

Sommers, Tamler – Why Honor Matters

Basic Books, 2018 [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★★★

In this his third book the relatively young Texan associate professor of philosophy at the University of Huston, Tamler Sommers, defines the virtue of honor, describes the pros and cons of honor cultures and claims that honor is underrated in our modern world. The author argues that the Western world has made a mistake in suppressing the concept of honor to the extent that has been done and that we need to adapt a “constrained” honor concept to live a good life. Although clearly interesting, *Why Honor Matters* fails to fully tie together all the loose ends.

According to the author the Western world is virtually schizophrenic when it comes to honor. The concept has little place in the discourse apart from when we horrify over the blood feuds, racism and bullying of women in honor cultures. On the other hand we admire the courageous hero of books and movies that rights the wrongs and in sports honor is still a valid concept. The first two chapters of the book define what honor is and discusses why it's a problem that the West has abandoned the concept. Chapters three through five, drills deeper in the various aspects of honor cultures. Then “*the most ambitious and [...] the most important chapter*” six argues for introducing so called restorable justice in the Western criminal justice system. Finally, the last chapter tries to present a picture of how the contained type of honor concept might look.

Sommers distinguishes between a Western dignity framework with its roots in the enlightenment and honor cultures – and to be clear, honor cultures could be attributed to both the populations of the Appalachian mountains and the Afghan mountains as well as the Navy SEALs, Mexican drug cartels and NHL hockey teams. Dignity is in this respect a universal unbreakable value that comes with being a human being and it is as such skeptical of narrowing forms of identifications with for example nation, class, race etc. This is because too close identification risks excluding others from the moral sphere. Honor is a much more fragile value

that takes the opposite view. Giving equal moral weight to outsiders and insiders of a group is seen as immoral. While others should be treated with respect and hospitality, caring for your own is absolute priority. In a dignity culture living a moral life is a pursuit and choice of the individual while in honor cultures the individual moral is a part of a group's norms and a moral life a necessity to be accepted by, and gain status in, the group. Dignity is independent of social structures and this has huge value in breaking free from oppressive structures. The downside is a loss of stability and structure plus of the self-respect that comes from standing up for yourself. To the author the western focus on the free will and the independence from others is too abstract where an atomization is prioritized over the meaning and solidarity that exist in honor cultures. Without the, granted not always positive, group cohesion of group norms dignity societies instead come to depend on an all powerful state penetrating deep into civil society.

Although I agree that a person to his best ability should live an honorable life of integrity, I reserve this as a choice for myself. My quarrels with the book are three. The discussion around restorative justice comes up now and again in the book and not just in chapter six. I think that it could have been better flagged that a debate on procedural structures in the US court system were such a large part of the book. Further, at times the author in my view comes a bit too romanticizing of the “honorable savage” of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The ending chapter on how to create the contained type of honor isn't very developed. Basically Sommers says that since honor norms are not universal they are changeable. What we need to do is to have norms that prevent violent escalation and that utilize less violent methods for standing up for oneself. Examples given are the dance-offs in Hip Hop culture, NHL norms, poetry slams and the Chicago BAM-project (Becoming a Man) - a bit slim basis for the change of western culture.

An important debate worthy of a stronger finish.

Mats Larsson, November 7, 2018