Booknotes

Honour, and its correlative shame, have received something of a bad press philosophically in recent years. In the wider world as well, there is a feeling that honour has little place in an era when equality and democracy are watchwords. It seems that the notion of honour is all too often brought to public attention in connexion with practices of a barbaric nature (as in 'honour' killings and in sagas of familial and tribal revenge, sometimes perversely glamourised in Hollywood treatments ostensibly crafted to show us just how primitive these practices are).

In his book *Modern Honor: A Philosophical Defense* (Routledge 2013), having considered honour in its myriad applications from Homeric times to the present day via episodes such as Icelandic sagas, duelling and the American south, Anthony Cunningham sums up the case for the prosecution: 'when Western intellectuals collect such honor stories they get an extremely worrisome picture. They see a world where lives are squashed, wasted and warped for ideals that often seem arbitrary, vain, violent, unfair, superficial, self-absorbed, conformist and melodramatic. They look askance at honor when rape victims are killed to erase a family's shame, when some are exalted and others debased on the basis of race or class or genealogy, where deadly violence becomes a frivolous sport and knee-jerk response to trifles, or where forms of life are so prejudicially vilified that exposure can make victims turn to suicide.' In sum, it looks as if honour cannot co-exist with Cunningham's own humanistic vision, whose watchwords are liberty, equality and fraternity.

Against what might be seen as atavistic applications of honour, Cunningham develops a conception in which the honourable life is seen in terms of upholding virtues such as dignity, courage, fortitude, fidelity, honesty, compassion and gratitude, as opposed to the elitist and misogynist moral codes we find described in Homer and the sagas. Cunningham assumes, somewhat uncritically some might think, that compassion and equality are central to a good ethic, and he wants honour to play a role in upholding them. Thus compassion and a respect for all others would be part of what I am, and I lose myself and my self-respect – my honour – in being hard-hearted or snobbish. All this is fine, but it makes it look as if honour is just a kind of free-floating addendum of feeling, which could be latched on to just about any already existing code or practice.

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In fact, towards the end of his book, Cunningham develops a more interesting (Humean?) picture in which morality arises first in the 'deep, intrinsic attachments to people, activities, causes and things' which are part of the lives of all of us. Morality is not first and foremost a reasoning activity, but one based in the love, respect, kindness and gratitude which have given me dignity, and which become part of my own self-conception in the way I deal with others, and which cannot, he says, be shed at will. Honour (and correlative shame) are what ground and uphold this self-conception, as I make my way through life. Cunningham might well have filled this picture out more than he does, maybe by referring explicitly to Aristotle: 'reasoned accounts of moral virtue… are powerless to induce the mass of human beings to worthy conduct' (N.Eth 1179b7-10); and, of some acts, 'rather than do the act in question, we must be ready to die' (N.Eth 1110a26-8). Hard sayings indeed, and possibly attachable to the ethical codes Cunningham deplores, but testifying to the centrality of honour in leading us to adopt any moral code whatsoever. Feeling honour and shame in regard to what is valued or disvalued in our moral beliefs is what makes those beliefs part of our practice, and what led us to adopt those values in the first place.

Cunningham begins and ends his book by referring approvingly to President Obama's explanation of the US's refusal to display the body of the dead Osama bin Laden as a trophy, 'you know, that's not who we are', we being the American people. In the view of Ronald A. Kuipers in his book *Richard Rorty* (in the 'Contemporary American Thinkers' series, Bloomsbury, 2013) Rorty was a quintessentially American thinker, an exponent not just of American pragmatism, but also of the American sublime. For like Emerson, Whitman and Dewey, Rorty's whole philosophical enterprise should be seen in terms of breaking through the crust of convention towards 'the apotheosis of the future'. That was Rorty's own phrase, but compare Emerson: 'No truth so sublime but it may be trivial tomorrow in the light of new thoughts. People wish to be settled: only so far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.' So Rorty in his philosophy unsettles, or as he puts it, edifies, knocking down supports and authorities like Truth, World and God. We have only what we say and do; world and truth are or emerge in what we say and do about and with them. This being so, our activities should be guided by their political and moral salience, cultivating and developing those activities and investigations which help us to create a better world, with less cruelty, more human solidarity, and a greater degree of honest human self-reliance.

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And while both Dewey and Rorty are secularist humanists, both are, in their own way, happy to invoke religious language. Thus Dewey: the term 'God' can encourage in us 'the sense of a connexion of man… with the enveloping world that the imagination feels is a universe. Use of the words 'God' or 'divine' to convey the union of actual with ideal may protect man from a sense of isolation and from consequent despair and defiance.' Rorty: 'My sense of the holy, insofar as I have one, is bound up with the hope that some day, any millennium now, my remote descendants will live in a global civilisation in which love is pretty much the only law. In such a society, communication would be domination-free, class and caste would be unknown, hierarchy would be a matter of temporary pragmatic convenience, and power would be entirely at the disposal of the free agreement of a literate and well-educated electorate.' And he goes on to invoke I Corinthians 13 as a 'useful text… for people like myself for whom this sense simply consists in hope for a better human future.'

But is I Cor 13 about a better *human* future, or about another realm altogether, one in which we will no longer see as through a glass darkly? However American it might be to envisage or hope for a perfect city on the hill, the utopian hope of the American sublime may be as much a dangerous illusion as any other millennial inspiration. Aside from Rorty's (and Dewey's) rather facile appeals to hope and the future, perhaps even more worrying is Rorty's belief (discussed by Kuipers) that an *enfant suavage* found wandering the woods would have no 'share in human dignity'. This is quite consistent with Rorty's anti-essentialism and his denial of any human nature apart from our formation in the communities and conversations in which we participate. It would also throw some light on the apparently widely accepted description of Rorty as a 'leftist *American* patriot', and on Rorty's own avowed celebration of the American democratic experiment. Rorty, had he been alive, might have acceded to President Obama's invocation of 'people like us', though perhaps not had President George W. Bush used the same words.

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