INBOARD IV — FOUNDATIONAL

THE KEEL INSTITUTE

HUMILITY

The Freedom to Be Your Own Man

Never Live in the Service of Others' Expectations and Opinions

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Before We Get Underway

This is the last of the four Foundational Inboards, and for many men it will be the hardest work in the curriculum. The subject is the need for appreciation, recognition, and approval. That drive is inborn, it is stronger than most men know, and it quietly makes many of a man's most significant decisions for him. This Inboard is about taking those decisions back.

LEG ONE — Discover

The Man Who Answers to Himself

You may or may not know a man whose life is genuinely unaffected by the approval or disapproval of others. Such men exist, but they are rare — rare enough that many men have never met one. So here is what he looks like.

Put him in a meeting where everyone can feel which way the decision is supposed to go. The senior man has made his preference clear, and the room is quietly arranging itself around it — people finding reasons to agree with what they can see is wanted, softening what they really think. There is a cost to being the one who breaks the mood, and everyone in the room can feel that

cost. You have felt it yourself. It is the pull to stay in favor, and in most rooms it decides what gets said.

This man feels the same pull everyone else feels. He simply does not let it decide for him. He says what he actually thinks, plainly — not to make a point, not squaring up for a fight. He says the true thing and lets it sit there.

Then something happens that surprises people the first time they see it. The room relaxes. Even the senior man whose preference was just contradicted often ends up thanking him. The reason is one everyone in the room can feel: this man wanted nothing from them. Not their approval, not a victory, not admiration. He wanted the right answer.

You have just witnessed a man living honestly by his own values and ideals: a man free of the need for approval. It is easy to mistake what he did for nerve, and plenty of men will be difficult in a meeting — most of them working an angle of their own. What you saw was not nerve at all. The pull to perform that broke every other man in the room reached him too. It did not move him.

Understand what that means about everyone else in the room: the need for approval makes a person dishonest. Every man who softened what he really thought, who found a reason to agree with what he could see was wanted, said something other than the truth — not because anyone forced him, but because staying in favor was worth more to him in that moment than

accuracy. You spent your last Inboard repairing your honesty. This drive is the force most likely to corrupt it again.

This man is not free of the need for approval because he was born without it. Like everyone, he was born with it. He did something with it.

The Need for Approval and Recognition

The drive for approval cannot be satisfied. Hunger ends with the meal. Fear passes with the danger. Ambition cools with age. Approval works — it moves a man, and always has. What it never does is make him want less of it. There is no amount that finishes the wanting, because there is nothing there to be filled — it is a fantasy, and a fantasy cannot be filled. This is the one drive that never wanes on its own. It is there before a child can speak, and men on their deathbeds often still worry what will be said about them.

Look around you and you will see it steering people's lives everywhere. The employee who cannot rest until the manager nods. The friend who agrees with everyone. The grown man still performing the part a parent wrote for him forty years ago. The man who collects titles. The man who changes his convictions to match the room he is standing in. Different lives, one engine: each of them is steered by other people's approval. And it is not only the obvious cases. Almost every man rounds the story toward the version that makes him look better. He feels the lift when someone thinks well of him — and the drop when someone does not, and the drop can take the whole afternoon with it.

This is not a defect in a few vain people — you will not easily find a man free of it.

Society has structured our lives around it. Awards, titles, rankings, employee of the month, student of the year — nearly every organization produces some version of certified approval, and an entire industry exists to manufacture the trophies and plaques that approval requires. The appetite is that predictable and dependable.

Serious thinkers have treated this drive as dangerous for as long as there have been serious thinkers. The oldest story in the Western canon turns on it. Achilles, offered the choice between a long quiet life and a short one, chooses the short one, because it comes with *kleos* — ancient Greek for glory, the recognition of others. He trades his life for it, and the *Iliad* treats that as a fully understandable bargain. No one questions whether he was right or wrong.

Plato gave the drive its own place in the soul, naming the part of us that strives for honor and wants to be esteemed: *thumos*, the spirited part. The rabbi, physician, and philosopher Moses Maimonides described it plainly centuries later: most people, he wrote, and perhaps all people, will spend enormous energy to gain standing and honor in the eyes of others, and will give up real pleasures rather than face public shame. Later yet, Rousseau built much of his account of modern life around what he called *amour-propre* — the love of one's own standing as reflected back in the eyes of a crowd.

These great men agreed about very little. But they all agreed about this. The hunger to be well regarded is powerful beyond most men's estimate of it, and it does not seek our permission to run our lives.

None of them saw it as a friend.

The Motive Nobody Names

The drive almost never works under its own name. Listen to a high achiever explain himself and you will hear the reasons he is willing to say out loud: the athlete on the podium talks about love of the sport, pushing the body, representing his country — and he means it. But look at what he actually paid — his whole life organized around a few seconds on a clock — and ask whether love of the sport, by itself, can give anyone that level of dedication. Something else carried him: the wish to be the best publicly, with everyone watching. The medal is not only the measure of the race. It is proof, in a form the whole world can read, that he came first.

You can see this even where you would least expect it. Scientists will tell you they serve the truth, and they do — and still they will spend years in bitter fights over who reached the truth first and whose name gets attached to it.

None of this makes such men frauds, and it is not the behavior of a strange few. It is the normal setting of every human being. People do in fact reach for real things — excellence, service, truth — but the need to be seen and appreciated quietly fuels much of the effort.

That fuel is never named. This drive is kept hidden, like a family secret — the alcoholic uncle no one mentions. When a man is asked why he did something, the answer he gives will predictably be the respectable one — the love of the work, the duty, the service. Underneath the respectable answer, every man knows the hunger for approval is a major part of why he does what he does — and somewhere, he also knows it is not a healthy motivation, which is why it mostly stays unspoken. And yet everyone knows it is there; people simply extend one another the courtesy of not mentioning it. That is why no one is surprised by Achilles' choice.

Where It Comes From

The need for approval has had a very important function in your life. It kept you alive long enough to allow you to read this.

A small child cannot reason his way to good behavior. You cannot explain to a two-year-old why he should not run into the street, and wait for the argument to win. What works is simpler and older than argument: the child reads your face. Your smile tells him yes; your frown tells him no; your approval and disapproval are the steering wheel, long before his own judgment can hold it. Every parent uses this, because it is the only thing that works at that age. The pediatrician Benjamin Spock, whose book raised a generation of American children, put it plainly: for a young child, the strongest reward is approval and the strongest punishment is disapproval. Not cake, not candy. Approval and disapproval.

So the need did its job. It kept you alive before you could reason, and it taught you how to behave until you could understand why. There is nothing shameful in having it. It raised you.

But then you grow up, and the steering wheel that is designed to be operated by others never gets uninstalled. Though meant for a child who could not yet govern himself, it is still present in the grown man who can. So a great many capable, intelligent adults are still being steered, in the moments that matter, by other people using machinery installed before they could talk. And no one questions it, because being steered by it feels familiar and natural. It feels like your own judgment.

An Afternoon in Asch's Laboratory

In the 1950s, a psychologist named Solomon Asch ran an experiment. A young man has volunteered for what he has been told is a study of visual perception, and he takes his seat at a table with seven other volunteers. He has no reason to think the afternoon will be anything but dull.

The task could not be simpler. Asch holds up a card with a single line on it. Then he holds up a second card with three lines, marked one, two, and three, and the men take turns saying aloud which of the three matches the first. One of the three is an obvious, exact match. The other two are plainly, almost insultingly, different — different enough that no one could get this wrong. A child could do it. The man at the table is a little bored.

What he does not know is that the other seven men are not volunteers. They are paid actors working for Asch.

The first few rounds go exactly as you would expect. The line is shown, everyone names the obvious match, and around the table they go. Then something strange happens. On one of the rounds, an actor confidently names a line that is clearly wrong. Not close. Wrong. The kind of answer that makes you wonder if he was looking at the same card. Then the next man says it too. One by one, seven men in a row calmly name an answer the subject can see with his own eyes is false.

Now it is his turn, and he has a problem. He can see the right answer as plainly as his own hand. But seven people have just said something else, without hesitation, as though it were obvious. So he sits there, looking at two lines that plainly do not match, and *a third of the time, he gives the same wrong answer the actors gave*.

And he knew he was being dishonest. Afterward, most of the volunteers who agreed with the actors admitted they knew the right answer and gave a wrong one anyway, because they did not want to be the one man at the table who disagreed. That was the entire pressure. No money, no punishment, no cake, no candy — no one they would ever see again. Just the discomfort of standing alone in a room of strangers, and that was enough to make a grown man say something he knew was false.

Asch's findings were so counter-intuitive that researchers ran the experiment again in 2023, seventy years later, to see whether they would hold. They did. Once again, about 33 percent still conformed. The newer study, however, added a test that made things even more revealing. The same groups were asked five political questions, and the study insiders answered first. In this test, subjects were more than twice as likely to give the answer they had just heard. And this is the test that matters. A man rarely has to declare which line is longer. He is asked what he thinks every day.

The newer study also checked whether intelligence or self-confidence made a man more reluctant to conform. Neither did. Put any kind of man's own eyes against his need for approval, in a contest that should not have been close — and again and again, the need for approval corrupts the surest thing he owns: his honesty.

The Usual Advice, and Why It Fails

So what do you do with a drive this strong? The oldest answer is to aim it well. You cannot get rid of it, the thinking goes, so let it carry a man toward good things. It is the whole psychology behind the awards industry. This is neither a modern nor a fringe idea; some of the most serious minds who ever lived thought this way. Aristotle held that the desire for honor should not be stamped out but rightly directed. Cicero treated the love of glory as a legitimate way to spur a person toward worthy deeds. And John Locke, writing on how to raise children, was blunter than either: get a child to love

credit and dread shame, he wrote, and you have put into him “the true principle, which will constantly work and influence him.”

These men were not naive. Rather, they were looking at people in general, and they did not believe most people would ever take real control of their own drives. So they offered a fallback. If a man is going to be steered by the need for approval his whole life, then at least let that need be pointed at good things, so the life it produces is a worthwhile one. Let him keep his hands off the wheel, but aim the car at a decent destination. As a policy for the general run of people, this is not stupid at all. It may be the best that can be done for most.

But look at the price of it, and at who is being written off. The fallback keeps a man useful, even admirable, and it leaves him exactly where he started: needing something other people control, his peace resting in their hands, steerable by anyone whose good opinion he wants. Aristotle, Cicero, and Locke settled for that because it was advice for the many. But when Aristotle described the man he actually admired, he no longer offered the compromise. A life spent chasing honor, he wrote, is too shallow for a serious man — because honor is given by other men and can be taken back by them, and a serious man does not let other people decide what he is worth. That is the ideal: a man who is not moved by what people think of him.

This curriculum is not built on the compromise. It is built on the ideal. And the ideal is not merely attainable — it is essential. A man who needs the room's approval will bend his honesty to keep it, and hand the steering of his

life to whoever is watching. Nothing a man builds is his own until this drive is governed.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who was born a Roman slave and later freed, cuts to the bottom of this. He taught that true freedom means building one's life only upon what one can control. Your reputation is not on that list: it lives entirely in other people's heads, and it is under their control, not yours. Tie your happiness to it and you give up control of your own life. Epictetus had a word for that condition. His word was slavery.

Perhaps no one ever saw this trap more clearly than Arthur Schopenhauer. He studied the human hunger for standing and reputation all his life, and wrote it up at length, and his diagnosis still reads as if it were written this morning.

Reputation, he wrote, exists in the fantasies of others. A man who ties his peace of mind to his reputation has therefore handed it over to their fantasies. He watched men make the trade anyway, every day: giving up real things — health, time, money, peace — in exchange for nothing more solid than a good opinion in someone else's mind. He argued that at least half of all human anxiety is rooted in concerns about what other people think of us, and that living for other people's appreciation is among the biggest sources of dishonesty — living for their fantasies rather than the truth. His solution was simple: understand, once and fully, that the opinion of others has no direct bearing on your existence, and the greater part of your anxieties falls away on the spot.

Still, the man himself failed. When Schopenhauer was offered a lectureship in Berlin, he scheduled his lectures for the exact hour Hegel taught — the most celebrated philosopher in Europe, at the height of his fame — so that the crowd would have to choose him. It chose Hegel. Schopenhauer spoke to a nearly empty room, and carried the wound for thirty years, salting his books with attacks on the man who had outdrawn him. He constantly checked the press for his own name. And when recognition finally arrived in his old age, the man who had declared it worthless received it with open delight and could not get enough of it. *Knowing is not doing. Schopenhauer proves it in spades.*

The goal for a serious man should never be a better-aimed need for approval. The goal is to not need it at all.

What the Need Costs You

The need for approval and recognition is anything but benign. Its costs are brutal.

First, it makes you fragile. If your happiness depends on being thought well of, then anyone and everyone can make you miserable. One piece of criticism can undo a good day, and you have handed a great many people a great deal of power over your own life.

Second, it makes you easy to manipulate. A need is a trigger, and other people can learn to pull it at will. Anyone who can make you feel important or inadequate can get things from you that you never wanted to give.

Third, it makes you dishonest. You watched this in Asch's laboratory: grown men said what they knew was false to avoid standing out. The same pressure works on you every day. A man who needs approval maintains an image, and maintaining an image requires constant dishonest work: he edits, he inflates, he invents. Rarely in big ways, but steadily, because the image always needs upkeep.

Fourth, and most dangerous: the need for approval hands the steering of your life to other people. A man governed by it lives a borrowed life — doing what others expect of him instead of what he expects of himself. He may be busy, even admired, and still not be living his own life, because the direction was never in his hands. The first three costs make a man miserable, usable, and dishonest. This fourth one costs him the most valuable thing a man could ever own: direction over his own life.

This Inboard's Central Principle

There is a word for the freedom this Inboard has been describing, and it is a word most men think they already know: humility. What most men mean by it — thinking little of yourself, taking the smaller share, keeping your head down — is not what it means. Humility is not a low opinion of yourself.

Humility is the freedom to be your own man.

This does not mean you stop listening to anyone. A free man still takes advice, still hears correction, still cares what his wife and closest friends think — but

he consults them; he is not ruled by them. He can be shown he was wrong and be glad of it, because what he was after was never being right in front of people — it was getting it right.

First Bearings named where all of this is heading: wisdom. The need for approval fights it head on. You may know exactly what is right — and still not do it, if the people whose approval you need do not value it. Knowing the good is not enough when someone else holds the veto.

Freedom from that need is what lets a man finally steer by his own understanding of reality alone. That is why this principle is Foundational. The three before it built a man who can change, who is fueled for the work, and who tells himself the truth. This one lets him take the wheel himself.

Reflection

When you finish this page, put the document down. Take a walk if you can; sit somewhere quiet if you cannot. This part is not reading. It is looking.

Look back over one ordinary week and watch for the places where a choice of yours bent toward how it would look to others. The opinion you softened, or sharpened, to fit the room. The thing you bought, wore, or said with one eye on who would see it. The story you told a little better than it happened. The decision you made, or ducked, because of what someone would think. Do not hunt for big, dramatic vanity. The need for approval does its real work in small, ordinary moments.

Avoid the two mistakes you know by now. Do not start fixing anything yet — the repair is one Leg away, and it will keep. And do not turn this into a case against yourself. You did not install this drive; it was standard equipment, and it kept you safe once. You are not judging it. You are learning to see it.

One more instruction. Some of what you notice will be easy to write down. Some of it will not — you will feel yourself wanting to soften it, or explain it away, or call it something other than what it is. Write those down anyway, and mark them. The reluctance is worth paying attention to, and if you end up with marked entries, they are where the next Leg will do its best work. If you end up with none, nothing is wrong.

Now write below what the week showed you — each place a choice of yours bent toward how it would look, in your own words, and mark the ones you hesitated over.

Today is for seeing where you have been living in the service of other people's opinions.

Tomorrow, the work of taking your life back begins.

What you have just read is the first of four Legs of this Inboard — the knowledge part. It is not the work.

The work is what comes next, and that is what the other three Legs of this Inboard are. They are done at the Helm — a private members-only workspace where you do the actual building of yourself.

If this document reached you from a friend, the first two documents — First Bearings, which is the map of the whole voyage, and this one — are free at thekeelinstitute.com. The road starts there.