

Meditation on the Honor Code – 11-13-2006

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I'd like to talk about the Nichols Honor Code, a topic on which we've already had a couple very good faculty presentations. Dr. Maritime told us a picaresque tale in which the morally questionable hero went from misadventure to misadventure until he finally came to a bad end. And Mr. Long turned a simple story of not doing his homework into the harrowing narrative of a dark night of the soul from which we're glad he emerged a better, wiser man.

My only comment on these meditations—excellent though they were—is that both cast the Code in a somewhat negative light. The message seems to be that we all know the dishonorable thing is easier to *do*, but that we should all strive to be honorable anyway because it's the better way to *be*. Thus the message of the Honor Code, as it's been presented so far, seems to be “Don't take the easy way out.”

There is certainly something to all that, but I'd like to take a different approach. I'd like to speak about the Honor Code in more positive terms. And my argument? We should all follow the Honor Code because it's the easier thing to do. Not harder—easier.

To make this argument, I'll rely on a discourse with which I'm familiar, the discourse of psychoanalysis. But I'm sure you'll see that this argument could also be cast in other terms.

Freud theorizes that our first attempts to find satisfaction in this world are based on something called the “pleasure principle.” That's not as much fun as it sounds. When we want something, Freud says, we want it right away. We want to be satisfied. And we

don't care where that satisfaction comes from. Even an imagined satisfaction, a fantasy of satisfaction, will do. But of course, imagined satisfactions aren't very satisfying.

Thus there follows a second stage, a modification of the pleasure principle that's called the "reality principle." You still want to be satisfied, but now you take the extra step of making sure your satisfactions are real. This calms you, because you've finally found a satisfaction that actually satisfies. But the reality principle leads to a new problem. Now we're confronted with the prospect of a large group of people all seeking their own satisfactions, and since they are no longer satisfied with fantasized pleasures, they seek them real world. This leads to competition and conflict. And the result is a Hobbesian world in which "every man is enemy to every man," and life is "nasty, brutish, and short."

The French psychoanalyst Jacques-Alain Miller adds another level. He says that after the pleasure principle and the reality principle comes—what? The answer is surprising. It's ethics. Ethics is a way for each of us to try to attain his or her own satisfaction while minimizing conflict with others who are simultaneously trying to attain their own satisfactions. You can sense Rousseau lurking in this account.

The crucial point here is that each level represents a *reduction* of tension. The pleasures of the pleasure principle are immediate, but not really satisfying, and so the anxious search for satisfaction goes on. The satisfactions of the reality principle are real, but potentially at odds with the satisfactions of others, and so we attain a little pleasure, but only under the threat of conflict. Ethics places us in the position of having to negotiate with others for our satisfactions, but it allows for more or less stable ways to attain them with the lowest possible level of tension.

Now, what does all this have to do with the Honor Code? The conclusion of the theoretical argument I've just rehearsed is that ethics is actually the path of least resistance. It provides the easiest means to satisfaction for the greatest number. You may sense Bentham lurking in this argument.

Now, some points of the Honor Code deal with interpersonal relations and some have to do instead with personal conduct. Let's take them one by one. We'll start with cheating because it seems to be a favorite topic. We've been presented with the argument that we shouldn't cheat because even though cheating is easier, it leads to bad results in the end. My argument is that *not* cheating is easier. When you have a paper due, write the paper. The satisfaction is real, and its attainment doesn't bring you into conflict with others. If you plagiarize, the satisfaction isn't real. And the tension of having to write a paper doesn't really go away. It's simply replaced by anxiety about getting caught or about writing the next paper. So it's easier just to write the paper.

To run quickly through the other articles of the Code, "treating all members of our school with respect and fairness" means allowing others their satisfactions as you are allowed yours. I think you'll hear something like the Golden Rule in that.

"To respect and foster the ideals of diversity in our school" means that you should respect that fact that others may have satisfactions that are different from yours.

"To show restraint and respect while attempting to resolve conflicts" means that our ethical system won't work perfectly, and when it doesn't, you should try to manage and reduce the tensions that arise.

"Respect[ing] the property of others" means that people's satisfactions are often tied to their possessions, and you should not interfere with that relationship.

I'll grant you that the account of our Honor Code that I've given is pretty utopian. But I still maintain that following the Code is easier than dealing with the tensions and conflicts that would arise in an anarchic community of competing satisfactions.

Those of you who know something about psychoanalysis may be thinking that this is the most positive account of the super-ego you've ever heard. Didn't Freud say something about the cruelty of the super-ego and the way it demanded an ever stricter observance of its dictates? Yes. But Freud also said that the super-ego is both normative and pathogenic. Roughly speaking, that means both good for us and bad for us. And we should remember Jacques Lacan's observation that it is we who install the super-ego as a cruel master by imagining that it demands an end to our satisfactions. In other words, you create a master by rebelling against one.

The Honor Code isn't intended to interfere with your satisfactions. And it only will if you believe that it does. The more positive way to put it is that the Honor Code is intended to promote the satisfactions of each and all.