THE STATUS OF HONOR IN MYTH1,2

ABSTRACT
In his book The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen (2010), Kwame Anthony Appiah observes four cases of social revolution and studies them philosophically for their honorific and moral natures. Then, he infers from these case studies that honor is the cause of moral revolutions. To establish his inference as a law of human social nature, he rings out the call to the academic community for more case studies. This essay does not answer that call, but focuses instead on the status of honor—among destiny, love, and other decision making factors—in myth. When the story elements of myth are related to principles of social order, and as these principles remain invariant under social revolution, this essay broadens the discussion of what counts as cause of moral revolutions.

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay, a community is a self-perpetuating collectivity of persons or members having a history sufficiently robust to project far into the future. To say a community is robust is to say it obeys principles for holding itself intact. Such are the principles of social order: general principles of social order are universals over time and space; special principles of social order adapt the general principles to the community. Herein, focus is upon the role honor plays in the decision making apparatus of that community. To have such an apparatus is to be a system, i.e. an interconnected arrangement of members, property, etc. Focus is sharpened wherever the role of honor agrees with and supports against

1 The original version of this essay was presented orally and in power point at the symposium Moral Traditions and Moral Revolution from African Antiquity to the African Diaspora. The symposium, sponsored by the Humanities Division of the College of Arts and Sciences of Howard University, took place on Tuesday, October 4, 2011 in the Browsing Room of Founders Library at Howard University. This essay was presented by its author.
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opposition to the community’s special principles of social order as well as wherever it disagrees with and supports opposition to any of these principles. Inquiry into the latter is expected to illuminate the power, if it exists, of honor to change the social order of the community. This is not to say honor changes morality in the community or causes a moral revolution. Nonetheless, this inquiry is also expected to illuminate powers, if they exist, of other values to overrule honor in decision making. What if honor has the power to change morality in a community, but is overruled because it will concomitantly change the social order of that community?

Do such values exist? If so: What are they? What is the power status of honor among them? These are the research questions for this essay. The main source for its discussion of honor and moral revolutions is Kwame Anthony Appiah’s book *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (2010). The main sources for its discussion on principles of social order are the great books of the philosophers known as the social contractarians: Hobbes, Rousseau, et al. Inasmuch as these sources belong to Western civilization, a new category of social order is introduced herein by which the scope of this essay is extended to old civilizations such as are found in India, the Middle East, the Far East, and Africa. Finally, it is from Joseph Campbell that this essay begins its discussion on linkages between social order and mythic stories. It is in myth that the answers to the research questions of this essay are found.

**The Honor Code**

“Call me Ishmael.” The first words of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* give his readers the point of view from which he would have them read his book. To read it from, say, Captain Ahab’s point of view would be to read a story that Melville did not intend to tell. From what point of view would Kwame Anthony Appiah have us read his book *The Honor Code*?

Honor and morals are philosophical concepts and, together with Appiah’s hope that his book will “return honor to philosophy,” we might think Appiah would recommend a philosophical point of view. Nevertheless, the bulk of his book consists in three historical case studies and one on-going case study, and his promise to tell us how moral revolutions happen seems a sociological challenge. According to the classification system of the Library of Congress, this book belongs to sociology, specifically, social change. From a sociological point of view, then, the claim made by Appiah that honor causes moral revolutions must be taken as a natural law inferred from data.

Appiah begins *The Honor Code* with an overview of its conceptual framework. Relying heavily upon Aristotle, he says that to have eudamonia is to flourish, i.e. live well. Ethics is the study of eudamonia and morality is the subset of ethics that studies what we owe to others. To grasp his meaning of moral revolution, I looked first to Thomas Kuhn’s
The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1970 [1962]) for a concept of scientific revolution. For Kuhn, a scientific paradigm shift is a change in the shared worldview of scientists, and a scientific revolution is a profound paradigm shift. Then, looking to Appiah, I saw that a moral revolution is an analogue of a scientific revolution. To grasp Appiah’s meaning of honor, I looked first to John Rawls’ A Theory of Justice (1971) for a concept of primary goods, i.e. things everyone is presumed to want, and then to what he said were the most important among them, namely, self-esteem. For Rawls, self-esteem divides as a 2×2 matrix whose columns are self-respect and self-confidence and whose rows are one’s evaluation of one’s self and one’s sense of the evaluations by others of one’s self. Then, looking to Appiah, I saw that honor is the subset of ethics that studies entitlements to respect, i.e. self-respect as obtained from one’s sense of the evaluations by others of one’s self-respect. Accordingly, although morality and honor are subsets of ethics, honor is not always ethical. An honor code, then, is a system of shared norms telling “how people of certain identities can gain the right to respect, how they can lose it, and how having and losing honor changes the way they should be treated.” Finally, Appiah’s thesis is that the honor code causes moral revolutions to happen.

The bulk of The Honor Code, its middle, consists in three historical case studies demonstrating that honor causes moral revolutions to happen, and one on-going case study is also considered. His historical cases are of dueling in England, the binding of women’s feet in China, and slavery across the Atlantic. His on-going case is of the wars against women. The so-called honor killing of women in Pakistan is an instance of immoral honor codes. Appiah ends The Honor Code with a comprehensive statement of his theory and proof of his thesis.

PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL ORDER

The cultural anthropologist Georges Dumézil observed a tripartite ideology deriving from the mythologies of early Indo-European peoples: priest, guaranteeing an administration based on law and moral stability; warrior, offering a protective and conquering force; and a producer of nourishment and enjoyment. Philosophers of the social contract persuasion have imagined a state of being in which a collection of imaginary persons seeks to build an ordered society:

It is a simplification but hardly a gross one to identify the three widely recognized solutions (that is, nontheological and nonbiological solutions) to the problem of order with the three major thinkers who argued that a social contract was necessary to overcome a prior presocial and/or prepolitical state of nature. Hobbes’ solution was coercive, Locke’s stressed mutual self-

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3 Appiah, pp. xi-xii.
4 Appiah, p. 175.
5 This discussion is outlined in the row of Table-1 having the same name.
6 Encyclopædia Britannica Online 2010.
interest, and the Rousseau of The Social Contract gave primacy to normative consensus.\footnote{Wrong 1994, p. 9.} To wit, Western scholars have observed three principles of social order holding societies intact, namely, the principles of self-interest, common higher cause, and force. These are correspondence principles of social order inasmuch as they are said to predict or otherwise tell of, i.e. correspond to, facts about the physical integrity of a society.

Among the great books on the self-interest principle of social order are Locke’s Second Treatise on Civil Government (1689) and Marx’s Das Kapital (2000 [1867]). On this principle, the masses of ordinary people will act in ways that hold their society intact insofar as they see it in their self-interests to do so. At bottom are the self-interests called primary needs: food, shelter, etc. In Justice As Fairness (Rawls 1971, 62), John Rawls says primary goods are things that any rational person is presumed to want. For him, natural primary goods include health and vigor, intelligence and imagination while social primary goods include self-respect (self-esteem), rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth. Thus, the choice to become and remain a member of a society depends upon the opportunities the society affords the individual to obtain all of his or her primary goods.

Among the great books on the normative commitment, common cause or common higher (than self) cause principle of social order are Jean Jacques Rousseau’s The Social Contract (1762) and Emile Durkheim’s On the Division of Labour (1893). Talcott Parsons’ The Social System (1951) also emphasized consensus based on norms and values.

Among the great books on the force principle of social order are Hobbes’ Leviathan (1651), Machiavelli’s The Prince (1515), and Sun Tzu’s The Art of War (6\textsuperscript{th} cent. BC). According to this principle human society can be maintained intact by force, i.e. coercion of the members of a society by force, or by pressure backed up by force. Force includes internal regulatory forces \textit{qua} police force as well as external defensive and external offensive forces \textit{qua} military force. Military defensive forces control foreign efforts to pursue domestic opportunities while military offensive forces back up domestic efforts to pursue foreign opportunities. Pressure includes the threat of force by diplomacy.

Coherence principles of social order tell how a society seeks to maximize its integrity by favoring none, one, or two of the three correspondence principles. Favoring none, the egalitarian coherence principle seeks equal adherence to each of the correspondence principles. Favoring one, the democratic coherence principle favors the self-interest correspondence principle, the theocratic coherence principle favors the common higher cause correspondence principle, and the oligarchic coherence principle favors the force correspondence principle.
pondence principle. Favoring two, the Western corporate coherence principle favors the self-interest and the force correspondence principles of social order, and the non-Western tradition coherence principle favors agreements, where they exist, between the common higher cause and the force correspondence principles.

Among the great books on the tradition principle of social order are the books of orthodoxy of the great religions, e.g. the book of Exodus of the Bible, and books of wisdom, e.g. The Analects of Confucius (449-429 BC). In engineering ethics, specifically, the case known as The Concrete Sumo, engineers were observed favoring tradition over ethics in their rites of passage into engineering.

MYTHIC WAYS OF LIFE¹⁰

When one can feel oneself in relation to the universe in the same complete and natural way as that of the child with the mother, one is in complete harmony and tune with the universe. Getting into harmony and tune with the universe and staying there is the principal function of mythology.¹¹

Around 3,000 B.C.E. Menes the Fighter unified the warrior-herder tribes in Upper Egypt and the urban-agrarian communities in Lower Egypt to form the great civilization of Ancient Egypt. Carved around 1500 B.C.E., Egyptian steles depicted the Sacred Triad, respectively, Horus, Osiris, and Isis. These Gods personified, respectively, Pharaoh, ordinary Egyptian citizen and High Priestess in Egyptian myth. As Horus is the son of Osiris and Isis, stories of their family life, military exploits and politics have since been preserved in Egyptian mythology. This Triad served as a model for the social orders of family, community, workplace and nation. A mathematician would say the social order is a fractal.

By 325 C.E. Emperor Constantine the Great had reunified the Roman Empire and made Christianity its state religion. Christian leaders brought with them their concept of the Holy Trinity: God the Father; God the Son; and God the Holy Spirit. And they brought their holy books containing stories of how these facets of God interacted with one another as well as with others. Like the Sacred Triad, the Holy Trinity served as a model for the social orders of family, community, workplace and Empire, i.e. a fractal order.

Around 1200 B.C.E. Moses ascended Mount Sinai. He is King of the Hebrews and his brother Aaron is High Priest. After his return with the Ten Commandments he deposes Aaron and becomes both King and High Priest. Stone reliefs of two nearly asymmetrical
The carved figures of King Ashurnasirpal II (883 – 859 B.C.E.) facing the tree of life once prominently appeared in Assyria. One figure is in regal attire; the other, priestly attire. The King is a High Priest. In 1534, King Henry VIII was excommunicated from the Church of Rome and became head of the Church of England. Perhaps the earliest version of the King-High Priest took the form of a marriage between King and High Priestess as represented in Myth by the sacred triad of Osiris and Isis. On the one hand, if the separation of King and High Priest should survive some modicum of conflicts, these conflicts may inspire a society to meet new challenges with flexibility and creativity. On the other hand, the merger of King and High Priest may produce harmony, but at the cost of rigidity. Over time, cultural rigidity reduces many duties of the King-High Priest down to finished systems which become ritualized into traditions.

Mythic stories tell of heroes in the Popular Way of life who are ordinary members of society as opposed to leaders. The Popular hero is concerned about pursuits of self-interests. Socrates distinguished between life and a life worth living, and put a life worth living on his list of primary goods. He said that the ill-considered life is not worth living and thus committed suicide rather than be forced to live it. A legacy of his choice is academic freedom and the claim today that the anti-intellectual life is not worth living. Other exemplars include Horus, God the Son, Cordelia (Act I), Telemachus, and Rosa Parks.

Mythic stories tell of heroes in the Priestly Way (Campbell 1973). Lucien Levy-Bruhl and C.G. Jung would say these heroes are leaders of common higher causes who are skilled in the participation mystique (Jung 1962). In The Oberlin Horse (Broome 1996), Irene was the mother of her family which had two children and who extended it by six orphans. She symbolically killed her former self, namely, “mother of two,” so as to become “mother of all,” albeit over the protests of her eldest child. Thus, as Penelope kept Ithaca intact while Odysseus was on adventure, Irene kept her new family intact while three of her brothers were on quests for higher education and who would return to inspire others to do likewise. Other exemplars include Isis, God the Holy Spirit, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Jr. Guinevere was a hero: at first, Priestly; at last, Popular.


A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men.\footnote{Campbell 1990, p. 30.}

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The story begins with the hero situated in the realm of the collective consciousness of a society which is suffering a problem, and the hero hears a call from the collective twilight state to come to the rescue by seeking out the “Holy Grail,” so to speak, containing the remedy for the problem, and bringing it back for everyone to share.

The journey begins with the separation. The hero’s adventure begins as he penetrates the collective twilight state of society and ventures down into its dark collective unconscious. There he finds the Holy Grail: he discovers that the Grail contains fearful truths contingent to society’s problem; but it lies in the custody of a fierce dragon. Nevertheless, the hero risks his life to wrest the Grail from the dragon. When he gets it, he passes again through the twilight state on the way back to consciousness. Here, he is reminded that the Grail lay hidden in the unconscious for good reason. To bring it into conscious is to risk a psychotic break. So, he resolves to put the Grail on solid moral ground. The hero’s return is celebrated by society as he shares the boons of the Grail with everyone.

From a Freudian point of view, Campbell says, the function of the hero’s journey is to help individuals in the first half of their lives develop out of adolescence and into mature adulthood, and continue their development through mature adulthood. Like Oedipus, the Freudian hero is in pursuit of a job and a mate. The second half of life is old age. Odysseus had a job and a mate but was seeking the meaning of life. The goal of the myth is the strong ego, one enabling the individual to resist parents and instincts alike. “Lingering attachments to parents for the satisfaction of instincts or to satisfy instincts in antisocial ways is to be stuck, or fixated, at adolescence.”13

Tradition Keepers are heroes insofar as they are considered worthy of imitation, e.g. the Hausa of Nigeria have their Mutumin Kirki or Man of Good Character and Judaism has its Tzadik or Righteous One; but all are tellers of mythic stories and speakers of wisdom, e.g. Native Americans have Storytellers and the Chinese have Venerable Ones.

DESTINY

Destiny is not a destination, but a mythic Way of life. Once the path is freely taken, one feels impelled along the way as if by “unseen hands” or by forces of nature belying some high purpose. One says “I feel as if impelled by unseen hands” and that “This pathway is the right way for me.” This is the result of harmony between the individual’s nature and the rest of nature. It is the bliss14 that Joseph Campbell talks about. Destiny is the answer to such universal questions as: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? How can I get there? How can I be the best that I can be?

Destiny is not fate. It is partly deterministic, partly random, and partly transcendent or governed by free will.

The difference between destiny and success is the difference between zero and an infinitely small number. On the one hand, Socrates gave up his life for the cause of freedom; his probability of survival was zero. On the other, Jesse James risked his life for revenge and money; his probability of survival was, at times, infinitely small, but not zero; there was no point in his giving up his life for revenge and money inasmuch as he could not enjoy them if he were dead.

Was it the destiny of Oedipus to rise and then fall? Yes, but it was also his destiny to rise again. Was it Jesse James’ destiny to rob trains? Perhaps, but he was an anti-hero so our destiny is to stop the likes of him. Is it a schizophrenic’s destiny to rob trains? Perhaps, but he is sick so our destiny is to help him. Are such pathways in life in harmony with nature? If so, our destiny is to make a new world.

THE MYTH OF OEDIPUS

Just as the myth of Hamlet is best known by its rendering of Shakespeare in his play *Hamlet*, the myth of Oedipus is best known today by its rendering of Sophocles in three of his plays, namely, *Oedipus the King* (*Rex*), *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*. In either case, Oedipus is a hero in the Regal Way of life. Joseph Campbell says:

The Sphinx in the Oedipus story is not the Egyptian Sphinx, but a female form with the wings of a bird, the body of an animal, and the breast, neck, and face of a woman. What she represents is the destiny of all life. She has sent a plague over the land, and to lift the plague, the hero has to answer the riddle she presents: “What is it that walks on four legs, then on two legs, and then on three?” The answer is “Man.” The child creeps about on four legs, the adult walks on two, and the aged walk with a cane.¹⁵

The Sphinx is Oedipus’ dragon. The answer to the riddle of the Sphinx *qua* relief of Thebes from the accursed plague upon it is his Holy Grail.

Knowingly, Oedipus kills King Laius and marries Queen Jocasta. Unknowingly, Oedipus has killed his father and married is mother. When he discovers the truth, the shame of it drives him to stab out his eyes with Jocasta’s hair pins.

In his tragic downfall, Oedipus suffers from a very human dilemma. At one moment, he seems all-powerful and in charge of his destiny—but in the next moment he becomes vulnerable and powerless.¹⁶

In the Regal Way of life, his destiny is to be king, specifically, to love his people and spend his energies on them rather than pursuing the self-interested goal of discovering his

¹⁵ Campbell 1988, p. 151.
¹⁶ Higgins & Higgins 2000, p. 28.
personal heritage. His fall comes as he puts honor above love and destiny. When no longer king, he begins a life of wandering. In the end, however, he defeats fear, achieves wisdom, and rises to become a transcendent or godlike figure.

THE MYTH OF ARTHUR


So it fell on a time King Arthur said unto Merlin, My barons will let me have no rest, but needs I must take a wife, and I will none take but by thy counsel and by thine advice.\(^{17}\)

Arthur’s destiny as king requires him to put the will of his barons, who must have an uncontested heir to Camelot or face civil wars among them that would threaten Camelot, above his love for Guinevere.

But ever in one Sir Agravine and Sir Mordred cried: Traitor-knight, come out of the queen’s chamber, for wit thou well thou art so beset that thou shalt not escape, O Jesu mercy, said Sir Launcelot, this shameful cry and noise I may not suffer, for better were death at once than thus to endure this pain. Then he took the queen in his arms, and kissed her …\(^{18}\)

Launcelot has put love above honor.

Truly, said the queen, I would an it might please God that they would take me and slay me, and suffer you to escape.\(^{19}\)

Guinevere has put love above honor. When King Arthur and Launcelot meet, the king says to Launcelot:

I am thy mortal foe, and ever will to my death day; for thou hast slain my good knights, and full noble men of my blood, that I shall never recover again. Also thou hast lain by my queen, and beholden her many winters, and slitten like a traitor taken her from me by force.\(^{20}\)

In the Regal Way of life, Arthur’s destiny is to be king. In the end, Arthur sends Guinevere to a nunnery and banishes Launcelot from Camelot.

THE MYTH OF PARZIVAL


For it was in the legend of the Holy Grail that the healing work was symbolized through which the world torn between honor and love, as

\(^{17}\) Malory c1470, p. 79.
\(^{18}\) Malory c1470, p. 438.
\(^{19}\) Malory c1470, p. 438.
\(^{20}\) Malory c1470, p. 453.
Parzival has become a knight and is out on quest for the Holy Grail. He comes upon a small lake. Two men in a boat are gently cruising around the lake: one paddling; the other, a calm passenger. Parzival and the passenger, likewise a knight, exchange pleasantry and the Parzival is invited to the knight’s castle for dinner and a place to rest overnight. That night there is a great banquet. The Grail appears: floating in the air and conjuring up everyone’s dinner order. Then, the king is carried to the table. It is the passenger knight. He is in great pain. It seems the point of a lance has broken off in his groin and cannot be removed. Once a day he visits the lake seeking to ease the pain in its waters.

And Parzival—here’s the key now, this is the crisis of the story—is filled with compassion and is moved to ask, “What ails you, …?” But immediately he thinks, “A knight does not ask questions.” And so, in the name of his social image, he continues the Waste Land principle of acting according to the way you’ve been told to act instead of the way of the spontaneity of your noble nature.\(^\text{23}\)

The banquet over, Parzival retires. Early that morning he hears the noise of knights in full armor on horseback trampling over the lowered drawbridge of the castle and off to do the good deeds set for them by the Grail. Parzival hurries to catch up with them but fails. He is told by a witch that, had he asked the king the question “What ails you?” he, Parzival, would have thereupon been made the new Grail King! Frantically, he hurries back to the castle to fulfill his destiny, but the castle has disappeared. For five years he searches for that castle.

Near the end of his search, Parzival the Christian comes upon a Muslim knight and challenges him to combat. After an exchange of blows, Parzival strikes the mighty Infidel upon Infidel’s helmet with his sword and sends him to the ground. But Parzival’s sword shatters. According to codes of knightly honor, they agree to a temporary truce. It is in the truce that they discover that they are brothers of the same father. Their discovery is based on Parzival’s knowledge that his brother has the skin complexion of “a parchment, with writing,” i.e. “black and white, in patches.” “I am he, replied the Infidel.” “Feirefiz (the Infidel) and Parzival ended their strife with a kiss.”\(^\text{24}\)

Together, Feirefiz and Parzival discover the castle: Parzival is crowned Grail King; Feirefiz returns to Africa to govern his own kingdom.

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\(^{21}\) Campbell 1972, pp. 166-167.

\(^{22}\) This is a reference to The Wasteland (1922) by T.S. Eliot, 1948 Nobel Laureate in Literature.

\(^{23}\) Campbell 1990, p. 255.

\(^{24}\) Eschenbach c1225, p. 372.
In the Regal Way of life, Parzival’s destiny is to be king, specifically, to love his people and spend his energies on them rather than pursuing the self-interested goal of always doing what knights were expected to do. His fall comes as he puts honor above love and destiny. Then, he wanders. In the end, however, he defeats fear, achieves wisdom, and rises to become a transcendent or godlike figure.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

What if honor has the power to change morality in a community, but is overruled because it will concomitantly change the social order of that community? Do such values exist? If so: What are they? What is the power status of honor among them? The principal lesson in the myth of Oedipus, the myth of Arthur, and the myth of Parzival is that the hero in the Regal Way of life puts destiny above honor, and honor above love. Here, then, is a class of situations in which honor has the power to change morality in a community, but is overruled because it will concomitantly change the social order of that community. In such situations, it would appear that, if morality is to change, the agent of change will be individual destiny.

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