

Honor Is a Game of Chess, Not Checkers

“It’s chess not checkers.”

That’s what my jiu jitsu coach told me once when I asked about when to or how to use a takedown. In as complex a fighting style as jiu jitsu (just like in chess, as opposed to the simpler game of checkers), there isn’t really a clear answer about when to use a “move.”

I’m learning that honor is that way, too. Honor is complex because life is complex. Rarely does it fit into a one-dimensional ruleset.

There is honor in going to bat for an ideal. But there will be times when honor requires that you prioritize a person over an ideal.

There is honor in being truthful about your own faults. But there will be times when standing proud is the most honorable thing you can do.

There is honor in standing up for someone else’s reputation. And there may be times when sacrificing your own reputation for honor may be the honorable thing.

There will be times when it is honorable to call things out. There will be times when it is honorable to stay silent.

There is honor in fighting an enemy, but there may be times when honor may require you to forgive or even work with an enemy for the sake of a greater good.

There is honor in disrespecting the disrespectful. And yet there may also be times when honor requires you to admit your foolishness to fools or your guilt to the guilty.

Honor is complex. It’s a strange, evolved code of lived-out truth, courage, loyalty, fairness, and personal risk. All of these dimensions of honor have to be combined in an honorable decision.

But all of this is not to say that the honorable way is hard to recognize. Honor is complex because life is complex, but we are ourselves complex beings. We have evolved with honor, and (somehow) we always know how to head in the direction of honor. We won’t know the exact steps to get there, or exactly where we will end up, but after all, that is what makes the game interesting.

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