

William Lad Sessions

Honor For Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation, and Defense.

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The study of honor has long suffered from scholarly neglect, especially among philosophers. And to the extent honor is studied at all, it is typically treated as quaint and obsolete or as oppressive, hierarchical, and violent. This is unfortunate, for honor is far more interesting than the typical caricature we are given today. Fortunately, there seems to be something of a renaissance in more sympathetic philosophical treatments of honor, including books Kwame Appiah and Sharon Krause. Each of these books argues that honor should be taken seriously as a normative ideal even for our own time. In *Honor For Us* William Sessions argues correctly that honor is not only not obsolete but is still deeply embedded in our culture, even if we do not call it by its rightful name. He makes a plausible effort to defend honor as a valuable form of motivation that is not an alternative but a supplement to morality and religion. Though he tends to make rather overinflated claims for the importance of honor—for example, the concept of honor ‘opens up new ways of conceiving and connecting to community’ (182)—still, overall, the book provides both a useful treatment of the neglected virtues of honor, and attention to its neglected role in the explanation of human behavior, in contrast to the current fashion of attributing all action to rational self-interest.

Sessions’ project is therefore commendable. However, there are problems with the execution. For one thing, the book needs better editing. Sessions seems to get so carried away with addressing every possible aspect of an issue that the book is littered with unnecessary footnotes. To take one example almost at random: in a chapter on the role of honor in ‘contemporary academe’, Sessions feels compelled to drop a footnote explaining: ‘I use “academe”, “the academy”, and “academic” to refer primarily to contemporary American post-secondary institutions of teaching and/or research; but there will be considerable applications to post-secondary education elsewhere, and perhaps even to primary and secondary institutions as well’ (113 n. 1). Is this sort of detail really necessary? Even in the main text, the author gets sidetracked with lengthy discussions of rather minor matters, as in the extended discussion in the same chapter of whether teachers and scholars belong to the same or distinct honor groups. Even for those of us who teach at the university, this discussion seems rather pointless and adds little to the all-too-familiar problem of balancing teaching with research.

A more serious concern is the author’s use of the method of ‘conceptual analysis’. This tool reached its peak of popularity in the 1950s but has largely been abandoned, and for good reason. Philosophers were never able to articulate any methodological principles for the ‘clarifying’ of concepts, or explain just how they were able to produce reliable results regarding the ‘logical structure’ of a given concept. The method predictably leads

to two major problems in this book. First, Sessions largely ignores the rich historical, literary, and anthropological evidence regarding how people behave in honor cultures; conceptual analysis, as so often, serves as an excuse for neglecting empirical evidence. Second, conceptual analysis regularly leads to rather dogmatic pronouncements as to the inner logic of the idea (here, of honor). Thus Sessions declares that honor is ‘ineluctably social’ (122), that there is no intrinsic duty of honorable treatment of those outside one’s honor group and that any such treatment is a mere ‘gift’ (27), and that honor is ‘more fundamentally committed to *equality* than to *inequality*’ (163). All of these claims are highly controversial, but the real problem is that ‘conceptual analysis’ functions in practice as a debate-stopper. Sessions gives us no indication of how he reached these conclusions—again, some attention to empirical evidence might have helped—and he seems to rule out disagreement, since his conclusions are presented as ‘logical’ claims. Oddly, this is true even of claims that seem to be straightforwardly empirical, such as the argument that the establishment of honor groups requires ‘generations’ (31). Surely this is an empirical, not a conceptual claim, but where’s the factual evidence?

A further, familiar problem with ‘conceptual analysis’ is its tendency to produce an ever-proliferating body of new distinctions. Thus Sessions begins his book with five ‘peripheral’ concepts of honor—‘conferred honor’, ‘recognition honor’, ‘positional honor’, ‘commitment honor’, and ‘trust honor’—before getting to the ‘central’ concept, ‘personal honor’. He is, however, far from clear about just how the peripheral concepts relate to the central one: ‘The concept of personal honor is importantly distinct from the five peripheral concepts of honor, although it is often confused and conflated with them, and even though there are indeed interesting connections and associations’ (56). And I am not aware of anyone who has found a need for these categories before—they are all Sessions’ invention. Nor are these six categories the end of the distinctions; Sessions also tells us of ‘religious personal honor’, ‘moral personal honor’, and, yes, ‘moral religious honor’, as well as ‘personal political honor’ (which is itself subdivided into three more categories). Indeed, the very concept of a ‘concept’ is not enough to contain these distinctions, and Sessions feels compelled to make a further distinction between ‘concept’ and ‘conception’ (there can be ‘different conceptions of the same concept’ (172)). You get the idea.

Here’s how Sessions claims to put these distinctions to use. In addressing the crucial question of the standard criticisms of honor—e.g., it is connected with violence, it is patriarchal, it is elitist, etc.—Sessions calls on his various categories in response. He uses two basic strategies here. First, he simply asserts that a property is not ‘necessary’ to honor: ‘invidious treatment of insiders and outsiders is not a necessary part of an honor code’ (168); ‘Honor is not *essentially* gendered’ (170)). This approach adopts the dogmatic assertion strategy of conceptual analysis; how does he *know* what is essential to honor and what is not? (Again, historical evidence would have been more helpful here.) His second strategy is to admit that a negative feature of honor is indeed essential, but only to one of the *peripheral* concepts of honor: for example, to charge honor with being inequalitarian is to ‘confus[e] different concepts of honor’, positional honor versus personal honor (162). This condescending strategy of charging one’s opponents with being conceptually confused is a familiar strategy in conceptual analysis, but it is not

very helpful. For now we want to know what the connections are between the two types of honor; after all, both are kinds of honor, so there must be something to the inegalitarianism charge. Here Sessions hides behind his distinctions, now claiming that the different kinds of honor have ‘little or nothing to do with each other’ (163). What happened to the ‘interesting connections’ between them that he earlier told us about? And more fundamentally, what makes them different kinds of *honor*, if they have ‘little or nothing to do with each other’?

This book, in short, displays both the virtues and vices of a philosophical approach. Philosophers, unlike historians and social scientists, are willing to look for the normative ideal behind the multiplicity of different practices of honor, and not settle for a lazy cultural relativist outlook. At the same time, the adoption of ‘conceptual analysis’ risks becoming an excuse for neglecting both the empirical study of honor and the need to present arguments for one’s conclusions. The danger is that non-philosophers will find some justification to accept the caricature of the philosopher as eccentric, isolated, logic-chopping, and prone to dogmatic pronouncement from on high in the ivory tower. What we need is a more direct engagement of the two approaches, the normative and the empirical. Honor is a rich, important topic of study, and Sessions (along with Krause and Appiah) are right to insist that it is still deeply present with us. We can hope that this newfound philosophical interest will continue and be even more fruitful.

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