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Shame

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Reviews: Kwame Anthony Appiah
THE HONOR CODE
How moral revolutions happen 265pp. Norton. $25.95; distributed in the UK by Wiley. £19.99.

It is unusual and irregular in the guarded precincts of contemporary philosophy to pay much attention to honour, but the "proper place" of this phenomenon is Kwame Anthony Appiah's concern in this book. Contemporary philosophy is the tailend of modern philosophy, which as a whole is particularly hostile to men who think much of themselves. Preferable to honour, in general, is gain, which keeps us sober, free of delusions of grandeur, and ready to calculate. Gain has its cost, but the greed that love of gain brings with it can be controlled by spreading the wealth it produces. Social justice in some form is the remedy for the excesses of gain.

Appiah, however, wants to enlist honour in the service of morality. He agrees that morality is not strong enough to be effective on its own, that doing right for its own sake will not get it done reliably, but he turns to honour as the incentive. Perhaps he means that honour should be understood in addition to gain, as he does not compare the two contrasting incentives to do right. From the book's title one could say that honour works through the medium of a code, an often complicated and parochial set of conventions, whereas gain appeals directly to a universal passion without resort to a code. To bring honour into ethical consideration, Appiah has to leave the comfortable ground of philosophic principle and enter the treacherous field of fact. So in his argument on behalf of honour, he gives three historical instances in which honour served the function of motivating a moral revolution: the abolition of duelling in England, the abolition of the foot-binding of women in China, and the abolition of the slave trade in England and elsewhere in Europe - all moral achievements of the nineteenth century.

These abolitions go in the direction of greater democracy, and accordingly all made use of honour not as an incentive to excel, to make or show oneself better than others, but negatively through dishonour, or shame, to avoid ill repute. Gentlemen, Appiah says, abandoned duelling when the practice spread to non-gentlemen and was no longer distinctive to their class. After the ban on duelling, everyone was now equally unwilling to risk his life when insulting someone or defending himself from insult. In the second case, the Chinese renounced foot-binding not because Chinese women demanded it, but when they saw that foot-binding was giving them a bad name in Europe and had become a source of national shame. Similarly, to speak against the slave trade, William Wilberforce appealed to British honour (as Abraham Lincoln in his speeches on slavery appealed to the taint on American honour before the world).

It seems that to advance the morality of democracy, the equal honour of all humans, or the honour of being the same or similar, was used to conquer aristocratic honour in unequal distinctions. Honour could not be conquered except by appeal to a contrary honour; honour itself is unconquerable.

Then which is the true honour, democratic or aristocratic? Not answering the question directly, Appiah asserts that giving and receiving honour "is in every normal human being". To understand it, he makes a distinction between the honourof recognition and that of esteem. Recognition respects some fact about a person, for example a powerful person like a police officer, and you either have it or not. But esteem judges a person according to some standard, and it is competitive and admits of degrees, such as with an excellent actor. The Duke of Wellington had both recognition as a gentleman, equal to other gentlemen, and respect as a great general, above others.

As against Appiah's distinction, however, one might venture to say that there is always esteem in recognition. One cannot recognize the fact of someone's power without coming to a judgement as to its legitimacy or other quality, hence as to whether he or she deserves esteem or not. Appiah admits that we owe recognition to policemen only if they "live up to" their professional codes (which have replaced "codes of honor"). If they do not, we might still obey but would withhold our esteem. There is no neutral recognition of the mere fact of power. While recognizing, one is always esteeming or not esteeming or in-between. In doing so, one creates a hierarchy of better, worse and equal. Hierarchy, it appears, necessarily accompanies honour; honour is necessarily aristocratic.

Yet there is a democratic honour based on equality, and Appiah rightly quotes Tocqueville to that effect. But the difficulty with this sort of honour is that whatever qualifies someone as equal also grades him as unequal. In asserting that a slave deserves the equal respect due to a human being, we mean that he is above subhuman beings. He has human reason or human feelings. But there are degrees, small and large, of reason and feeling in human beings. In whatever regard we are above subhuman, there are degrees of that quality in human beings, hence grounds for unequal honour and for aristocracy. When you abolish the slave trade because slaves have the merit of human beings, you justify a ranking in that merit, whatever it is. The inevitability of esteem means that democracy is both enlivened and threatened by little aristocracies made up of the people we cannot help but admire, accurately or not, whether mere celebrities or truly great. If honour is unconquerable, it must exist in democracy - but so, too, must aristocracy, in the inevitable ranking by the judgements we cannot fail to make.

Nor can honour be understood as mere recognition that does not include esteem, since, as Appiah says: "To care for your honor is to want to be worthy of respect". People are not satisfied with ignorant praise or with praise from their inferiors, which may be ignorant. They want to be honoured by their peers or their betters. Or if thathonour is not available, they want to deserve it. People want their honours to be based on true desert, not on reputation alone. If reputation is all they want, it is undeserved gain they want, not honour. To be sure, people often deceive themselves as to what they deserve and whether they are worthy of respect, but either the truth or the self-deceit is necessary to honour. Hence the desire forhonour is a claim to know the truth about oneself. It cannot be an incentive to morality if it is merely an incentive to a reputation for morality. An "incentive" is a form of gain. Appiah looks at honour as if it brings only gain or advantage to thehonoured, disadvantage to the dishonoured or shamed. In his book, honour is diminished into its shadow, the gain that accompanies it but to which it can never be reduced in the eyes of those who seek it.

Honour in the service of morality is honour tamed if not conquered. But is not honour more intractable than this, more rebellious against morality? Appiah takes up this problem in a chapter on violence against women, particularly "honour-killing" in Pakistan. Instead of attacking honour as such, he appeals to it, arguing that "there is no honor in honor-killing", and that refraining from violence to women should be "central to male honor". Here he seems unafraid of the risk of returning to the tradition that male honour requires protection of women because they are usually physically weaker and less able to defend themselves. How does this square with the contemporary morality which says that women are equal to men? Feminists have preferred to rely on the police, rather than on male honour, to protect women in the reasonable fear that men will exact a price for the admission or implication that women are weaker.

In general, honour of any kind may take over morality rather than serve it, bending or even breaking it so as to make morality serve honour. There is all the difference in the world between the honour-killing of women and gentlemen fighting each other in duels, but in both cases the "honourable" ones are willing to do murder. On the other hand, one could defend the morality of chastity that honour-killing attempts to enforce - but chastity is almost as much against Western morality today as is murder. Honour is an appeal to our finer feelings, hence more than an obedient incentive to democratic levelling.

A society of honour might become divided between those who protect honour and those who live under its protection, the former proud of their duty and the status that comes with it, the latter grateful and respectful to their betters. Again, this is aristocracy. "Sounds horribly old-fashioned, doesn't it?" - says Appiah of the life of honour.

Yet if Appiah seems careless of risk - like one of the honourable men he calls upon - he is right to suggest that honour is pervasive, even in democratic societies. Our honour is involved in our "identity", he says. One could add that the label might better be "self-importance", as it identifies what makes a person or group distinctive. Identity politics, such as the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the women's movement everywhere, is about the human sense of self-importance.

It is not, for example, about poverty but about relative poverty. Honour is a mixture of nature and convention, and of truth and boasting. We have seen that Appiah says honour is "normal" in human beings. To hear a contemporary moral philosopher say something is "normal" is one of several pleasant surprises in this book. He might almost have said it is part of human nature. But honour is also obviously conventional in that all honourable people live in an "honour world" of their time and place constructed around them. It is true, then, that humans have a sense of honour, but also true that when they come to express it, they fasten it to the particulars of their situation. Honour in human nature comes down to one's own honour, usually as against someone else's. Appiah, the author of Cosmopolitanism (2006), passes over the strong tendency of honour to divide us into warring groups, and in assertions of honour to exaggerate our own importance with boastful partisanship. In the conflict between honour and gain, it is often alleged that gain, though more ugly than honour, is more peaceable. But Appiah does not explore the reasons why honour has been neglected in modern philosophy.

Nonetheless, a reconsideration of the subject is very welcome. In the course of it, Anthony Appiah is led to question the dishonouring of honour by Kant, also welcome. Still more welcome would have been a venture outside contemporary philosophy back to the Greeks, poets as well as philosophers, who were preoccupied with honour, who took its measure, and who were wiser than we are.