Draft of entry "honour" for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Honour

*Introduction*

Given its psychological and sociological importance, especially in non-liberal societies, honor may be the most undertheorized normative phenomenon. Philosophical neglect of honor is due partly to the doubtful moral *bona fides* of honor: honor-typical motives have been usually viewed by philosophers in both the Christian and liberal West as either non-moral or immoral but replaced by morally sounder ones. More practically, honor (and what is usually translated into the English "honor") connotes a number of apparently contradictory meanings, further bedeviling analyses. Four particularly salient conceptions of honor emerge in the anthropological, literary, and philosophical literature on honor: honor as prestige, honor as the ethos characteristic of "cultures of honor," honor as *honestas*, and honor as agonism.

*Honor as prestige*

The core sense of "honor" amounts to positive social standing, social esteem, or prestige: i.e., a pro-tanto good in the "axiological" sense, akin to health, wealth, pleasure, or talent. Aristotle has this sense of honor in mind when he says that cultivated people seek *time* (honor, esteem, value, worth) as the *summum bonum*, in contrast to the vulgar, who seek pleasure (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b22-30). Aristotle rejects honor as the supreme good because it is overly contingent on the favorable opinion of others. Certain Christian criticisms echo the concern, resolving the problem with the suggestion that we not abandon the pursuit of honor so much as seek the (reliable) honor bestowed by God as opposed to the (fickle) honor given by men (e.g., Psalm 62:7, "My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge"). Skepticism about the value of prestige also plays a critical role in modern ethical and political thought, as can be seen in the writings of Hobbes, who endeavored to replace a contemporary concern for prestige and marks of distinction with one for goods Western liberals now take as foundational: liberty, security, welfare (Hobbes 1996, Bagby Johnson 2009).

*From prestige to morality*

Unlike "face," honor is usually thought to be something we can have a claim to. Hence two canonical definitions of honor: anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers' (1966) of honor as "the value of a

person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society . . . his estimation of his own worth, his *claim* to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his *right* to pride" and anthropologist Frank Stewart's (1994) concise analysis of honor as a "*right* to respect."

That honor-as-prestige or positive social standing can be deserved suggests a (perhaps quasi-) moral dimension to the honor concept: just as the goodness of (say) wealth doesn't settle how morally to achieve or distribute it, acknowledging the goodness of honor-as-prestige doesn't settle the moral question of how we ought to distribute or go about earning social status.

Universality is usually considered to be a necessary requirement of morality. Whether there are any universal principles of behavior determining who deserves honor is a vexed matter (Appiah 2010, Gerrard 1994, Kumar and Campbell 2016, Sessions 2010). Particularly problematic for honor theory is that the moral approaches taught in Western classrooms appear ill-suited for distributing honor-as-prestige. For instance, the zero-sum nature of prestige would appear to make agent-neutral consequentialism impossible, since honor cannot be maximized or promoted generally. The "rights" language in the two definitions quoted above suggests that moralized honor is non-consequentialist in nature. But since the nature of prestige is such that we cannot easily trade, bequeath, or forcefully redistribute it as we might wealth or liberty, contractarian applications appear unlikely (but see Brennan and Pettit 2005).

Perhaps honor is a deontological system? Insofar as deontology overlaps with Kantianism, Elizabeth Anderson (2008) has argued that Kant was impressed by (contra consequentialism) the disregard for material consequences honor norms seem to inspire in their adherents, as well as (contra contractarianism) honor's uncompromising concern for one's dignity. However, Kantism as usually understood departs from typical honor norms in that Kantianism holds that all humans are equally endowed with a dignity that is theirs by virtue of their natural rational autonomy. In contrast, societies and (sub)cultures associated with honor see dignity as alienable and unequal. For instance, a very common framework in honor (sub)cultures sees every member of an ingroup concerned with a certain form of prestige (as warriors, as mothers, as football players, as scholars) sharing fully and equally in what (following Stewart) is called "horizontal honor," or respectability, enjoying prerogatives denied to both those outside the ingroup and those who were, but have been dishonored or shamed. Among those who have horizontal honor, there will be a ranking reflecting the prestige or "vertical honor" of members based on their (often competitive) success, but only if they obey the rules governing the pursuit of prestige. Thus, even the fundamental and egalitarian horizontal honor can be lost for bad behavior or bad luck, and this, along with honor's comfort with rank-relative amounts of dignity, is often said to mark the difference between honor culture and the Christian and Kantian "dignity" culture (e.g., Berger 1983).

Insofar as positive social status is the *summum bonum* of any honor culture, and insofar as the prospect of losing one's fundamental right to respect is a real possibility, [shame](#) will be the primary self-directed, and contempt the primary other-directed, condemnatory moral emotions of honor as opposed to guilt and anger, so characteristic of Christian and modern moral regimes. Thus the

"honor culture/dignity culture" dichotomy is sometimes used interchangeably with a "shame culture/guilt culture" one (Nussbaum 2004).

*Cultures of honor*

"Cultures of honor" has become a term of art in the social sciences for societies characterized by swift and violent riposte to slight and insult. Psychologists Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen's *Culture of Honor* (1996) is the seminal work in this tradition, and argued that norms calling for violent responses to insult are adaptive in areas where weak central authority combine with easily-stolen goods, a dynamic at work in pastoral societies but even some urban settings where (say) an alienated minority live outside the law and interact in an informal economy of contraband.

Honor killings, reported to claim about 5,000 women annually, are so-called because they are motivated by the imperative to cleanse a family's honor of the stain of a female family member's sexual indiscretion or even her rape. Although their masculine mores monopolize scholarly attention, traditional "cultures of honor" usually honor chastity and fecundity in women. But what is perhaps most distinctive in such cultures with regard to both resources and female chastity is that successful *protection* of cattle or womenfolk is not the only honor-conferring behavior for men: in cultures of honor past and present, cattle-rustling and seduction (or even bride-theft) are counted as honorable coups against rivals, enemies, or even one's social superiors (Herzfeld 1985). The logic of this sort of honor has been observed at the level of international relations as well (Lebow 2010, Friedrichs 2016).

*Honor as honestas*

"Cultures of honor" emphasize public performance. For men, a reputation for being a hard target means public insults and challenges must be answered, but not necessarily private ones. For women, even chastity norms may be abandoned if the appearances are bad, as in the case of the noblewomen Lucretia, whose otherwise rigorous sexual fidelity is compromised not by a threat of murder but by a threat of being scandalized *as* unchaste (Livy, *History of Rome* 58). "Cultures of honor" are also self-oriented, with everyone engaged in a complex game to maintain and elevate their status. Thus it is perplexing that "honor," at least in English, also connotes a set of traits best summarized under the concept of *honestas*: integrity, principledness, selflessness, quiet dignity, dutifulness, honesty (Olsthoorn 2015). Hence from Cicero's *honestas* to many modern treatments of honor (often associated with military honor and stoicism (cf. Sherman 2005, French 2003)), an honorable person in the honor-as-*honestas* mold contrasts dramatically with the moral ideal in a "culture of honor": Achilles, for example, is a very poor example of a moral combatant on this picture.

*Honor as agonism*

Honor has also been associated in many cultures with a distinctively "agonistic" ethic (Huizinga 1950). Agonism is the ethos of public, respectful, and ritualistic competition between equally-matched opponents. Its roots may be biological, as males in many species square off to establish hierarchy and win the attention of females, presaging sport (Lombardo 2012). Agonism's way of

imposing sportsmanship onto battle is evident in the warrior-aristocratic traditions in many societies (Demetriou 2013). Nietzsche is perhaps the most prominent Western philosopher to consider agonism as a serious alternative to Christian and Modern moralities or perhaps (depending on honor's moral status) morality itself (Acampora 2013, Tuncel 2013).

*Honor as morality, ethics, or a tertium quid?*

Whether honor is a (candidate) moral value is, then, complicated by the question of what is meant by "honor" and "morality" in the first place. Those who see *honestas*-associated virtues at the heart of honor are most inclined to see honor as a moral value we should all aspire to (Cunningham 2013, Krause 2002). Agonists tend to see honor as a moral value for a certain sort of person (the aristocratic) or a certain domain (competition): as H.L. Menken put it, "Honor is simply the morality of superior men" (Demetriou 2014). Some, notably Anthony Appiah (2010), see honor as relative, as whatever code happens to describe how prestige is distributed in a society or subculture, and thus see honor as a non-moral or at best "ethical" but nor "moral" good. Finally, for those who see honor more in terms of the norms characteristic of "cultures of honor," honor is likely (but not always—see Sommers 2018) to be viewed as either a false moral code or a moral value so fundamentally different from "ours" that its prevalence implies some form of moral antirealism (Doris and Plakias 2008).

*List of works*

Acampora, C. (2013) *Contesting Nietzsche*, Chicago: Chicago University Press. (Discussion of agonism in Nietzsche's work.)

Anderson, E. (2008) "Emotions in Kant's Later Moral Philosophy: Honor and the Phenomenology of Moral Value," in *Kant's Ethics of Virtue*, ed. Monika Betzler, Berlin: De Gruyter: 123-145. (Important discussion of Kant's debt to honor psychology.)

Appiah, K. A. (2010) *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*, New York: Norton. (A philosophical exploration of the demise of representative honor-based practices of different societies, with an analysis of honor's relationship to morality.)

Aristotle (1985) *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. Irwin, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. (Includes seminal discussion of ancient Athenian conceptions of honor and related virtues such as magnanimity and fineness.)

Berger, P. (1983) "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor" in *Revisions: Changing Perspective in Moral Philosophy*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press). (An important analysis of honor and its distinctions form morality.)

Brennan, G. and P. Pettit (2004) *The Economy of Esteem*, New York: Oxford University Press. (Thorough analysis of prestige through an economic and philosophical lens.)

Cunningham, A. (2013) *Modern Honor*. New York: Routledge, New York. (A moral defense of honor.)

Demetriou, D. (2013) "Honor War Theory: Romance or Reality?", *Philosophical Papers*, 42(3): 285-313. (Contrasts just war theory with "honor war theory," and thus the ethics governing modern militaries from the warrior-aristocratic ethos.)

---- (2014) "What Should Realists Say About Honor Cultures?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17(5): 893-911. (Argues honor, understood as agonism, is a moral value.)

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French, S. (2003) *Code of the Warrior*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. (Discusses the warrior/military ethos across centuries and cultures.)

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Herzfeld M. (1985) *The poetics of manhood: contest and identity in a Cretan mountain village*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Analysis of honor in the Mediterranean.)

Hobbes, T. (1651/1996) *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Haskins, New York: Oxford University Press. (See chapters X and XIII for Hobbes' views on honor.)

Huizinga, J. (1950) *Homo Ludens*, Boston: Beacon. (Classic discussion of the civilizing role of play, contest, and agonism.)

Johnson Bagby, L. (2009) *Thomas Hobbes: Turning Point for Honor*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. (Most thorough discussion of Hobbes' role in undermining aristocratic honor norms.)

Kumar, V. and R. Campbell (2016) "Honor and Moral Revolution," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19(1): 147-59.

Krause, S. (2002) "Liberalism with Honor," Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Influential defense of honor motives as compatible and necessary for liberal societies.)

Lebow R. N. (2010) *Why Nations Fight*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Analysis of honor psychology at the level of international relations.)

Livy. (1912) *History of Rome*, trans. C. Roberts, New York: E. P. Dutton and Co. (Ch. 58 of book I recounts the famous story of Lucretia's Roman wifely virtue and her honor paradox.)

Lombardo, M. P. (2012) "On the Evolution of Sport," *Evolutionary Psychology* 10(1): 1-28. (Argues that sport served as a way to sort male genetic quality for allies, rivals, and mates.)

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Pitt-Rivers, J. (1966) "Honour and Social Status," in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany, Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 19-77. (Seminal discussion of honor norms.)

Sessions, L. (2010) *Honor for Us*, New York: Continuum. (A detailed philosophical analysis of honor.)

Sherman, N. 2005. *Stoic Warriors*, New York: Oxford University Press. (Connects martial values to stoicism.)

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Stewart, J. H. (1994) *Honor*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press. (Analysis of honor with special emphasis on Bedouin society; widely considered the most important contribution to honor research in any field.)

Tuncel, Y. (2013) *Agon in Nietzsche*, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press. (Discussion of agonism in Nietzsche's work.)

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