, on which occasion all new matriculates would be initiated into the honor system, as it were, taking upon themselves such vows in such terms as would be appropriate to the emotional and dramatic features of the situation. The psychological effect of a ceremony of this sort is obvious.

Another suggestion I have to make in this connection is that the publicity given by student officers and leaders to the standards embodied in the honor code can be made something more than perfunctory explanations and warnings. Too often such publicity aims only at putting the new student on notice, so to speak. The usual attitude seems to be something like this: Here are the ideals of the college community; let the new student take them or leave them,—along with the consequences! A rather formal sense of justice (and should we not add, something closely akin to smug self-righteousness?) requires that the inevitable delinquents, when once their violations of the honor code prove them to have been "devils from the beginning," shall not be able to plead ignorance of the law. Hence the necessity of some sort of information concerning the honor system and its standards. But my contention is that this information can and should be conveyed in such a manner as to establish in the freshman's

mind associations and attitudes which will make his acceptance of the honor code something more than a meaningless technicality. Constructive publicity, then, as a substitute for perfunctory explanations and warnings is another way in which the honor system can be rendered truly educative in its effects.

And there are various other methods which might be employed with results equally good, such as a more discriminating and intelligent use of the "pledge"; and such as the use of corrective and constructive forms of punishment as opposed to those forms which aim only at vindicating and upholding the honor code and at ridding the college of its undesirable elements. Our time is passing, however, and I must hasten on.

There is another prevalent misconception of the honor system to which I wish to call your attention. It has to do with what we must regard as the very foundation of all student government, namely, personal responsibility; and it usually manifests itself in an unwillingness on the part of one student to assume responsibility for detecting and exposing the wrongdoing of another. What shall we say of such an attitude? Well, there are several things, it seems to me, which should be said with reference to it. For one thing we shall do well, I think, to recognize how prevalent this attitude is. We shall also do well to recognize the sincerity of those who share it. Again we might as well face the fact that this is the point at which student government is most apt to break down. And, finally, it is important for us to realize that many of those who are opposed to the practice of informing on their fellows are able to give very definite, and, as they see it, very convincing reasons for the faith that is in them. After a thorough investigation, extending over two or more years, and conducted by means of personal inquiry among many students, I have come to the conclusion that those who are opposed to this principle of reporting

the misconduct of others fall into a number of clearly marked off groups in accordance with the reasons they give for the position they take. I wish you to consider during the time which remains two or three of these reasons in order to determine, if possible, whether they have sufficient merit to justify the position taken with reference to it.

Some of these reasons are relatively superficial and need not, therefore, detain us. I refer to such contentions as that the principle of informing on others is unnecessary; or that it is extremely difficult and unpleasant; or that the punishment in which it results is too severe; or that the principle is inherently odious. An argument which is more serious and which merits more consideration is that the individual student is not responsible for exposing the misconduct of others because this duty has been delegated to a student council elected for this purpose and authorized, therefore, to act for the individual in this capacity. And in defense of this attitude, an appeal is usually made to the analogy which is said to exist between civil society and the college community. In civil society there are agencies whose sole duty it is to detect and expose wrongdoing. To be sure, the existence of such agencies does not absolve the individual from all moral nor indeed from all legal responsibility in this connection. That is to say, there are situations in which the individual citizen is neither morally nor legally free to refrain from reporting to the proper authorities the misconduct which comes under his observation. But on the whole, the welfare of society is best promoted where every citizen attends to his own business. To attend to one's own business, therefore, is under ordinary circumstances, an honorable trait so far as the citizen is concerned. Now the college community under the honor system is like civil society in a democratic state in that it sets up certain machinery through which it proposes to govern itself.

It is unlike civil society, however, (and here the analogy between the two breaks down) in that the personnel of its governmental machinery are not primarily policemen or judges, but are, on the contrary, students, who in the nature of the case cannot be exclusively depended on to detect and expose wrongdoing. Theirs is the duty to investigate misconduct and to administer punishment in such cases as come under their personal observation, or such as are reported to them by others. For the most part the rank and file of the students themselves must be responsible for and take the initiative in holding to account those whose misconduct is dishonorable and thus strike at the foundations of college life.

The tradition that "to tell" is not an honorable thing to do has a more primitive basis, however, than this analogy between the college community and civil society. It reaches back into the earliest training of the individual as a member of the family and the elementary school. And, if I am not mistaken, it is this training which all of us get as members of the family and elementary school that accounts for the largest group of those students who are adverse to reporting the misconduct of others. And yet there is no analogy between these more elementary groups and the college community that justifies carrying over into the latter this tradition against concerning oneself with the wrongdoing of one's fellows. For, mind you, neither the family nor the elementary school pretends to be a self-governing body. On the contrary, authority is vested in parents and teachers, respectively. And on the whole parents and teachers find it easiest to administer their authority in an effective and equitable manner when there is a minimum of "spying" or "tattling." But in a college where student government prevails, students are in a large measure on their own responsibility and must, therefore, be prepared to take the initiative in upholding their honor code.

Let me hasten to remind you, however,

that under the honor system the student is not required to "spy" or to "tattle" or to be a "busybody." He is merely required to report such cases of misconduct as come under his own observation while engaged in his own affairs. And he is not at liberty to withhold information of such violations of honor for the reason that this information rightfully belongs to the student council to whom he as one who has elected to live under the honor system has delegated the task of upholding the honor code. The fact that the knowledge in question was not gained as a result of any effort on his part but on the contrary was stumbled on, so to speak, as one might pick up a purse lost by another, does not in any way affect his obligations in the matter. The knowledge is not his; it belongs to others. To keep it locked up in his own mind is no more defensible, morally, than it would be for one to pocket money he had found with no attempt to identify its rightful owner. And this is the reason that, under the honor system, to refrain from reporting violations of the honor code is itself regarded as a breach of honor.

There is one other objection to the principle of personal responsibility, as conceived under the honor system, to which I wish to call your attention. There are many students who feel that to report or to threaten to report the misconduct of another is, in effect, to employ a degree of force which is strangely out of place in a system of control based on honor. The criticism I heard expressed most frequently at the recent Congress of the National Student Federation was "too much system and too little honor." Back of this criticism seemed to be a feeling that it is inconsistent to regard the standards of action included in the honor system as standards of honor when the practice of the standards, so far from being left entirely to the voluntary disposition of students, is in reality guaranteed by coercive measures of the most compelling kind. Has this attitude, with the criticism it implies,

any weight? And how is one who is concerned to uphold the reasonableness of the honor system to meet it?

Well, it is possible that those who feel so sure that honor and coercion cannot be combined in any sort of system have overlooked or misconceived the real nature of group self-control, of which the honor system in college communities is a special case. Self-control by groups manifests itself in two forms, namely, in morality and in law. By morality is meant the control of the members of a group from within through personal ideals; and by law is meant the control of such individuals from without by means of legislative enactments enforced by agencies competent to inflict appropriate penalties for violations. But these two forms of social control, although distinct in their mode of operation, are by no means mutually exclusive. For neither is possessed of a sphere of action peculiar to itself, in which it operates to the exclusion of the other. On the contrary, the spheres of action in which they respectively operate overlap, so that a standard of action may be both a matter of morality and a matter of law. For example, driving an automobile at a reasonable (or legal) rate of speed on public highways is for some a personal ideal (as well as a law) and operates, so far as they are concerned, as an inner control; for others, however, it is merely a law imposed from without and enforced by extraneous penalties.

Now, the honor system combines within itself the two forms of control to which I have referred as morality and law, and also exhibits the overlapping of their respective spheres to which reference has been made. In other words, the honor system is, in reality, a combination of coercion and honor. And the standards of action embodied in its code partake of the nature of both law and morality. For many students these standards are personal ideals which exercise an inner control. For such students the honor code is simply an announcement

to the world of the principles they mean to live by in the interest of certain values, felt to be fundamental in college life. And in living up to this announcement, no coercion or restraint of any sort may be experienced. There is a small minority of students in every college, however, for whom the honor code is to all intents and purposes a legal enactment. Its standards, so far as these students are concerned, are not personal ideals; and the observance of these standards is not at all a matter of morality. For such students, on the contrary, the control exercised by these standards is entirely external, and is enforced by the decrees of a council with penal powers. And yet, the existence of such an external and coercive form of control within a system which proposes to effect a control of conduct primarily from within through a sense of honor is, as we have seen, neither unusual nor unreasonable. In a group, made up of such a diversity of moral types as compose the personnel of a college community, only such a combination of law and morality, coercion and honor, will suffice.

It must be obvious, however, that this conception of a group, some of whose members are so moral as to require no control save through their own ideals and others of whom are so lacking in morality as to require control altogether from without, is an undue simplification of the state of affairs actually existing in a college group, or in any other community. In all groups, including the college, the dividing line between the "good" and "bad," or between the "honorable" and the "dishonorable" is fluctuating and indistinct. The great mass of individuals fall somewhere between these moral extremes, either because their ideals are not sufficiently inclusive to serve all the vital interests of the group, or because these ideals, however inclusive they may be, are not vigorous enough to function always without some support and reinforcement from without. And even the best of us, if we are but honest enough to admit it,

have our unfinished areas, our weak moments, or both. It may be, therefore, that we all need from time to time to be reminded lest we forget, to be enlightened lest we become confused, and to be made sober and steady in the face of what might otherwise cause us to falter. And the existence of law and law-like coercions affects us in just these ways. Indeed, the law has been one of the great educators of the human race, one of the schools, if you please, in which mankind's morality has been nurtured. There is a sense, to be sure, in which law may be said to represent the institutionalizing of morality. But the law has more than repaid the debt it owes to the moral insight of the social genius in the nurture it has provided for the morality of the masses. And as an educative influence, it is as indispensable for the average individual of today as it was for the masses of individuals in primitive society.

The average college student, like any average individual, has his ideals and his convictions. But like any other average individual he is, with respect to goodness or character, an unfinished product. At college he associates himself with other immature persons. Together, he and they publish abroad the fact that they mean to live by certain principles. These principles constitute their code of honor. But immature and idealistic though they be, students realize that some of their number are without much appreciation of what they have agreed to regard as matters of honor, and that all of them appreciate some of these ideals but inadequately at best. They resolve, nevertheless, that these ideals shall be maintained, whatever penalties must be imposed to maintain them. Whereupon the honor code ceases to be a matter of morality alone and becomes, in essence, at least, a matter of law. But in the meantime no violence has been done to the spirit of morality. On the contrary, morality has, in reality, been supplemented and reinforced; supplemented for those who are more

or less lacking in the inner sanctions of conduct, and reinforced for those the inner sanctions of whose conduct may be in need of that stimulus, enlargement, and support which come only from a subjection to discipline which is self-imposed.

J. R. GEIGER

## TEACHING THE APOSTROPHE OF POSSESSION

**H**AD anyone told me when I first began teaching that some day I would admit that any single matter of form in written composition was hard to teach, I know I should have been greatly humiliated; and had I been told that I would admit that the apostrophe of possession was more than stubborn about getting taught, I think I should have left the teaching ranks at once.

Yet here I am after a number of years of getting oriented in what "is English"; of reconciling minimum essentials; of conducting classes in sight-seeing trips through English and American literature; here I am, making an informal report on how I attempt to teach the apostrophe of possession! "Picking up pins" I should have perhaps termed such work back there a few years.

Had this particular bit of form—spelling, perhaps—not run such a high percentage of error in the numerous studies of recent years of pupil errors in written composition, I might never have known the mark was poorly taught. Then had it not shown up worst in a study of seven formal elements I made of my own teaching, I probably should not have given it any more thought.

But when this elusive will-o'-the-wisp made the worst showing in my own teaching, I analyzed the nature of the mistakes made in its use and discovered that my forty-six sophomores—tenth-grade high school—misused the apostrophe of possession in a series of dictation exercises in which it was one of the problems, accord-

ing to the following distribution of types of errors.

- 57%, omitting the apostrophe
- 15%, placing the apostrophe after the *s* in singular nouns
- 12%, placing the apostrophe after the *s* in irregular plurals
- 8%, placing the apostrophe before the *s* in plural nouns
- 6%, placing the apostrophe before the *s* in singular nouns ending in *s*, as James
- 3%, unnecessary use of the apostrophe
- 2%, confusing the apostrophe with the comma

This bit of analysis caused me to plan a definite method of attack on the apostrophe of possession alone. Twice since, I have done this, each time refining my method; and not yet have I been able to take the improvement, as shown by a closing-up test, beyond a fifty percent improvement. However, I had evidence that attention had been permanently directed to the pestiferous mark. Each time that I have tried the experiment, I have had the individual cooperation of the pupils, who always seem to puzzle as much about the elusive nature of that apostrophe as I do about their slowness to capture it.

There are no less than ten different ways in which a pupil may go wrong in the use of that apostrophe of possession! I did not know it until I began to isolate its uses for the purposes of incorporating them in exercises for dictation. Briefly, these are: (1) Omission of the apostrophe; (2) Its unnecessary use; (3) Placing the apostrophe on top of the *s*; (4) Placing the apostrophe after the *s* when it should be before; (5) Before when it should be after; (6) In irregular plurals; (7) In nouns ending in *s* all the time, as Charles; (8) In joint ownership; (9) Confusing *its* with *it's*; (10) In possessive modifiers of gerunds.

The plan for the experiment is quite simple. It consists of an initial test of forty-five sentences, arranged in cycles of nine; that is, each group of nine sentences occurs in the same order as does the first nine. This test so arranged is for diagnostic purposes, and for comparison with a similar one given at the close of the experiment.