
Review

Honor: A Phenomenology

Robert L. Oprisko

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Honor is a topic that has, after a long period of near neglect, received quite some attention over the past few years. Four examples of fairly recent books on honor are Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (2010), Krause's (2002) *Liberalism with Honor*, Sessions' (2010) *Honor for Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation and Defense* and Welsh's (2008) *What is Honor? A Question of Moral Imperatives*. Despite this notable increase in interest in recent years, the literature on honor is still quite limited, while the term itself is defined in many different ways within the literature. Definitional disagreement concerns, for instance, the question whether honor is a virtue, a reward for virtue, a quality of character or a right. This in turn leads different authors to have diverging views on whether honor is mainly an external or internal quality, and to what extent it is something hierarchical, egalitarian or both.

Oprisko's *Honor: A Phenomenology* attempts to bring some clarity in the matter. Not surprisingly, the author does so by noting, in a first chapter that provides an overview of the recent literature, that honor indeed means different things to different authors, and then explaining what is not so good in the work of Appiah, Krause, Welsh and quite a few others. But Oprisko especially positions himself by explicating where his book differs from Sessions' *Honor for Us* (2010), which is the most similar in outlook to his own. Like Sessions, Oprisko starts from the assumption that honor is something that is still relevant for us, where other authors on honor tend to explain how and why honor has lost ground. Or, as Appiah (2010) does, to describe honor by means of exotic examples such as dueling in Britain, foot-binding in China, slavery in the British Empire and honor killings in modern-day Pakistan; cases that are culturally far away from most readers, and that suggest that honor's role is limited to unfamiliar contexts. A more important point of congruence is that both Oprisko and Sessions want to end the conceptual confusion about honor. However, according to Oprisko, Sessions in the end fails to deliver what he set out to do. Oprisko promises to take up where Sessions left off.

According to Oprisko, the main 'methodological difficulty within the study of honor is that the word means many things and that, because it means many

things, its value as a word becomes relatively meaningless' (p. 4). To disentangle the complexities regarding honor, Oprisko conceptualizes in the first chapter of his book honor as 'the category of related processes that structure social reality by inscribing social value onto persons and groups' (p. 4). To describe how honor structures society, and frames reality for individuals, he links, in the two other chapters of this part of the book, honor generally with the study of value and identity. Having done so, Oprisko makes an important (and often made) distinction by delving deeper into external and internal honor; respectively, the subjects of the second and third part of his book. Part 2 devotes separate chapters to six concepts that together make up external honor, described by Oprisko as inscribing individuals with social value externally (p. 120). These concepts are prestige, shame, face, esteem, affiliated honor and glory. Although some of them will sound rather alike to most people, they are actually not, as Oprisko explains. In fact, some of these different concepts can only be understood by dividing them into narrower concepts, and by zooming in on some concepts that look like honor but are it not. To give an example of that, and of Oprisko's method: the chapter on glory describes the differences between fame, celebrity and glory, and explains that fame is not honor because it is just a matter of being known, while celebrity (being known, but also being worthy of being known) and glory (renown that transcends time and space, such as that of Achilles) are honor concepts. These short chapters on external honor are the best and most readable chapters of the book.

Internal honor, subject of an equally interesting but considerably shorter Part 3, is the incorporation by the individual of the social value ascribed to him or her by others. This third part contains two chapters, describing two primary processes of internal honor: honorableness, 'the individual's degree of internal acceptance of external valuation of the self' (p. 113) and dignity, the inscribing of social value 'onto the self by the self' (p. 120). Internal honor thus receives a lot less attention in this book than external honor. That is probably a defensible choice, and it distinguishes Oprisko's work from most of the recent work on honor, which is largely devoted to internal honor (personal honor in Sessions' terminology). This emphasis on internal honor in the work of other authors is in line with what is the case outside political theory, where honor is increasingly taken to mean something close to integrity, or, even more general, being ethical. Honor is in that case more a personal quality or virtue, as for instance is the case when we say that someone has a sense of honor. As anthropologist Stewart (1994, pp. 44–45) describes, from the seventeenth century people began to consider having such a sense of honor, something internal, as more important than honor based upon public codes. Appiah (2010), for instance, writes that 'a person of honor cares first of all not about being respected but about being *worthy* of respect' (p. 16). But although forms of internal honor, such as dignity, have often a much more modern ring to them than forms of external honor such as, say, face or glory, we might lose sight of an essential



characteristic of honor if we no longer see it as something that ultimately depends on how others see us. Oprisko does not fall into that trap.

Oprisko does a good job in explaining the distinctions between the different meanings of the word honor, and added a helpful appendix with descriptions of the key terms. If there is drawback to this book, it lies in its conceptual approach, which sometimes lacks illustration, and its relative neglect of the rich (intellectual) history of honor – the section on the origins of honor in the first chapter is just one page. There is also only a limited discussion of honor's interesting but complicated relationship with, to name a few things, war, violence and sex. Especially in Part 4 of the book, on the politics of honor, one would expect more on these and similar topics, but it looks as if Oprisko's phenomenological approach has as a side effect such that he is somewhat silent on what honor can do, apart from binding a group together (p. 3). Honor can, for instance, be an important driver of moral change; Appiah's *The Honor Code* describes how something that was once thought honorable can be turned relatively quickly into something to laugh about, as happened to the practice of dueling in Great Britain, or as something backward, which was the fate of foot-binding in China (2010, pp. 51, 100, 162). Most thinkers on honor before the cotemporary surge in attention (such as Cicero, Mandeville and Smith, all of whom are duly missed in this work) considered honor a necessary reward for making the right choice between higher interests and self-interest. Whether or not honor was also a *legitimate* motive (Should doing the right thing not be its own reward?) was naturally a topic of considerable debate, but there is nothing on that in Oprisko's otherwise thorough book. But then again, Oprisko never intended to write a book on the intellectual history of the notion of honor; the aim was to clarify, and in that aspect he delivers as promised.

References

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Peter Olsthoorn
Netherlands Defense Academy, 3509 AA,
Utrecht, The Netherlands
phj.olsthoorn.01@nlda.nl