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VIRTUE
IN THE LATE fall of 2010 as the economy was beginning to recover from a crisis that destroyed so much of the wealth of the middle class, a number of documentaries and docudramas appeared that asked probing questions about the causes of this catastrophe. One such film was *Inside Job*, about the culpability of the nation’s elites—not just on Wall Street and Capitol Hill but at research universities, in faculty offices of “thought leaders” who influence policy. In this film professors appeared as technocrats, publishing papers whose
economic analysis benefited the corporations where they served as consultants.

Another 2010 film approached a similar subject from a more celebratory angle. *The Social Network* is about the founding of Facebook in the dormitory rooms of Harvard. Larry Summers, who was then president of Harvard after stepping down as Secretary of the Treasury, is played by an actor who is a dead-ringer for Summers—with the same astute bluntness. Two students, Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss, had arrived in his office to accuse their fellow student, Mark Zuckerberg, of stealing and profiting from their original idea for a social networking site. The Winklevoss twins are handsome, strapping children of privilege, with a clear sense of entitlement, so it is hard to feel sorry for them.

Interesting, however, was the argument the twins advanced: Zuckerberg had violated Harvard’s honor code. Cameron Winklevoss recited it for President Summers: “The College expects that all students will be honest and forthcoming in their dealings with members of this community. All students are required to respect public and private ownership. Instances of theft, misappropriation. . . .” Summers interrupts and calls out to his secretary. “Anne?” “Yes sir,” she says. “Punch me in the face.” Tyler Winklevoss continues quoting from the code: “or unauthorized use will result in disciplinary action, including requirement to withdraw from the College.” Summers looks up lazily from his desk, eyes full of exquisite contempt, and says: “and you memorized that
instead of doing what?” He tells them that students do not enter into a code of ethics with each other—only with the University, and shoos them out of his office. But all was not lost: the brothers eventually accepted a settlement from Facebook worth a reported $65 million.

The first student-run Honor System in the country was established in 1842 at the University of Virginia. In 1965, Professor Robert Gooch said in an address at Finals that he regarded it as “the finest thing about the University,” adding that “the great body of alumni are convinced that their association with the Honor System was the most important, the richest, and the most permanently influential experience which they had during their search for truth as students in this institution.” The same could be said today, 170 years after the establishment of our code of honor.

The Honor System at Virginia is renowned not just for its resilience and the reverence with which the students and alumni regard it, but also for the non-negotiable quality of its essence. Administration of the honor system is entirely in the hands of the students, with offenses presented to the Honor Committee, which makes the final decisions, and no appeals are possible—not to the faculty, not to the administration, and not to the Board of Visitors. And year after year, the students affirm the policy of “single sanction”: one strike, you are out.

There may be no single explanation for the persistence of these institutional features. It illustrates what social
scientists call *path dependency*—perhaps a clumsy way of saying that origins matter, and that once you are set on a course under a complex set of circumstances, it is difficult to veer from that course. The circumstances that set Virginia’s honor system off on its original track were violent ones, and hence dead serious.

In Mr. Jefferson’s mind the University was the fondest experiment of self-governance—that government is best that governs least. The genius of American institutions, he thought, was incongruent with a disciplinary system that hardens college youth “to disgrace, to corporal punishment, and to servile humiliations.” Self-governance, even for advanced teenagers, was the best policy. That proved to be a difficult proposition, however. Many of the first students in Mr. Jefferson’s University were from plantation-owning families, young men accustomed to privilege but not always to responsibilities, leading the founder to lament the “vicious irregularities” in habits and disposition among a few of his students.

Some of the irregularities were silly—making shrill noises like “split quill” that penetrated the silent night of the Lawn, tooting away on tin-horns, ringing the college bell, dragging iron-fenders over brick pavements just to hear the racket they made, and exploding fire crackers. (Living on the Lawn, I know whereof he speaks.) But others were, as Mr. Jefferson said, vicious: virtual riots, chanting epithets against European professors, hiding behind masks. Soon the riots became
a “tradition,” and one unsuspecting professor, who tried to pull the mask off a student, was shot and killed on the spot. Out of this tragedy came a chastened university, and out of this chastening, came the Honor System in 1842.

However it was not until after the Civil War that the Honor System reached its finest hour. The students were from preparatory schools with honor systems, the culture of honorable gentlemen was a shared, living experience, and so the Grounds were simple extensions of hearth and home. As the College grew, there was a fear, reasonable but untested, that it was social homogeneity that made the spirit of honor possible; heterogeneity would render the continuation of the Honor System impossible. Even so the System survived and thrived, yet doubts about its viability persisted—in the 1920s the students were predicting that if enrollment went beyond 2,000 the Honor System would be no more. Today the University enrolls over 20,000 students, ten times more than the presumed breakpoint, with a diversity—in gender, race, class, and culture—of those who genially inhabit the Grounds that would flabbergast even Mr. Jefferson.

Along the way the Honor System has evolved. In 1935 the system adopted (in part to avoid an overload of cases) a simpler code focusing on the pledge not to lie, cheat, or steal. The code survived the challenges of the 1960s that came from many quarters, including the Radical Student Union, which called the Honor System one of the two greatest irrelevancies in the pursuit of knowledge (the other being grading).
The students at the University’s Law School were equally disenchanted, with 85 percent of the students interviewed saying that “the spirit of the Honor System at Virginia does not correspond to the ideals and morals of the world outside our doors.” Then their report went on to pose this stunning question: “Since there is no honor in the world, why try to force an old outdated concept of integrity on students who are preparing to live in this modern world?” (Anne, punch me in the face.)

No honor in the world? As Prince Hal exits the stage in a scene from Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, the corpulent Falstaff is left to muse on the meaning of honor. “Can honor set a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honor? A word. What is that word, honor? Air... Therefore, I will none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon.”

Today few of our institutions are unscathed by misbehavior and scandal: Wall Street, the church, big-time sports, government local and national, the mores of our politicians. Among the two institutions people still hold in high esteem are the military and higher education—two great institutions traditionally cherished for social mobility, and for social and racial integration. Yet only recently we learned of the careless burning of the Koran in Afghanistan, and of the racial hazing that led to the suicide of a Chinese-American soldier. Academe grapples with its own sets of problems related to athletics—and at Virginia, we have all been tarnished
by a senseless killing in our midst, an event that forces us to examine the terms and boundaries of our cultural norms and behavior. But higher education cannot escape its role in setting moral standards for our society. Honor is not a mere scutcheon—a ceremonial shield—nor is it simply empty air: it is an attribute without which our society cannot function, a principle without which we are left only with broken covenants. Whatever our faults, for two centuries the University of Virginia has pledged itself to the ideal that honor matters, that honor counts.

On many days I walk through the gateway to the University on Hospital Drive. On the arch—we can call it our escutcheon—is a marble slab. Inscribed in marble is this statement: “Enter by this gateway, and seek the way of honor; the light of truth; the will to work for men.”