Moral Revolutions: 
Ancient Tricksters and Folkloric Revolutionaries

Kwame Antony Appiah demonstrates in the narratives of his book *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* how moral revolutions may begin through the initiative of individuals with revolutionary or world-turning ideas and behaviors. Appiah draws upon Greek, Latin and German for the technical language of his book. Utilizing terms such as *eudaimonia*, *honestus*, and the *Anerkennung*, he analyzes the concepts of moral values, recognition respect and honor worlds. This paper serves as a case study of moral revolutionaries, individuals who strive for happiness, by comparing what folklorists term the Wise Man and Trickster figures of Socrates and Aesop to their more modern manifestations, African Tricksters. My essay is to examine more closely how the values expressed in these philological terms position the individual with respect to his society. This project draws upon a synchronic, folkloric approach to the texts examined.

The terms Appiah relies upon offer insights into the values he espouses. The word *honestus* refers to the winning of honors, and extrapolates to one worthy of honors or honorable. Langenscheidt’s *Standard Dictionary of German* offers three glosses for *Anerkennung*: recognition as acknowledgement, as appreciation, and as approval. For the most complex term, *eudaimonia*, three readings are useful. First, a simple etymology: *eu*-daimon-ia derives from the prefix *eu* for “well” and the word *daimon* for one’s guardian spirit, in the sense of being fortunate in life thanks to one’s guardian spirit. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* offers an understanding of *eudaimonia* as “flourishing”, which leads Appiah to his definition, “living well.” Richard Kraut, in his book *Aristotle and the Human Good*, says that *eudaimonia* is “the name of the highest good at which one can aim”. (Kraut 3 n1)

*A daimon* – whether it a good angel or evil demon - gives its blessings to the individual possessing it or acknowledging its existence. One explanation of how a *daimon* functions comes from Plato’s narratives on Socrates, a figure best known to us through the dialogues, written by his students Plato and Xenophon, discussing Socrates’ ideas on truth, beauty and other abstractions. Traditional or folk tales offer further insight into the person and nature of this revered figure when they rewrite him as a Wise Man-cum-Trickster. In other words, just as the ideas of Socrates are transmitted through others, an individual’s ability to “live well” requires him or her to interact with the rest of society, and perhaps even to follow his *daimon*. Appiah explains that living well means having moral and ethical “values that guide us in deciding what we owe to others”. (Appiah xiv) Though, considering Socrates’ independence in pursuing his own goals, even to the extent of being a social nuisance, one has to wonder, “Where or when may I find opportunities to live well?”

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1 This paper benefitted from points raised in discussion.
Ancient popular tales and wisdom literature use Wise Men and Trickster characters who have in common several aspects of their mental and verbal repertoire. Stith Thompson assembles in the volume on “The Wise and the Foolish” of his Motif Index of Folk Literature a long list of behaviors characterizing folk figures from all eras and regions. These traits include acquiring wisdom, being prudent in decision-making, having forethought and cleverness as well as verbal repartee skills. Applying some of these categories to characters such as Socrates and Aesop, one can observe their shared qualities. That is to say, folklore approaches Socrates as a Wise Man figure rather than a philosopher, and one type of Wise Man who advises society but lives even further off in its margins is the Trickster, Aesop.

Such folkloric thinkers come equipped with values that guide them in making decisions. Since folklore emphasizes practical skills rather than the philosophical or the emotional, the Wise Man and Trickster types appear to greatest advantage in social situations that involve the figure’s status and honor. Aesop certainly shares a type of narrative persona with Socrates. What Alexander Hollmann calls their ‘voiceprint’ is “marked by confidence, control, authority.” (Hollmann 310) Socrates, with his beguiling, gadfly approach to Athenians going about their daily business, never gives straight answers to other inquiring minds. He can indeed be seen as a Trickster figure. And, according to Plato’s recollection of Socrates last days in the Phaedo, when Socrates was to drink hemlock and die at the behest of the Athenian court, he received visitors in jail while he was putting the fables of Aesop to verse. Aesop, similarly, is a Wise Man and appears as a character in Plutarch’s Dinner of the Seven Sages, a character quite capable of serving society.

The Vita Aesopi or Life of Aesop, from around the second or third century of the Common Era, offers a fictional biography of the legendary Aesop. In his early days, as a mute, Aesop used gestures and signs to express himself during social crises. Aesop’s discontent with his inability to speak leads him to experience a moral crisis. When his fellow servants eat the master’s ripe figs and blame Aesop, he develops and swallows an emetic in order to prove his innocence and their guilt. It is possible that Aesop acted to avoid punishment, and in the process demanded respect of being acknowledged as innocent. His cleverness and ability to communicate his innocence through gestures reveal what Appiah calls “something shameful in the old way of doing things”. (xvi) In fact, Aesop’s behavior here speaks to his interest in being able to live well by avoiding suffering.

In Plato’s dialogues Socrates explains that he relies on his daimon or guiding spirit to warn him if he is about to do something wrong. Such warnings applied for social occasions. For instance, in the Apology (40b-c), since the daimon kept quiet, Socrates attended his public trial (for impiety and corrupting the youth) and did not try to leave Athens to avoid the judgment of the court. It is possible that by listening to his daimon, Socrates felt such an affection for honor, that even sentenced to death, he continued in Athens, pursuing his efforts towards self-discovery by communing with Aesop. As Appiah states, “[w]hen able-bodied people with a sense of honor … remember they are entitled to respect, they literally walk with their heads held high.” (xvii)
Certainly many who followed have felt the shame inherent in executing such a ‘revolutionary’ moral character.

In Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates discusses matters of respect and honor with a rhetorician, Phaedrus, while walking in the countryside outside Athens. Socrates alludes to the traditional tale of the cicadas - which the two can hear chirping around them – that we know as the Aesopic fable of “The Grasshopper and the Ant”. In Socrates’ version of the story, the cicadas were originally men who were so busy singing that they forgot to eat and therefore died. As a reward for their diligent artistry, the men were brought back to life as cicadas who report to the Muses, the deities of the creative arts, regarding the mortals who have been honoring the Muses with words and music. In the Aesopic tale, the cicada is known for his ‘idleness’ since, unlike the industrious ants, he sings his way through the summer and lacks time to stock supplies for the harsh winter. David Schenker finds that Socrates’ reference to the fable is his indirect way of saying that the two interlocutors should honor the Muses by concentrating on the work of philosophy. That is to say, philosophical conversation may bring about changes in the two speakers’ ideas, not sleeping through the afternoon. (Schenker 77). We could imagine Socrates’ *daimon* telling him to keep walking and talking so the two will also earn the Muses’ respect.

An Ewe story, “The Work Done by Itself,” (Abrahams 1983: 223–4) holds a certain similarity in its reference to a ‘tricky’ situation between acquaintances. A Hyena and Bush-cat together, each unknown to the other, clear grass and build a house. Each in turn, expecting to perform one of a necessary sequence of tasks, arrives at the scene to find the work already finished. Their alternating actions, with each performing half of the other’s allotted work, resemble the give and take of the Socratic dialogue. Finally, the job complete and both in residence, they simultaneously suffer accidents that reveal the other one’s presence in the house. Without having to seek guidance on what they owe to each other - and without an official pact for mutual assistance - the tasks planned for each one’s own well-being are completed. The unrequested assistance, only acknowledged at the end, made their lives successful and allowed them, at least temporarily, to live well. Through insightful observations, the Wise Man-as-Trickster may similarly effect a sudden transformation in others’ moral behavior. In this sense he may serve as a moral revolutionary in drawing upon the society’s common values to transform their moral self-awareness much as the Hyena and the Bush-cat engaged in a joint enterprise without being aware of the cooperative effort. The actions of the Wise Man-as-Trickster, driven by a need for respect and recognition, may serve the common good as a way of earning recognition, that is, acknowledgement, appreciation and approval.

The Trickster’s physical appearance earns him what Appiah calls recognition respect, in the audience’s emotional reaction to the odd figure he cuts. The *Vita Aesopi* offers the portrait of a somewhat misshapen Aesop, his stomach and head protruding, squat, bandy-legged, short-armed and squint-eyed (Ferrari 59, §1). The overall effect hovers between the monstrous and the miraculous, but proves an invitation to laughter. The Trickster also appears in Bantu folklore as the Great Dikithi, a misshapen man, whose one-eye, one-arm and one-leg cause him to be out of
balance. Abrahams, a scholar of both African and Afro-American folktales, says this “lack of physiological balance makes a moral as well as a physical statement,” and, “his physical character and qualities, as well as his outrageous actions remind the audience to laugh at his ridiculous antics”. (Abrahams 1983: 153) The observer’s emotional reaction to a ‘monstrous’ figure such as Aesop may be a kathartic release in Aristotle’s sense of moving the audience with a sense of emotional release. That is, Aesop’s or the Great Dikithi’s odd features provoke the audience’s own inner fears and pity because they prove the terrors that life holds. The audience laughs in reaction to seeing the horror that they themselves are powerless against. So the Trickster contributes to the survival and even flourishing of the group.

Both Socrates and Aesop earn what Appiah calls appraisal respect (Appiah 13) when judged on the merit of their verbal skills. The gods recognize Socrates’ ‘wisdom’, in that his daimon continues to guide his conversations. Aesop bests his employers in speaking and arguing, so much so that, despite their animosity at his tricks and deceit, they will not punish him. The Trickster’s cleverness may or may not function as an example to be returned for the society to apply within their own lives. Instead, what can be modeled by others is the Trickster’s desire for and insistence upon being treated with respect. The slaves of Greece and the Tricksters of Africa, though often field-workers, engaged in various skilled occupations: they were teachers, musicians, singers and dancers. As people of great talent, their purpose in wisdom literature is to entertain, but also to educate, although in a manner not conforming to traditional philosophy.

Abrahams emphasizes the adaptability and endurance of Trickster figures. So even though Aesop is introduced in the Vita as a mute, he marshals his wit against the humiliations of domestic service. In the effort to partake of the goods of human life, Aesop, despite his misshapen appearance, undergoes a series of sudden transformations. First, he finds himself a home in the residence of Xanthus the philosopher, then he advances in the household, and finally he wins his freedom. For example, at one point the philosopher berates Aesop in order to make him obey commands. Aesop decides that so strict an attitude merits its own reward and turns the table on the philosopher by obeying to the letter every instruction given him. He carries only an empty flask and towel to the baths, but no oil in the flask; he cooks one single lentil for dinner. Told to cook the finest thing imaginable, he serves tongue. Told to cook something worthless, tongue again is served. When he is told to take food home from a feast and give it to the one the master loves the most, Aesop offers the food not to his mistress, but to the dog, the original ‘doggy bag’. He creates further tension between husband and wife by having sex with his mistress. When she reneges on their bargain – ten times and a new shirt – he brings his case, in code, to the husband. The man and woman settle, agreeing to a tenth round and the promised reward.

The idea of moral values as a guide to what we owe others (Appiah xiv) is tested by the Trickster’s familial relationships. For instance, Aesop’s wit and cunning cannot save him from an internal attack: son adopted later in life betrays him for the sake of a woman. A friend’s loyalty keeps him alive, though imprisoned, until Croesus, King of Lydia, once again needs his
cleverest advisor. The recognition of his innocence through the reinstatement in a ministerial position also renews the appraisal respect Aesop earned. The Hausa tale, “The Ant’s Burden” (Abrahams 1983: 188-9), contains a similar story of deceit and treachery within the parameters of the father-son relationship. Anansi and his son Tsin have fine harvests from their farms until the rains stop. Anansi’s son finds a dwarf who agrees to help generate rain. Anansi hears of this success and is determined to outdo his son. Since the rain came only when the dwarf was struck, Anansi assaults the dwarf aggressively to induce an even greater downpour. This hubris leads to the death of the dwarf. The Trickster then attempts to frame his son for his own crime. The son, aware of the father’s treacherous nature, outwits Anansi. Duped into seeking a reward from the king for the murder of the dwarf, the father instead receives the punishment of having to carry a box on his head. Still, Anansi manages to manipulate the Ant into carrying the burden for him. The story concludes with an etiological conclusion explaining why ants carry bundles. Like the ants of “The Grasshopper and the Ants”, these insects are busy and industrious. Unlike the Aesopian ants, however, these workers are the victims of the Trickster who has reinstated his tricky ways.

Sharing an honor world in which philosophical debate is the norm for education, the slave Aesop is able to reprove and censure his master without being subject to punitive consequences. The honor world Aesop shares with his philosopher master values intelligence and creative thinking; the competition nature of the philosopher’s society requires Aesop to correct the other’s manner of speaking and to engage in verbal debate and repartee. Xanthus’ dedication to education through philosophy also binds him to certain conventions of argumentation and debate, and his affection for his honor world obliges him to accept Aesop’s corrections. Aesop, on the other hand, when faced with unanswerable riddles, ‘flips’ the scenario so his solution trumps the teasing conundrum. This ability to transform a losing proposition into a triumph leads to Aesop’s accumulating competitive honors within Xanthus’ social world. Unfortunately, the social order also requires Aesop to accept that recognition for his own mental feats may be transferred to Xanthus.

Similarly, the Tobago tale, “Why They Name the Stories for Anansi” (Abrahams 1983: 182), tells of a spider who seeks the honor of having Trickster stories named after him. To earn this recognition, he defeats with his wits the cleverest of creatures, Mr. Blacksnake. When Anansi’s traps for Blacksnake failed he resorted to the flattery of recognition respect: Blacksnake was so proud of his length that, in order to be appreciated by a larger audience, he allowed himself to be captured by Anansi. The Trickster thus effected an immediate transformation in his prey and the successful outcome of his own quest.

Appiah explains how social identities bind people together through understanding and attachment, such as in a segmentary lineage system. Whatever disagreements may exist, Aesop is aware that his fortune and well-being are closely connected to Xanthus’ prosperity. The social crises besetting the philosopher escalate from challenges during drinking parties to the dangers of public humiliation in the political arena. The island of Samos where they live faces an
unknown political future. An omen appears to guide the town: an eagle steals the city’s seal and throws it at a nearby slave. As a local Wise Man, Xanthus is called upon to aid his homeland by interpreting the omen. Xanthus is about to commit suicide in order to save his honor when Aesop intervenes. Xanthus had bought Aesop at a discount rate because of the latter’s deformity. Now the Trickster offers to interpret the omen on his master’s behalf. The only stipulation is that Aesop must be freed as a slave cannot perform such an important task. Xanthus is compelled by the pressures of the political crisis to manumit Aesop for the greater good rather than admit to his earlier miserliness.

Xanthus’ sense of honor is apparent because he plans to commit suicide because of his inability to interpret the portent bewildering the city. He could have explained publically that his skills lay in philosophical debate and inquiry, rather than augury. Instead of admitting to his own ineffectiveness, the philosopher opts for death. Aesop senses that Xanthus is in crisis and seizes his opportunity. They concoct a scene in which Xanthus condescends to let his pupil, Aesop, read the omen for the salvation of the community. Since a slave lacks the authority to read omens, Aesop requests that the accuracy of his interpretation be rewarded or punished as if he were a free-man. The moral imperative to maintain their respective positions, of master and slave, yields to the requirement of the honor world, to save face, and the Trickster decodes the sign that his ‘master’ could not.

Frank Snowden explains in *Blacks in Antiquity* that while Aesop’s ethnic identity cannot be determined, “[W]e know enough, however, to say that manumission and a ‘carrière ouverte aux talents’ were equally available to slaves of different ethnicities.” (188) That is, Aesop’s talents function not only as his path out of slavery but also as his admission ticket to a new career promising public honors and an enhanced reputation. After again saving the Samians, the freedman Aesop visits the source of the threat, Croesus, King of Lydia, and becomes transformed yet again, this time emerging as the king’s minister. Honor, or *honos* in Latin, is the mark of respect, and Aesop enjoys receiving these formal recognitions. His numerous adventures and victories make him a heroic type, but the acquisition of honors and social respect apparently is not reward enough. Aesop’s *hubris* brings about his downfall. Having neglected Apollo and disparaged the people of Delphi for failing to give him due honors, Aesop was condemned to death and, for once, could not talk his way out of the crisis.

Aesop’s activities, especially his problem-solving skills, seem to contribute to the greater good of his society. Abrahams, however, qualifies the role of the Trickster in African folklore to say that, even when the Trickster’s anti-authoritarian activity results “in benefits to the group, his action can not be interpreted as providing a model for future conduct.” (Abrahams 1983: 342) In other words, the Trickster achieves singular success, and is to be emulated only to the extent that one is prepared to face the consequences. In the Kiniramba tale, “Stuffing the Hyena” (Abrahams 1983: 179), Hare and Buck are friends, who agree to hunt ants together. Buck carries fire into the anthole, whereupon Hare closes the hole and suffocates Buck along with the ants. Hare steals the horns of the dead Buck. Being swallowed by an elephant, Hare blows the horn and the other
elephants kill the ‘crying’ one. Hare emerges from within the elephant and agrees to eat it, asking Hyena for assistance. Hyena agrees and eats the elephant until he bursts and dies. Hyena’s mistake was to adopt the Trickster Hare as his model for eating practices.

Aesop is best known for composing fables or traditional tales with moral lessons attached. Since fables serve as analogies for resolving real social world crises, these fables, especially ones in which Trickster figures speak or narrate, often serve as coded messages within politically-charged narratives. Just as Socrates’ philosophy was transmitted through his students’ writings, Aesop’s traditional wisdom has many followers. A freedman of the Roman Emperor Augustus, Phaedrus, told fables containing the secrets of the court, even cautioning his audience against the power of the perfidious minister, Sejanus. In African American folklore, Trickster and other fables function as “personal suggestions couched impersonally”. (Abrahams 1985: xix)

And, according to Julia Allen, Russian communists used the term “Aesopian language” to describe the coded messages that permitted them to communicate about their collectivist goals and ambitions inside Czarist Russia.

During the Hellenistic Era, the great age of book-collecting at the Library of Alexandria, the philosopher Demetrius Phalerus assembled the first collection of fables, adding brief summaries or tag lines to introduce his entries. These short descriptions suggested when a speaker was to use the exemplary stories. The ‘moral’ or evaluative comment on the fable’s plot (Holzberg 20) came to attached to the traditional stories by many later authors, and become commonplace in later didactic collections, such as Caxton’s.

In the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, African and African American forms of Orature, or oral culture, are spoken by a Narrator-and-Trickster. These performances are understood to carry strains of resistance in which mixing, versioning and interacting celebrate the community-based values of the Trickster narrator. Daniel Banks explains that the African diasporic performance aesthetics of Orature include the audience’s emotional reaction, a physical release that resembles Aristotelian katharsis. He adds that the goal is for community members to gain self-knowledge - in the Socratic sense - and attain self-sufficient efficacy, in the Aesopic sense.

The problem with Tricksters striving for efficacy, however, is that they tend to be over achievers in this field. In stark contrast to the flippantly-deceitful nature of the Trickster type, the final lesson or moral may become overly didactic. In a revolutionary turn, Toni Morrison and her son Slade have rewritten some of Aesop’s fables, much as Socrates once did. Tapping into the language and idiom of contemporary African American culture, the Morrisons raise questions about how to interpret the lessons of fables with a view to the open-ended nature of the genre. In a radical paradigm shift that evokes an African tradition to leave the final word to the audience (Abrahams 1983: 17), they avoid imposing a verbal tag line that would conclude their fable.
As Rebecca Ferguson says, *Game* is an ambiguous term, meaning “courage, toughness, or the power to win, or canny knowledge”. (Ferguson 55) For example, in the Morrisons’ retelling of Aesop, *Who’s Got Game?* “The Ant and the Grasshopper”, the ant accumulates his provisions for the winter, but the grasshopper works hard at his art as long as he can manage. This contemporary approach to Aesop’s Trickster demonstrates Appiah’s injunction “to foster a commitment to human dignity such that no honor world will give so much standing to the successful [such] that it implies disrespect to all others”. (Appiah 131) Ferguson also says that one of the core indexes of happiness is time-neglecting absorption in an activity, or being self-forgetting (Ferguson 56). The grasshopper’s pursuit of his art even to the point of self-forgetting serves as a human good, from which even the ant benefits. Just so do the Morrison revisions of Aesop offer an empathetic and honor-sharing engagement for children.

**Conclusion**

Aesop begins his quest for *eudaimonia*, or ways of living well, by finding a home with the philosopher Xanthus. Aesop’s quality of life, and his share of the human good, continues improves until, finally, he achieves international recognition and honors. The Trickster, however, does not succeed in reforming the moral nature of society any more than the Wise Man Socrates, and both die unfortunately. Being marginal to society, the Trickster type possesses the requisite intelligence to partake of an honor world, a shrewdness that helps to avert suffering, and the skill set to serve as a trouble-shooter by thinking outside the box. In African American society, the Trickster appears as a performance artist, simultaneously singing of the community and tricking them into questioning his choices. By earning the respect of the audience and through his own achievement of self-respect, the Trickster fights and flourishes. His success rate remains to be determined, but the Muses have surely heard reports of this grasshopper’s respect for them.

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