

Book Reviews

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010.

There is an evident division of labor among philosophers. There are those who busy themselves primarily in the effort to impress one another, engaged in dialogue with their colleagues, advancing arguments and counterarguments designed to further and thwart philosophical ambitions and disputes. Such is the aspired-to-destiny of many philosophers. They work diligently and with dedication at their craft with the hope that their journal articles and academic manuscripts might garner their peers' attention, and better still their respect. The ideal, acknowledged by most and achieved by few, is to be a "player," to have a seat at the table where trends are set for the profession, influencing what others ought to write about if they hope to be published, recognized, and respected by others in the field. Then there is the truly rarefied air occupied by those few philosophers who have achieved an elevated status, having earned the ear of people who do more than read philosophy. This audience, indeed, which is both intelligent and influential, isn't likely to read much philosophy at all save for that written by these very public philosophers. For this reason, the words of these philosophers possess considerable cultural and political weight. Kwame Anthony Appiah is unquestionably a member of this philosophical elite, and his *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* is an exemplary work of public philosophy.

The Honor Code is a decidedly ethical book, aimed at inducing and directing action. Indeed, Appiah intends nothing less than to help incite a moral revolution, "a rapid transformation in moral *behavior*, not just in moral sentiments" (p. xi). As the subtitle of the book suggests, *The Honor Code* is offered as a sort of "how-to" manual by way of historical guide to just such transformations. By exploring the unexpectedly swift eclipse of three practices that had been accepted and endorsed for centuries (in one case for a millennium)—dueling among English gentlemen, footbinding of women in China, and the institution of Atlantic slavery—Appiah hopes we can learn to harness the relevant winds of change to end rapidly the long-standing tradition of "honor killing" of females for bringing shame on their families through inappropriate (primarily sexual) conduct. For example, females who have had sex with those to whom they aren't married (including, notoriously, those who achieve that distinction by being raped), and those who seek to divorce those they do not love, have been murdered, either by or at the direction of their own families. Such are the methods the aggrieved family must take to reclaim

its lost honor. While such honor killings occur in many places around the globe, the phenomenon is particularly acute today in Muslim societies, most especially within elements of the Pakistani population, which, according to the statistics Appiah cites, may have accounted for as many as a quarter of the honor killings committed in the early years of the twenty-first century.¹ Appiah very much wants such killings to stop and has written *The Honor Code* with that end clearly in mind.

The bulk of the book consists of the excavation of different, contextually responsive conceptions of ‘honor’ and what it requires of those who are concerned with it—many care to be worthy of honor, in some sense. It then traces how changes to those conceptions and revisions to those requirements led to the rapid demise of the very practices they once supported. In prose at once erudite and engaging to the point of making the book a page-turner, Appiah takes the reader on a high-minded historical tour. The initial encounter is with the English gentleman, circa the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, who is willing to take to the field with a peer in a potentially deadly face-off in defense of his honor, that is, his “entitlement to respect” (p. 16). But respect for what? What is the “honor” that is under threat? These questions, Appiah assures us, matter, since there are different kinds of honor and different species of respect. Borrowing from and then building upon a distinction introduced by Stephen Darwall between “appraisal respect” and “recognition respect,”² Appiah aims to stitch together a “basic theory” of honor that could be put to noble use (such as ending honor killings). It is from this distinction that most of Appiah’s philosophically interesting work in *The Honor Code* ultimately flows.

We owe appraisal respect to people who have shown prowess as measured by some standard, be it athletic, military, intellectual, or even moral. We show such respect when we honor someone by awarding him a Nobel Prize, inducting him into a Hall of Fame, or by canonizing him as a moral saint. Appiah reserves the term “esteem” for these expressions of honor.

Recognition respect involves regarding people in ways that recognize salient features about them, features that, in principle, may be of many sorts. We might respect someone for his imposing physical capacities (as when you respect someone’s strength), for his legal power (as when you respect a police officer’s or judge’s authority), or for his social standing (as when you respect the fact that a given man also happens to be a *gentleman*). When this respect for a person in light of certain facts about him prompts a “positive attitude of a

¹ Appiah cites a U.N. report from 2000, which claims that “as many as 5,000 women and girls are murdered each year by relatives” for dishonorable behavior. He also cites an adviser to Pakistan’s (then) prime minister, who claims that in 2003 “as many as 1,261 women” in Pakistan were so murdered (p. 146). For reasons easily imagined, the accuracy of such statistics is open to question.

² Stephen Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (1977), pp. 36-49.

certain sort” (p. 14), an attitude very much like that of esteem, then we have the kind of honor associated with recognition respect. This attitude is essentially practical: having it influences our behavior toward the object of respect. We respond to, and interact with, those we respect for their authority differently from those we respect on account of their willingness to learn. Especially important for Appiah’s project in *The Honor Code*, we recognize persons as deserving honor precisely in virtue of their being persons, for being creatures with “the capacity for creating lives of significance . . . [who] can suffer, love, create . . . [and] need food, shelter, and recognition by others” (p. 129). To recognize these features, and to respond accordingly to them, is to treat people with “dignity.”

Recognition respect, entitled to a person in virtue of certain features or facts about him, is intimately connected to the notion of identity. *I* feel entitled to the respect due to a teacher insofar as *I am* a teacher. *You* feel entitled to respect due to any student in the college because *you are* a student at the college. Again, to be so respected, is to be treated in certain ways, and to respect oneself for certain identifying features is to have self-respect; self-respect often demands that one acts in certain ways. In this sense of identity, we each have many identities: I am a father, a husband, a teacher, and I feel entitled to be respected *as* a father, husband, and teacher. Each of these identities, however, relates me to other people possessing other identities, and importantly identities of particular kinds. *As a father*, I feel entitled to respect from *my children*. *As a teacher*, I feel entitled to respect from *my students* and, importantly, from my colleagues, my college’s administrators, and my students’ parents, in virtue of their identities *as* colleagues, administrators, and parents of my students. I don’t, however, feel that my students owe me respect as a father (certainly not the kind of respect we feel due to *one’s own* father). The constellations of identities by which people are related by entitlements and obligations of respect are honor worlds and the rules of respectful engagement between inhabitants of the same honor world, written down or not, is that world’s “honor code” (p. 20). Ideally, we believe that we are only entitled—*worthy of*—the relevant recognition respect to the extent that we have kept the honor code of the honor world to which that identity belongs. If I behave dishonorably as a teacher, I don’t deserve the respect of my students, or any of the other members of that honor world.

The honor for which the English gentleman was willing to risk his life was an honor he thought he was entitled to from anyone who shared his station within the social hierarchy. English gentlemen, that is to say, inhabited an honor world of their own, and the honor code of that world required the respectful regard of each gentleman by every other. To fail to show that respect was a breach of the code, and in such an event that very same code provided means of redress: the duel. Dueling, however, is a highly questionable practice; one could, and certainly many did, claim it to be immoral. Involving, as it possibly can, the intentional killing of another person, the duel certainly violated Christian standards of morality, to which virtually all English gentlemen professed to subscribe. The practice ran also

afoul of English law, or at least the letter of it. And yet these Christian gentlemen (who, as parliamentarians, were to a certain extent responsible for their country's laws), remained loyal to their code. The gentleman's honor, the sense of respect he felt entitled to in virtue of who he was, evidently mattered more to him than the moral ideals he publicly professed on Sundays or even the laws he was charged with upholding. He regarded himself most highly in virtue of being a gentleman: first and foremost, that was who he was.

The primary lesson Appiah wants to impart here is the motivational power of the sense of honor: honor judgments apparently have greater influence on action than do moral judgments. The lesson is reinforced when Appiah shows how in a matter of decades the centuries-old practice of dueling essentially died out. It wasn't that existing or new moral arguments eventually prevailed; rather, as a result of various social factors and forces that changed the face of English social life, gentlemen came to have different conceptions of honor (p. 47). By the mid-eighteenth century, most gentlemen would no longer dishonor themselves by appearing so "ridiculous" and vulgar as to risk their lives over some social slight (p. 47). This "moral revolution" was induced with little input from "morality."

The lesson is repeated, but importantly expanded, when Appiah invites us to the other side of the world in his second historical sketch. For close to a thousand years, from roughly the ninth through nineteenth centuries, Chinese families (at least those that did not require their women to work the land) were unwilling to invite the shame of not binding their daughters' feet. This painful, disfiguring practice, which left women essentially immobile but nevertheless marriageable (to men who had become enamored of four-inch-long feet) had nothing to do with Confucianism (from which the traditional ethical understanding of China is derived) and survived more than one half-hearted attempt by ruling authorities to root it out (p. 69). It only ceased, and ceased quickly, when the Chinese, led in particular by the "literati" (the Chinese intelligentsia), acknowledged the existence of an honor world to which they belonged *as a nation*.

Identities can be shared, and we can take part in the honor and the shame that attaches to that identity in virtue of the behavior of others. It quickly became apparent to the Chinese literati of the late-nineteenth century that footbinding was not condoned by the honor code that prevailed among Western nations, and that the practice brought shame to every Chinese whether they individually engaged in it or not. The Chinese stopped binding their daughters' feet only when the Chinese became preoccupied with how they were regarded by outsiders. Once they came to respect the practices and judgments of non-Chinese, they soon hungered for that respect to be reciprocated. While many Chinese practices and traditions were found worthy of respect in this new honor world, footbinding was not. A sense of honor permitted Chinese families to induce and essentially ignore the tortured screams of their daughters for a millennium; it took only about thirty years for a newly coveted sense of honor to render the practice unthinkable.

Our sense of honor, the worth we place on our own identities, apparently has greater psychological purchase than a sense of what is morally required. Appiah recognizes this: “Keep reminding people, by all means, that honor killing is immoral, illegal, irrational, irreligious. But even the recognition of these truths, I suspect, will not by itself align what people know with what people do. Honor killing will only perish when it is seen as dishonorable” (p. 172). What our sense of honor demands of us (or others), moreover, needn’t coincide with the demands of morality. These are claims that, after Appiah’s historical analysis, appear exceedingly plausible. They are also claims that beg for more widespread acknowledgement and discussion among moral philosophers writing for other moral philosophers than is apparent in the academic literature. (These ideas would seem especially relevant to debates about “internalism” and “externalism” about moral motivation.) Appiah’s goal, recall, is to change our behavior, not our theories. To this end it is important for him to show that recognition honor and morality *can* coincide. We see they can when we consider the special form of honor we referred to above as “dignity.” That many have come increasingly to believe that this is owed to each person in virtue of her being a person is the definitive moral development of modern, democratic culture. The code of this honor world, the peer world of persons, represents the liberal ideal of a *moral* code. We see how honor in this sense can be marshaled in support of moral ends in Appiah’s discussion of Atlantic slavery.

It was primarily the emerging English “working class” of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries who, in the course of demanding that their own dignity be recognized, drove England to abolish first slavery, and then its participation in the slave trade to the Americas. Again, what’s most interesting about Appiah’s retelling of these events is that England’s “humbler classes” weren’t so much moved by the *wrongness* of slavery as they were concerned with what the obvious dishonor thrust upon the slave as a creature fit only for laborious toil said about themselves. This was a life of drudgery, also. And while the working-class Englishman had his “freedom,” what he wanted was the respect of his countrymen. What became apparent to those Englishmen, much to the benefit of countless slaves, was that in order to convince their more privileged compatriots that a life of labor deserved its share of honor, they also had to convince them that a life of labor could no longer be the life of a *slave* (pp. 124-25).

It is precisely this sort of alliance of morally desirable results and honor that Appiah urges us to bring to bear on the problem of honor killing. One step would urge women around the world to pursue a strategy of “symbolic affiliation” (pp. 166-67). Doing so will lead them to find the honor killings of women in other societies as an actual affront to their own honor: If a woman anywhere is denied her dignity, then women everywhere have been dishonored. Another suggestion is for women (and men) inside these societies to impress upon their fellow citizens that the respect they receive from the rest of the world is contingent on how they treat their women (p. 172). The practice of honor killing needs to be made a source of collective shame.

The form of respect that drives the historical revolutions discussed in *The Honor Code*, and which underlies the morally significant notion of dignity is, as we have seen, recognition respect. It is important, however, to appreciate that the esteem associated with appraisal respect is never far from the stage. Esteem is comparative and competitive, and being worthy of it is an achievement; the desire to be appreciated for one's efforts, moreover, is likely irrepressible. Appiah nicely appreciates that this drive to achieve, manifest in our professional lives as well as in many of our pastimes, can seamlessly be directed toward moral achievement. Recognition respect, as we have seen, shapes honor worlds that are regulated by honor codes. Codes, of course, are standards and adherence to them is an achievement, not an assumption. If we could establish a widespread practice of esteeming adherence to honor codes that respect human dignity, the power of our competitive nature could be directed toward uplifting our heretofore dishonored fellows.

The Honor Code is a book for which Appiah should be proud. His efforts on behalf of the dignity of women warrant our esteem—so, too, his efforts as a philosopher. Would that more members of his profession were to see his book as setting a standard by which their own honor as philosophers is to be measured.

Joseph Biehl
Felician College

