Book Reviews

The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen, by Kwame Anthony Appiah. New York: Norton, 2010. Pp. xix + 264. H/b £19.99.

Honour has been in disrepute among intellectuals for almost a century now. The standard explanation for honour's demise is its role in driving young men and their countries to surpass the limits of acceptable human slaughter in the First World War, the trenches of which became 'a mass grave for honor' (Alexander Welsh, *What is Honor? A Question of Moral Imperatives*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p. x). Academic interest in honour revived in the 1950s among anthropologists and sociologists, where it was treated with a studied moral distance. Literary scholars, historians, and political scientists took up the subject a generation later, and broached the question of whether honour should be rehabilitated. So it was only a matter of time until philosophers turned their attention to honour (by name) in any sustained way. Fortunately for our field, one of the first to do so was Kwame Anthony Appiah. *The Honor Code* is an enjoyable, approachable, and yet immensely learned book in which all of Appiah's many capabilities — as a philosopher, a historian of ideas, a cosmopolitan, and a prose stylist — are on full display in the service of honour and our understanding of it.

Although some analytic ethicists might wish for a more thoroughgoing analysis of honour, *The Honor Code* aims at and achieves the more urgent goal of reacquainting Western intellectuals with honour. It accomplishes this by contemplating honour's role in four different 'moral revolutions': the decline of European duelling (Ch. 1), the abandonment of Chinese foot binding (Ch. 2), the outlawing of the Atlantic slave trade (Ch. 3), and the (much hoped-for) cessation of honour killings (Ch. 4). Appiah's spiral-shaped narrative in these four chapters alternates between history and philosophical analysis as he teases out increasingly deeper lessons about honour's role in moral revolutions. The fifth and final chapter summarizes Appiah's theory of honour, and offers some arguments for its rehabilitation.

Appiah's most basic claim is that moral revolutions are rarely the result of moral reasoning alone. This is not because the arguments against the immoral practices in question are not popular: they are often widely held, even by the perpetrators themselves. So what delays moral revolutions in these cases? Appiah points to the disconnect between what people see as moral and

what they see as honourable. Even if a practice is agreed on all sides to be immoral, our sense of what is honourable is so powerful a motivator that moral revolutions will grind to a standstill until the old honour codes are replaced. Thus, we learn that gentlemen will flout reason, Christian duty, and the law by duelling, until such time as the practice is rendered ridiculous by its adoption by the lower orders. Chinese aristocrats will literally cripple their daughters until they wish to rank themselves among Westerners, who see footbinding as barbaric. The slave trade will cease only when physical labour stops being shameful and principled moral leadership itself becomes a source of national pride. The practice of honour killing will go on, even in the teeth of Islam's condemnation of it, until regional opinion-makers conclude that the ancient tradition is a cultural embarrassment.

Turning to Appiah's theory of honour, he follows anthropologist Frank Stewart's seminal *Honor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) in seeing honour as a 'right to respect'. Appiah identifies two importantly different types of honour corresponding to two different sorts of respect. *Peer honour* is had fully and equally by all *honour peers*, or individuals in good standing who occupy an *honour world*, a society that accepts the same *honour codes*. Peers failing to live by the constraints of their relevant honour code will lose the respect of those populating their honour world, and thus their honour. A second sort of honour, *competitive honour*, is not had equally among honour peers, but rather in proportion to some sort of excellence they possess. Appiah adverts to Stephen Darwall's distinction between 'recognition' and 'appraisal' respect ('Two Kinds of Respect', *Ethics*, 88 (1977), pp. 36–49) for a rough model of the two sorts of respect that correspond to peer and competitive honour. So, for instance, Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington and hero of Waterloo, was the first among his peers because of his triumphs in service of king and country. Thus, he enjoyed more competitive honour than other aristocrats and had a right to a high level of appraisal respect. On the other hand, various rights of recognition respect were possessed equally by all aristocratic peers. Among these was the right to settle certain disagreements with a duel. That is why even Wellington felt obliged to challenge the comparatively unremarkable George William Finch-Hatton, Earl of Winchilsea, to a duel when the latter questioned his motives in print (Ch. 1).

Honour is a *right* to respect, so merely being honoured is not sufficient for being honourable. Nor is it sufficient merely to do the sorts of things that warrant being honoured, since one might not endorse the honour code that one happens to satisfy. *Being honourable* requires having a *sense of honour*, which means understanding the honour code and being 'attached' to it. Thus, although honour has something to do with the appraisal of others on a conceptual level, a fully honourable person 'cares first of all not about being respected but about being *worthy* of respect' (p. 16).

Honour is possessed by both individuals and groups. Group honour plays a role in every moral revolution Appiah discusses, but it is perhaps most

prominent in the case of Chinese footbinding. Footbinding was seen for a millennium in China as a mark of aristocratic leisure (footbound women could not work in fields, of course) and chastity (footbound women could not easily stray). Despite centuries-old objections to footbinding based on its painfulness, the honour-based (and, apparently, the aesthetic) considerations in its favour overwhelmed all else. As Appiah tells the tale, influential Chinese came to see footbinding as shameful only when they came to care about how the Chinese were seen by global powers.

Honour is not a moral value, Appiah argues, because the moral realm concerns only what we owe others (pp. xiv–xv). However, because respect is part of a good life and honour concerns respect, honour is an ethical value. Appiah's rehabilitation project begins by stressing the relative nature of honour codes. True, honour has often been thought to demand different things from men and women, as the asymmetrical honor codes regarding sexual chastity dramatically demonstrate. And yes, traditional honour codes have been markedly comfortable with violence, be it on the battlefield or the duelling ground. But a culture might just as easily adopt an honour code that, say, calls for respecting human rights and promoting well-being. (One is reminded of Barack Obama's 2007 campaign promise to 'restore the moral standing' of the US by ending its wars, prohibiting torture, and closing the Guantanamo Bay prison camp.)

When aligned with morality, honour can also be a powerful tool for good. Protest groups and liberation causes, for instance, inevitably generate honour worlds that bind their members together and elicit heroic sacrifices for the cause. Moreover, fostering a sense of honour can buttress our resolve in tough circumstances and enhance the self-respect we feel we deserve for living morally, as it did for the British abolitionists who prided themselves for leading the charge against the slave trade. Even honour worlds such as athletics, the arts, or academia, which are not premised on moral achievement per se, are ethically sound because it is reasonable to esteem the excellent in those domains. Thus for Appiah, honour in the service of morality — or at least not in opposition to morality — is, as Robert Ashley put it centuries ago, 'the spurr of vertue'.

By way of criticizing this fine book, we might begin by wondering how uniquely important honour is when it comes to moral revolutions. Plausibly, moral progress is driven by our improved understanding of our moral reasons. That means we should not be too surprised if, for any would-be moral revolution based upon an improved sensitivity to considerations of type C, institutions based on non-C reasons play a conservative role. So honour is likely to retard moral progress if the relevant progress is based on non-honour considerations — considerations having to do with harm reduction or justice, for instance. I suppose a book could be written arguing that moral revolutions will not happen until religious sentiments can be shaped to suit them, and certainly many instances could be provided (chapters could be

devoted to religious opposition to the separation of church and state, freedom of speech, and gay marriage). Would that reveal something equally important about moral revolutions? Moral revolutions happen when enough of a culture's ethical attitudes point in a new direction. Honour concerns one set of these, surely. But there are others, and none is obviously more recalcitrant than the rest. So the book's theme (and subtitle) could be read as overstating the importance of honour to moral revolutions.

A second problem is that Appiah portrays honour codes functionally, as whatever sorts of behaviour an honour world sees as respectable. Yet it is likely that there are certain substantive properties of honourable evaluands that make it appropriate to call them 'honourable' as opposed to 'pious', 'just', 'beneficial', or 'compassionate'. For instance, honour is commonly thought to have something to do with competing or fighting fairly. One female Pakistani human rights advocate Appiah quotes evinces this principle when she declaims, 'What sort of honor is it to open fire on an unarmed woman?' (p. 169). The stress here appears to fall on 'unarmed woman': her point seems to be that honour killings are not only unjust but also dishonourable, since its victims are so vulnerable. (Here, by the way, we have evidence of honour — or at least an improved sense of honour — helping to propel a moral revolution against an institution defended in the name of honour. This very same honour-based rationale once had a galvanizing effect on Western men, who were taught from an early age that the wrong in bullying and wife — as opposed to 'spousal' — abuse is that perpetrators do not 'pick on someone their own size'.)

The deeper issue here is that two important senses of 'honour' are not sufficiently distinguished in Appiah's discussion. There is 'honour' in the sense of respect, prestige, or status in its various forms. It is this that the well-born Chinese saw in bound feet, and many traditional societies see in chaste women. Any trait or behaviour can be seen as honour-conferring in this sense of 'honour': one's caste, physical stature, or light skin can be honour-conferring in particular cultural contexts. But there seems to be a second thing that gets called 'honour': a substantive, principled normative system that claims the authority to *regulate* these ethical goods of status, prestige, and esteem. Plausibly, this honour ethic includes some of the principles Appiah discusses in his first and last chapters: antagonists must be equals and fight fairly; prestige should be based on performance and not irrelevant factors such as race or sex; persons of high reputation must not acknowledge insults from those too far below them, and so on.

Distinguishing honour qua the right to respect from honour qua the ethical system that purports to say when that respect is merited is important to recognizing honour's role in moral revolutions. Since the latter is constituted by substantive principles and characteristic types of reasons, an improved conception of those principles and reasons might help blaze the trail of moral progress, as they plausibly did in liberation movements and anti-authoritarian

campaigns (compare Krause's *Liberalism With Honor,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002; a book that *Honor Code* should have referenced). On the other hand, not all moral revolutions are for the better, and sometimes honour's substantive principles will thwart moral degeneration, as when soldiers refuse to commit an atrocity by appeal to honour's demands (pp. 195–9; compare Mark Osiel, *Obeying Orders,* New Brunswick: Transaction, 1999).

Finally, all this talk of a 'right' to respect, 'obligations' of honour, and honour 'codes' leads us to reconsider Appiah's claim that honour is an ethical, but not moral, value. Suppose we accept Appiah's distinction between the ethical, which concerns living well, and the moral, which is that subset of the ethical that concerns what we owe others. Even so, if you have a right to respect, am I not obliged to treat you accordingly? Don't I owe you that? You are a philosopher. That means I *owe* you a form of recognition respect that acknowledges how you chose a difficult field with relatively low remuneration, and did so presumably to pursue wisdom and promote intellectual and moral virtue. Are you an accomplished philosopher who has advanced philosophical inquiry in an important way? Then I *owe* you a proportional amount of appraisal respect. What about this is not moral, by Appiah's distinction?

Appiah himself realizes that the liberal assumption that morality concerns 'avoidance of harm, or fairness, or consent, or rights' is somewhat parochial (p. 178). But it is hard to see what non-parochial reason Appiah has to exclude honour from the moral domain. As far as I can tell, honour satisfies the usual formal constraints on what a moral value must be (compare Steve Gerrard, 'Morality and Codes of Honour', *Philosophy*, 69 (1994), pp. 69–84). First, honour is clearly a social and practical value, claiming to regulate interaction among people. Second, honour-based reasons or principles are not thought to be systematically trumped by other sorts. Daughters are not slain by otherwise loving parents for infractions thought to be trivial. Duellists did not risk their lives, political and military appointments, exile, and God's wrath for anything other than what they felt to be among the most binding of obligations. Third, it is not implausible that honour's reasons and principles are tacitly considered to be universal, considering the ease with which we judge those from other honour worlds as conducting themselves dishonourably. The fact that honour worlds (martial, athletic, academic, or musical) usually expect certain behaviour only from their members (see William Lad Sessions, *Honor For Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation, and Defense,* New York: Continuum, 2010) poses little difficulty for this claim: different local conventions and private contracts give rise to obligations of justice that some, but not others, bear, but this hardly shows that the general principles of justice do not apply to us all. Finally, it would appear that honour 'facts' (supposing there are any) supervene necessarily on the relevant descriptive facts, as moral properties are usually supposed to do. We cannot imagine a scenario descriptively identical in the relevant ways to a case of bullying in this world that would not be dishonourable in another world as

well. So honour seems to pertain to principles and reasons that are practical, trumping, universal, necessary, and social.

It might be thought that honour cannot be categorized as a moral value because most honour codes throughout history have been immoral. This is not a satisfactory objection to categorizing honour as a moral value. First, the question at hand is not whether honour is a genuine moral value, but whether it *aspires* to be a moral value. Honour may be a false value (because it purports to justify heinous acts and judgements), but that question is different from whether it, like chastity or manliness ('virtu'-ousness), purports to be moral value. Second, just because evil practices are commonly defended in the name of some value does not mean the value in fact justifies them. Many desperate evils have been committed in the name of justice, but justice is a paradigm moral value. It may be there are mind-independent facts about what is honourable, and that most cultures — even today — see those facts as dimly as medievals did the facts about justice. Third, if honour were a moral value, then it is only to be expected that it would justify some things that a moral sensibility devoid of a commitment to honour would find perplexing or even pernicious. Like any unique value (compassion, justice, beneficence), honour would ground considerations that other values do not speak to. Perhaps honour is not a genuine value; but to deny that it even *aspires* to be a moral one because it does not reduce to our endorsed moral values would be a parochialism even on the descriptive level. Since these considerations are quite general, it seems like good practice to compartmentalize our opinions about the genuineness or reality of a value from questions about its categorization as moral, ethical, aesthetic, or what have you.

So honour probably is not uniquely important to moral revolutions, it probably grounds an independent substantive ethical framework Appiah mostly ignores, and it is probably a moral as opposed to ethical value. If Appiah's book was not so groundbreaking, these objections would be significant indeed. As things stand, they sound like quibbles. Honour is one of mankind's most cherished values. And yet Western philosophers — not just of the last century, but since Socrates — have paid it nowhere near the attention it deserves, given its influence. Thus, *The Honor Code*, by introducing an entirely new aspect of ethical domain, is itself a moral revolution.

Department of Philosophy DAN DEMETRIOU
University of Minnesota, Morris
600 E 4th St.
Morris, MN 56267
USA
ddemetri@morris.umn.edu
doi:10.1093/mind/fzt064 Advance Access publication 8 August 2013

