Fundamental Moral Disagreement, Antirealism, and Honor

Abstract: Social psychologists Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen’s (1996) account of “the culture of honor” has been appealed to by multiple empirically-minded philosophers, and plays an important role in John Doris and Alexandra Plakias’ (2008) antirealist argument from disagreement. In this essay, I point out some empirical inadequacies with the Nisbett-Cohen account that bear on the relevance of honor cultures to metaethical research. I suggest another theory of honor in its place that actually strengthens Doris and Plakias’ case for fundamental moral disagreement in important ways. Nonetheless, I argue that the persistent appeal of honor-based norms isn’t best explained by antirealism, but pluralism—a reply on behalf of realism that itself has considerable empirical support.

Keywords: Doris, Plakias, disagreement, moral realism, moral antirealism, honor, honour

1. Introduction

John Doris and Alexandra Plakias (2008) have reinvigorated the antirealist argument from disagreement in part by appealing to “honor cultures” as described by cultural psychologists Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen’s Culture of Honor (1996). They claim the Nisbett-Cohen account of honor in such cultures empirically supports the thesis that some moral disagreements are intractable, and that this intractability is best explained by antirealism.

I argue here that the Nisbett-Cohen account is inadequate, even on empirical grounds. I suggest in its place the “competition ethic” analysis of honor. My account actually strengthens Doris and Plakias’ case in some ways, since on it the differences between the prototypical liberal and the prototypical honor adherent are even more radical than Nisbett and Cohen say they are, and these differences cannot be explained-away by harsh circumstances, non-moral factual disputes, or other
considerations that would render them superficial. Nonetheless, this suggests not antirealism but pluralism, since honor justifies principles that are reasonable in certain contexts. The pluralistic reply on behalf of realism is buttressed by recent philosophical interest in honor and other non-liberal ethical values, which I take to show that convergence in ideal conditions isn’t as unlikely as Doris and Plakias suggest.

2. Doris and Plakias’ antirealist argument

Doris and Plakias argue as so:

1. Philosophically, moral realism entails fundamental moral agreement.
2. Empirically, we have good evidence for fundamental moral disagreement.
3. So moral realism is improbable. (2008: 327)

With regard to the first premise, Doris and Plakias reason that if moral facts were mind-independent and objective (or at least thought of as such), then we would expect there to be “fundamental” moral agreement. That is, in ideal conditions, where all parties are rational, familiar with all relevant non-moral facts, etc., we would find convergence in moral opinion, just as (presumably) we would for scientific opinion.

Doris and Plakias support the second premise with two examples of cultural disagreement. One concerns markedly different attitudes between Chinese and American respondents to the Magistrate and the Mob case: the experimental evidence suggests that, as one might have guessed from the emerging literature on East-West differences (Nisbett 2003), Chinese respondents were more likely than Americans to conclude that an innocent man may morally be framed in order to prevent more deaths. A second example of disagreement—and the one that seems to have generated the most notice—is based on the Nisbett and Cohen (1996) study of elevated Southern violence, and its theory that explains this elevated violence by appeal to the South’s inherited “culture of honor.”
Are these disagreements fundamental, or can realists show them to be superficial through “defusing” explanations? Doris and Plakias consider and dismiss various types of defusing explanation for these two cases: namely, that the disputes trade on a disagreement about non-moral facts, or are the result of partiality, or rest on irrationality. The fourth and last defusing explanation they consider says that the differences of opinion about these cases are based on differences in the respective “background theories,” which include more general moral commitments. Doris and Plakias note that although the disagreements about particular cases may be explained by more basic moral differences, this hardly helps the realist interested in showing these disputes to be superficial.

As a realist, I am content to say that in some cases of actual moral disagreement, one or both sides will be completely wrong. As a convergentist, I hold that in ideal circumstances all parties would agree about our moral obligations, or at least converge on agnosticism about what the moral facts are. Since fundamental moral disagreements are intractable by definition, it follows that I don’t believe in fundamental moral disagreements. However, instead of arguing that the disagreement between Western liberals and honor adherents about acceptable violence is superficial (Collier forthcoming, Fraser & Hauser 2010), I will go the other direction, arguing that the disagreement between these two groups runs as deeply as possible while yet remaining a recognizably moral one. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests optimism about convergence, given the possibility of moral pluralism and a resurgent interest in honor and other non-liberal moral systems by academic philosophers. So the second premise of Doris and Plakias’ argument appears to be false.

3. Against the Nisbett-Cohen account of honor

Although not generally embraced by humanists, Nisbett and Cohen’s Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South (1996) is one of the most influential portrayals of honor in the social sciences, and has attracted the attention of empirically-informed philosophers (Collier forthcoming, Doris & Stich 2005; Fraser & Hauser 2010, Sommers 2008 and 2012). In this book and the many subsequent
articles based upon it (e.g., Cohen et al. 1999, Rodriguez Mosquera et al. 2002), honor is an adaptive social construct constituted by tendencies to respond violently to threats or insults, thereby communicating to would-be attackers that the honorable person is dangerous prey and not to be trifled with. These tendencies are (allegedly) rational in lawless circumstances where goods are easily stolen. For instance, cattle are easily rustled while crops are not, and this fact is used to explain why pastoralists are more often governed by honor norms than are agriculturalists. The pastoralist-honor connection is in turn used to explain the elevated honor-mindedness and violence one finds in the U.S. South, since that region was colonized by pastoralists from the British periphery.

Nisbett and Cohen’s empirical case for concluding that Southerners are more likely than Northerners to respond violently to offense is strong. And that this propensity is attributable at least in part to the heritage of the whites in these areas I find plausible. I also accept that honor-based concerns lie behind the fierce defense of livestock and the desirability of having a reputation for toughness that one sees in pastoralist societies. The problem with their picture is that we have good reasons not to understand honor’s norms as a deterrence-driven construct. Since Nisbett and Cohen’s account of the “culture of honor” has been accepted by a number of philosophers, it is imperative that we recognize the theoretical and empirical weaknesses of this deterrence-based theory of honor which, I claim, denatures a radically different moral perspective.

Before launching into my criticisms, I should point out that isn’t clear whether Nisbett, Cohen, and those in the social scientists who accept their account aspire to analyze honor, or only something they call “cultures of honor.” Researchers in this literature sometimes concede that honor has to do with virtue, status, and good reputation, whereas by “cultures of honor” they mean a specific set of normative beliefs and practices that emphasize “a man’s reputation based on his toughness and ability to protect his family and possessions” (Vandello & Cohen 2003: 998). It seems this syndrome exists, and obviously it can be named anything its researchers wish to call it. The
problem arises if a “culture of honor” is thought to reveal the nature of *honor*. The rest of this section is primarily devoted to saying why that inference is illicit. And yet even if the social scientists do not take themselves to be analyzing honor, the following criticisms nonetheless trouble the Nisbett-Cohen account of so-called “cultures of honor,” since the honor-based norms of even the cultures they discuss don’t appear to encourage deterrence. In contrast, the account of honor I forward addresses the deficiencies of the Nisbett-Cohen theory, and also serves as a philosophically adequate account of a value system only describable in terms of “honor.”

3.1 Honor and aggression

The first reason for doubting the Nisbett-Cohen account—whether interpreted as an account of honor or of “cultures of honor”—is that, if honor were a construct meant to lower the chances of having one’s goods stolen, then honor-driven pastoralists would be expected to frown on cattle raiders. If not positively disapproving of rustling, these cultures would not praise it, or at minimum not praise rustling as honorable. But just the reverse is true: raiding is not usually seen as dishonorable by pastoralists, but rather *encouraged and praised as honorable*.

This is not the place for a thorough review of the literature on the subject, but some vignettes help support this claim. For instance, according to anthropologist David Gilmore, African pastoralists (the Masai, Rendille, Jie, and Samburu are named as examples) have initiation rites in which boys are cast out into the wilderness where, “thrust on their own devices, they learn the tasks of responsible manhood: cattle rustling, raiding, killing, and survival in the bush” (1990: 13). According to another eminent anthropologist, the Nuer of Sothern Sudan, who subsist entirely on cattle, are proud raiders: “Skill and courage in fighting are reckoned the highest virtues, raiding the most noble, as well as the most profitable, occupation” (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 48). Of East African pastoralists generally, we are told that small-scale livestock raiding is a “veritable international sport” (Jacobs 1979: 49).
Africans aren’t the only ones who see honor in raiding. Anthropologist Jane Schneider tells us that cattle raiding is “endemic” to pastoral societies, and lists many examples: “In Sardinia, the shepherd boy of nine or ten who has not yet stolen an animal is called a *chisineri*, a sissy who clings to the ashes of the campfire. Bedouin boys first participate in raids around the age of twelve . . .” (1971: 4). In Crete, there’s a cradle-wish that goes, “Tonight, he’ll [the newborn baby] go on a raid!” (Haft 1996). In fact, in the Cretan highlands even as recently as the 1980s, rustling was so integrated into the moral expectations of villagers that young boys raided from older, more powerful livestock owners *in order to win them as allies*—the idea being that the pluck, daring, and intelligence it takes to successfully raid prove a boy’s worthiness and manliness, even to his victim (Herzfeld 1985).

Turning our attention to Scottish highland pastoralists, we gain important insight from the wildly popular novels of Scottish author Walter Scott. (Mark Twain semi-seriously blamed the Civil War on Scott, claiming that he “enchanted” the South with his pernicious tales of honor (Twain 1883/2009: ch. 46)). Rob Roy, both the man and the heroic character of the eponymous Scott novel, was an ardent cattle rustler. So was the superlatively honorable aristocratic highlander Fergus Mac Ivor of *Waverly*, who as a matter of policy employs rustlers to steal the cattle of Lowland gentlemen failing to pay him protection money.¹ Scott’s fiction reflects the reality: McHardy (2004) catalogues the importance of cattle-raiding to highlanders,² and demonstrates at length that inter-clan raiding was an “honorable tradition” in Scotland for many centuries. Taking all this to together, it seems that violently protecting one’s cattle was (and in places still is) thought to be demanded by honor,

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¹ At one point, the English protagonist Waverly asks his lowland hostess about this “thief-taker” Mac Ivor who has lately robbed her father of his cows. “Thief-taker!” answered Rose, laughing. “He is a gentleman of great honor and consequence; the chieftain of an independent branch of a powerful Highland clan, and is much respected, both for his own power, and that of his kith, kin, and allies.” (Scott 1814/1985, ch. 15)

² McHardy begins with story of one highlander who, upon being sentenced to death, protests only at being declared a “common thief”: “Common thief! One cow, two cows, that be a common thief! Lift a hundred cows, that be gentleman drovers!” (2004: 3).
true, but so was (and is) stealing cattle. The Nisbett-Cohen account of honor-as-deterrent seems unable to explain this second fact.

Nisbett and Cohen think their theory of honor helps explain the importance of honor to gang members, who live violence-filled lives in the relatively lawless inner cities (1996: 90-91). And indeed, there is clear evidence that, according to the “code of the street,” one’s status is predicated upon one’s wealth, prowess, and territory, and honor is thought to oblige one to defend these at all costs. However, according to Elijah Anderson (1999), this same code expects one to pursue status, and

[...] In this violent give-and-take, raising oneself up largely depends on putting someone else down. (75)

And according to authors of one important and early study of gang violence,

[b]y treating violence as a response to threat to an actor’s self-esteem, we do not imply that it is necessarily a defensive reaction. Toch (1969) points out that “self-image promoters” habitually precipitate violent situations in which they can demonstrate their power, courage, and importance. Conversely, “self-image defenders” are extraordinarily sensitive to any action that appears to discredit their image of themselves as persons with whom others do not trifle. We shall see that a heightened concern with personal honor makes a person both a self-image defender and promoter, i.e., one demands deference from others and is sensitive to any act that suggests that one is not worthy of respect. (Horowitz & Schwartz 1974: 240, my stress)

The honor code followed by the types of people Nisbett and Cohen find interesting, then, encourages not only defense of various “goods” such as cattle, wealth, territory, or women, but also the wresting of these from others. If honor is a construct made to rationalize a deterrence strategy, then what needs to be explained is why cultures of honor would adopt norms—norms of honor, specifically—that encourage behaviors diametrically opposed to successful deterrence.
2.2 Honor in stable, peaceful circumstances

A second problematic bit of data for the Nisbett-Cohen account is that practices typically described in terms of honor have been known to thrive in subcultures with fairly strong central authority, such among European officers any time from at least the 17th through 19th centuries (Bell 2007; Jones 2000; Stewart 1994), and warrior castes generally (Fields 1991; French 2003). Codes of honor also seem to flourish in safe circumstances (such as in sports (Sessions 2004)), and material wealth (as in the case of dueling among European gentry (Appiah 2010). In fact, one of the few remaining bastions of honor-talk in the typical Western democracy is academia: we are awash in the language of honor with our honor societies, honor codes, graduations with honors, honors courses, honorary degrees, volumes honoring prominent scholars, etc. Since any empirically-driven account of honor must take our actual use of the word “honor” as an important indicator of an honor tradition, it would seem that any good account of honor cultures would need to explain the term’s importance to academics. And yet academia is wealthy, orderly, and safe.

2.3 Honor and fair fights

A third problem for the Nisbett-Cohen account, at least if interpreted as an account of honor per se, is that some paradigmatic ways honor governs conflict are plainly ineffectual at deterring aggression. Consider the *codes duello*, which demanded that duels be conducted such that neither party had any advantage. Rule 17 of one popular code, for instance, states that “[t]he challenged chooses his ground; the challenger chooses his distance; the seconds fix the time and terms of firing” (Wilson 1838). It is hard to see why these honor-driven codes should have required symmetrical threat between duelists if honor is a construct designed to reduce one’s exposure to offense and attack. Granted, the prospect of your challenging me to a duel might lower the chances that I will insult you. But that just shows that honor permits more deterrence to insult than liberal societies do. The present mystery is why sophisticated and yet paradigmatic honor cultures would endorse stringently
fair dueling codes when other, much more deterring patterns of response were imaginable. For instance, I would be more deterred if I knew that you responded to perceived insults by revenging yourself upon me in the most efficient and brutal way possible. If honor is about deterrence, why would sophisticated honor cultures have rejected such effective deterrence strategies for the open and equitable duel?

The problem here is much more general. The warrior-aristocratic philosophy of war itself worked along the lines of a duel by encouraging orderly, “fair” fights. This war ethic is not merely product of medieval European chivalry: remarkably similar strictures have been obeyed across the centuries in Africa (Iliffe 2005), Japan (Fields 1991, ch. 9; French 2003, ch. 8), New Guinea (Fields 1991, ch. 2) and pre-Columbian Mexico (Clendinnen 1985; Hicks 1979). Perhaps most striking example of this “sporting” approach to battle is found in the ancient Indian Rigveda:

Elephants should oppose only elephants; and so the chariots, cavalry, and infantry only their opposite. […] One should strike only after due notice . . . [and never one] who is confiding or unprepared or panic-stricken . . . or [one who is] without armor, or whose weapons are rendered useless . . . or [one who is] fatigued and frightened, weeping and unwilling to fight; [or] one who is ill and cries for quarter, or one of tender years or advanced age. [A] Ksatriya [a member of the warrior caste] should defend even his enemy if entreated with joined hands. (qtd. in Singh 1965, pp. 161-162)

Or take the scenario of catching your enemy’s troops crossing a river. According to the semi-historical song Battle of Maldon, the Saxon chieftain Byrhtnoth, upon finding a large force of Viking marauders across the Panta River in 991, allowed the Vikings to cross the river unmolested before launching his attack, since he thought it would give him an unfair advantage to attack them while they were vulnerable (he was defeated and killed). Fifteen hundred years before Byrhtnoth and a world away, the ancient Chinese history Zuo Zhanju records how Duke Hsiang of Sung intercepted attacking Ch’u troops as they were fording the Hung river. Hsiang, against advice from his subordinates, allowed the Ch’u to cross and form ranks. He was defeated, but unrepentant, declaring that
the gentleman does not inflict a second wound, or take the grey-haired prisoner. When the ancients fought, they did not attack an enemy when he was in a defile. Though I am but the unworthy remnant of a fallen dynasty, I would not sound my drums to attack an enemy who had not completed the formation of his ranks. (qtd. in Fields 1991: 109)

The Duke’s aristocratic approach to battle was condemned for its inefficiency by both Sun Tsu and Chairman Mao, both of whom preferred deterrence to fighting, and winning to losing nobly (Griffith 1963, 30; Walzer 1977: 225ff). So just as gentlemanly approaches to duels ensured that the offended party had no advantage, warrior-aristocratic codes of war discouraged a “win-at-all costs” mentality, even when it came to defending one’s homeland from attack. So honor in these spheres hardly seemed designed to discourage attacks.

2.4 Honor and receptivity to challenge

Perhaps most perversely from the Nisbett-Cohen perspective, honor adherents seem to invite real and virtual attacks, challenges, and even insults. Consider this passage by social anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, taken from his seminal ethnography of the Kabyles of North Africa:

“The man without enemies is a donkey,” say the Kabyles, meaning not so much that he is stupid as that he is over-passive. “The accomplished man (argaz elkamel),” said an old Kabyle, “must always be on the alert, ready to take up the slightest challenge. He is the guardian of honor (amj’ajer), watching over his own honor and that of his group. There is nothing worse than to pass unnoticed, like a shadow. Thus, not to greet someone is to treat him like an object . . .. The challenge, on the contrary, is the highlight in the life of the one who receives it.” (Bourdieu 1966: 199, my stress).

This is not atypical. Many honor (sub)cultures are, as anthropologist Michael Hertzfeld put it of one Cretan highland culture, places of “constant struggle to gain a precarious and transitory advantage over each other” (Herzfeld 1985: 11). As such, they invent ways and even institutionalize opportunities to be challenged. These institutions may take the form of jousting tournaments, athletic playoffs, or even fiercely competitive gift-giving contests (Benedict 1934/2005: Ch. 6). The “challenges” here needn’t be insulting in nature, but many honor cultures seem even to institutionalize insults. In the age of European dueling, the man who hadn’t “been out” would have
his honor questioned, since one was to supposed to be sensitive to insult and apparently needed to cultivate some circumstance (real or drummed-up) in which to be insulted. In German dueling clubs—and these still exist—members initiate fairly violent duels with the ceremonial “I hereby insult you.” If honor is meant to discourage insult and attack, these patterns are difficult to explain.

2.5 The need for a better theory of honor

Although these four objections to Nisbett-Cohen account haven’t (to my knowledge) been raised, recent social-psychological research acknowledges that honor adherents—especially male ones, whose “precarious manhood” is under question—feel obliged to aggress and even simply to perform dangerous feats (Barnes et al. 2011; Bosson et al. 2009; Vandello et al. 2008). These studies explain male aggressiveness in “cultures of honor” in part to the pressure men feel in such places to prove their masculine toughness and fearlessness. This in turn often leads the researchers to cite the Nisbett-Cohen account of honor, because it says that men in such cultures need to present themselves as tough. What is elided, however, is that the Nisbett-Cohen account says that masculine toughness is extolled in honor cultures because it deters aggression, whereas the newer research acknowledges that honor cultures promote aggression and dangerous exploit independently of slights (Barnes et al. 2011). Thus we observe some slippage in the way the honor-violence-masculinity triad has been discussed by social psychologists: honor’s supposed requirement to present oneself as a tough target is being replaced by a requirement to present oneself as tough, period. Divorcing toughness from deterrence may well improve our understanding of patterns of violence in “cultures of honor,” but it undermines the Nisbett-Cohen explanation for the desirability of toughness in the first place.

In sum, honor adherents seem singularly unmotivated to deter aggression, either real or symbolic. They appear to encourage it and even to welcome it, at least in contexts where aggression connects with prestige and comes in a form licensed by accepted conventions. To be sure, a
A constructivist account of a normative system is compatible with widespread ignorance about its function. For instance, a culture with a superabundance of females may well unconsciously justify female infanticide to itself by adopting a code that sees female babies as less valuable (as may have been the case with Inuit infanticide (Smith et al. 2004)). The problem for the Nisbett-Cohen account, however, is that the actual norms of honor fail to function as it says they should. So the best explanation is that the Nisbett-Cohen account is wrong: whether we are speaking of honor or just the norms of “cultures of honor” that endorse violent responses to insult, it appears that honor isn’t about deterrence.

4. The “competition ethic” account of honor

In place of the Nisbett-Cohen account, in this section I suggest a framework for thinking about honor that not only explains the unaccounted-for phenomena surrounding honor cited above, but also bears on the question of fundamental moral disagreement.

Analyses of honor are bedeviled by the fact that “honor” and its cognates have many senses. One important point is that “honor” has one sense that is synonymous with “prestige.” Prestige is not quite what I am discussing here, since prestige is seen by the honor adherent as merely an “axiological” property, or “good.” Obviously, knowing that some group of people see a certain property as good tells us little about how they feel that good may be morally promoted or distributed: a utilitarian and a contractarian may agree that utility is the good, but they disagree on how that good may morally be promoted or distributed. Thus, I shall focus, as Nisbett and Cohen tried to, on a normative code that regulates the good—in this case, a code that places limits on how we can gain and distribute the good of prestige.

Another complication is that there may be multiple normative codes fairly associated with “honor.” For instance, we observe in the Boy Scouts and modern Western military academies a sort of “military honor” emphasizing self-sacrifice, unquestioning duty, and steadfast integrity.
That said, I will focus on what I take to be the most widespread, historically important, and intuitive conception of honor, one commonly associated with athletics, aristocracy, and warrior castes. We can call this “competitive honor” (cf. Stewart 1994: 59-60) and an account of it the “competition ethic” account of honor (Demetriou forthcoming a, c):

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\text{Honor} = \text{the value that grounds a non-consequentialist normative system encouraging and regulating competitions for prestige.}
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I will refer to this normative system as “the honor ethos.” A bit of unpacking is necessary before discussing a handful of principles that help constitute this ethos.

First, if not already obvious, we should stress that an ethos is not an ethical theory. Roughly, an ethical theory is an attempt to characterize the limits of ethical action, and that is why any recalcitrant intuition or plausible moral principle that a theory cannot accommodate is a prima facie problem for that theory. This is not true of an ethos: an ethos is just a general, elaborate, and cohesive way of thinking and feeling about right and wrong, and adopting an ethos doesn’t at all commit one to saying that all moral behavior must be explained in terms of it.⁴

Second, it is convenient to say that the honor ethos is justified, or “grounded” upon, honor, supposing honor to be a genuine moral value. For an illustrative parallel, consider (ethical, not necessarily metaethical) contractarians. They disagree on much. But from Epicurus to Hobbes, Locke to Rousseau, and Rawls to Gautier, all contractarians think and feel a certain way about justice: namely, that it legitimizes a set of moral rules understood in terms of mutually-beneficial contracts, that it prescribes punishment for free-riders, that it encourages cooperative solutions to conflicts, and so forth. If it turns out that justice doesn’t justify contractarian principles—say, because justice isn’t a genuine value, or because justice legitimizes a much different moral system—

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³ Whether “military” honor and “competitive” honor can be subsumed by some overarching analysis of honor is perhaps the most important question for honor ethics at this stage in its development.

⁴ Very roughly, the sort of thing an “ethos” is in the sense I mean it here is what social-psychologist Jonathan Haidt would call a “moral foundation” (Haidt & Joseph 2007; Haidt 2012), stripped of Haidt’s antirealist commitments.
then acting according to the contractarian ethos is unjustified (buck-passers are welcomed to translate this language into terms they find amenable). *Mutatis mutandis* for the competitive principles constituting the “honor ethos” and the moral value, honor: if the principles of the honor ethos are obligatory, they are made so by the value, honor (or for buck-passers, the considerations associated with honor).

With that rough framework in place, we may now turn to the ethical content of the honor ethos, which I claim encourages and regulates the pursuit of prestige.

The status that comes with prestige mustn’t be confused with the status of a hierarchy. Let a “hierarchy” be a ranking such that higher-ranked parties have power over lower-ranked parties in virtue of that ranking (military rankings are hierarchical). A “prestige ranking,” on the other hand, is one in which the higher-ranked parties are merely considered better for some reason. For instance, a high-ranked tennis player does not have, or wish to have, any power over lower-ranked players.

Honor on this account is concerned merely with prestige, obliging us to distribute it in proportion to competitive excellence.

Unlike mere excellence, competitive excellence is excellence situated in a competitive context. Whereas an excellent runner runs quickly, an excellent competitive runner runs quickly *and* has the virtues of being a good competitor: when pitted against others, a merely excellent runner may panic or cheat, whereas the excellent competitive runner will do neither. Honor keeps tabs not only on excellence, then, but the qualities a person displays in the heat of competition. Because of this, it may be said that honor, like justice, is paradigmatically an ethic that regulates interpersonal behavior—a Robinson Crusoe could no more be honorable than be just. And exactly as how all just institutions and individuals will be similar insofar as they manifest truly cooperative principles, attitudes, and virtues, so too would all honorable competitions and people bear a certain likeness since certain sorts of principles, attitudes, and virtues are necessary for honorable competition.
For instance, since unfair competitions do not result in rankings that reflect competitive excellence, competitions must be fair. Moreover, since it would distort the ranking just as badly to accept a lower rank than one deserves as to accept a higher rank than one deserves, the honorable must constantly or at least periodically strive for higher status. Third, since higher status isn’t achieved by besting lower-ranked opponents, the honorable avoid challenging those weaker or somehow lower-ranked than themselves. The reciprocal principle here is that honorable people must welcome challenges to their own rank from up-and-comers. However, since time and resources are limited, and not all would-be challengers have a plausible claim to one’s rank, one can ignore much lower-ranked challengers.

We can codify these thoughts with the following principles:

**RANK AMBITION:** One must seek the highest status one deserves, so one must challenge those slightly higher-ranked if one thinks one can defeat them.

**RANK HUMILITY:** But one mustn’t challenge those much higher-ranked, and much higher-ranked parties cannot accept challenges from those much lower-ranked.

**NO BULLYING:** One mustn’t aggress upon/challenge those of lower rank.

**NO DUCKING:** One must not decline legitimate challenges to one’s rank.

**FAIR PLAY:** Competitions must be fair, and advantages of wealth, rank, superior networks, etc., must be eliminated.

Generally, a subscriber to this ethos will say that adherence to these rules makes one fully “honorable,” and violation of these rules makes one “dishonorable.” “Honor” in the sense of prestige is supposed to be apportioned in greater or lesser degree according to rank among the set of honorable people.⁵ (So, for instance, an academic that plagiarizes is dishonorable, whereas a merely

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⁵ Cf. Frank Stewart’s (1994) distinction between “horizontal” honor (the honor one has equally and fully among all peers) and “vertical” honor (the honor one has in proportion to one’s prestige) (54-62). The present account identifies horizontal honor with honorableness, and vertical honor with prestige. The competition ethic account differs from Stewart’s discussion in various ways, the most important being that it tries to account for many of Stewart’s observations in terms of what he would call “competitive honor” (59-60). Moreover, many honor cultures Stewart is interested in are not explained by this analysis. That is because this is an analysis of a particular type of moral norm regulating prestige or
low-ranking academic is honorable but lacks prestige.) In any event, these principles have been and still are taken to trump competing considerations in the most profound ways. Some examples noted above demonstrate that honor adherents take these principles so seriously that they regularly risk their lives, families, and even cultures in order to adhere to them. So these principles are best understood as categorical.

Whether these principles should be used to regulate war, social life among young inner-city men, or the management of cattle is one question. Whether these principles are reasonable in some circumstances is another. Regarding the latter question, it seems to me that the honor ethos is quite plausible when prestige is the central concern, and especially when prestige is supposed to track competitive excellence. Consider the distribution of prestige among violinists in an orchestra. It is reasonable to want the best violinists to have the highest status, for those violinists to want that status (RANK AMBITION), and for that ranking to be determined by fair competition (FAIR PLAY). It also seems eminently reasonable to have a system in place where violinists can challenge higher-ranking players when they think they deserve a higher spot (NO DUCKING), and yet for the system to require violinists to accept only those challenges coming from slightly lower-ranked violinists (RANK HUMILITY). And this is more-or-less the practice in many academic orchestras. Mutatis mutandis for a number of sports, especially those without an assigned schedule or tournament structure (such as professional boxing).

The competition ethic account of honor not only presents honor as an ethos that is sometimes reasonable, but also explains the data that Nisbett and Cohen could not. If “goods” (cattle, women, territory, etc.) are seen as status symbols, then praising raiding as honorable is predictable if honor prompts us to protect and promote status (RANK AMBITION). (Of course,
ecological, economic, and biological pressures may explain why people come to see something as a trophy or status symbol, but that is consistent with actors’ being motivated by honor as such.) This account also explains why honor should be thought to demand “fair fights” between adversaries and a receptive attitude toward attacks to one’s status: as long as the enemy/opponent is seen as a competitor for status, honor’s demand that we not distort the ranking requires us to fight fair, to avoid aggressing on those who are weaker, and to accept reasonable challenges to our rank. Finally, the competition ethic account explains why honor could thrive in peaceful and orderly circumstances where “goods” are rarely stolen (such as in academia): the academy is suffused with honor-talk because it is an honor culture. Academics eagerly compete for prestige, and this prestige is won on the basis of a conflict-model of research that sees the theories of high-ranked academics constantly challenged by up-and-comers who covet higher status (RANK AMBITION). Professors encourage their students to challenge their views and the reigning orthodoxy (NO DUCKING). Academics support various procedures, such as blind review, to eliminate old-boy networks and various sorts of discrimination (FAIR PLAY). Scholars are praised for carefully calibrating the tone and content of their replies, reviews, and Q&A’s in ways that account for whether the target is an undergraduate, graduate student, or professor of higher or lower prestige or experience (NO BULLYING). So although honor is perfectly compatible with extraordinary violence if the relevant competition happens to be a violent one (as primitive male ranking systems frequently are), it is equally at home in the peaceful confines of the university.

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6 There are exceptions to the NO BULLYING rule. Since honor’s principles regulate competition for prestige, it doesn’t regulate non-competitive relations, and thus doesn’t prohibit asymmetrical conflict that is conceived of as being non-competitive. That means an honor adherent may spank her child or beat his wife and see that as being consistent with honor (of course, some other moral constraint may prohibit such acts; and if there is a fact of the matter about who our competitors for status are, even honor may prohibit such acts). This isn’t a defect with honor in my view, since only if honor is compatible with some asymmetrical force can honor be compatible with state punishment, which exerts asymmetrical force upon offenders when apprehending and punishing them. We wouldn’t want police or the courts to treat offenders as honorable equals!
5. Honor and antirealism

If the competition ethic account of honor is plausible, Doris and Plakias’ point is strengthened in some respects. Honor-motivated (sub)cultures really are motivated by radically different norms than the those favored in our classroom teaching. Explaining how requires painting in broad strokes, but the differences are stark enough to justify some sweeping claims.

5.1 How honor is different

First, honor grounds an ethos that places prestige in the role of “the good,” as opposed to, say, welfare, health, or wealth. In fact, people who prefer such goods over prestige are usually held in contempt by the honorable. As Shakespeare’s Henry V famously put it in his St. Crispin’s Day speech,

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,  
Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;  
It yearns me not if men my garments wear;  
Such outward things dwell not in my desires.  
But if it be a sin to covet honour,  
I am the most offending soul alive.

From this point of view, the contemporary ethicist’s preoccupation with property and the alleviation of suffering is ignoble, and the debates we see as being so central about how to approach wealth distribution and welfare are all stained with the same bourgeoisie brush.

Second, honor contrasts with typical contemporary philosophical approaches on how properly to respond to “the good.” Utilitarians call for promoting the good in an agent-neutral way. Egoists and care ethicists argue for promoting the good in an agent-relative way. Virtue ethicists see morality as being about living well. Honor cannot be a species of any of these views so-understood. Since prestige is a zero-sum good, agent-neutral maximization of it is impossible. Although the honor ethos is somewhat self-regarding insofar as it calls for one to compete at the highest level possible, honor unlike egoism places stringent non-consequentialist constraints on how one goes
about pursuing this good. That honor’s competition-based moral structure is utterly foreign to care ethics we may take as read. And since honor on the present view justifies a code-like, principle-based conception of right action, it thus resembles so-called “modern” moral approaches and not virtue-ethical ones.

Turning to the mainstream deontological moral approaches that lie closer to the heart of the liberal tradition, we observe that they typically call for “respecting” something: humanity, or autonomy, or rights, and this translates into some sort of moral requirement to treat a certain group (humans, maybe animals) decently—at least if they are innocent—and to live cooperatively and harmoniously with others in that favored group whenever possible. Although the differences between Western deontological theories can seem monumental, they are tempests in teacups when we consider the honor-based way of showing “respect”: as we have seen, on honor, “respect” is just as likely to result in aggression as what we usually call “good treatment,” challenge is a welcomed way of showing one’s respect, and morality is centrally about not eliminating conflict but shaping or, if need be, generating it. One might venture a helpful parallel: just as the ability or at least willingness to cooperate is key marker of a moral agent deserving our respect according to the liberal tradition, on honor the precondition of respect is the ability or at least willingness to compete.

Third, honor privileges unique moral affects. Scholars of honor usually are quick to note that the main self- and other-condemning affects associated with negative honor-appraisals are shame and contempt. Appiah goes so far as to understand shame and contempt in terms of honor:

Shame is the feeling appropriate to one’s own dishonorable behavior. (Because of this connection between honor and shame, one way of speaking of those who are especially dishonorable is to say that they are shameless.)

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7 Peristiany’s (1966) is entitled *Honour and Shame*, and he discusses in its introduction how shame and honor in some languages are synonymous, since to have (a sense of) shame is considered constitutive of being an honor-minded person (p. 41ff; see also in this regard Graham 1998, p. 203). Jones 2000 (chapter 2) and Welsh 2008 (p. 6) each argue that shame is the main self-condemning affect of honor. David Gilmore finds that honor and shame are reciprocal moral values representing primordial integration of individual to ‘group.’ They reflect, respectively, the conferral of public esteem upon the person and the sensitive to public opinion upon which the former depends (Gilmore 1987, p. 40).
from others if you breach the code is, first to cease to respect you and, then, actively
to treat you with disrespect. The feeling we have for those who have done what is
shameful is contempt; and I shall have occasion in this book to make use of the
slightly old-fashioned verb “contemn,” which means both to regard and to treat
contemptuously, just as the verb “honor” means both to regard and to treat with
respect. (2010: 16-17)

Even noteworthy discussions of moral emotions having nothing to do with honor acknowledge that
shame and contempt contrast with the paradigmatically liberal moral emotions of guilt and anger.
For instance, Allan Gibbard suggested that anger’s adaptive purpose is to punish the guilty, and
guilt’s adaptive purpose is to “placate [the anger] in others through apology, restitution, and open
contrition.” In contrast, the contempt-shame pairing’s adaptive purpose is to spur people to develop
their powers or withdraw from the group (1990: 138-139). The competition ethic account of honor
explains why shame and contempt would prompt such behavior: whereas our ancestors often needed
to impose force upon uncooperative parties to effect material restitution or to protect themselves,
no force is necessary to restore the correct prestige distribution when it is discovered that someone
distorted it. No matter how egregious the dishonorable act, all it takes is erasing some wins from the
record books, or stripping the offending party of his insignia, etc., to return prestige to its rightful
place. Thus, materially harming a dishonorable person is less appropriate than simply ignoring him
or refusing to associate with him. Contempt prepares us to give, and shame to accept, just this sort
of punishment.8

5.2 How Doris and Plakias’ case is thus strengthened

So honor contrasts most remarkably with the moral perspectives we advance and teach. But mere
disagreement between two groups isn’t enough to ground a case for antirealism: intractable
disagreement is a necessary condition for any interesting antirealist argument from moral

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8 Of course, the same act may be unjust and dishonorable, and so both harming and shaming punishments might be
appropriate. Nonetheless, I am not suggesting that honor should be a concern of the law, however, or that legal shaming
punishments are desirable (cf. Nussbaum 2004).
differences. And it seems to me that, given the account of honor offered here, we have more evidence for intractable disagreement than what Doris and Plakias provide.

First, the disagreement between liberals and honor adherents isn’t one having merely to do with permissible violence:

We are therefore inclined to think that Nisbett and colleagues’ work represents one potent counterexample to the convergence conjecture; the evidence suggests that the North/South differences in attitudes toward violence and honor might well persist in ideal conditions. (2008: 321)

If what has been argued in §5.1 holds, the differences between liberal and honor norms are both wider and deeper than a disagreement over violence: wider, because honor has traditionally been seen as a moral value of central importance regulating all sorts of activities which its advocates thought of as properly competitive (sport, war, hunting, mate selection, career choice, the international order, etc.); deeper, because honor is based on basic moral attitudes completely at odds with liberal ones.

The present account helps Doris and Plakias’ case for fundamental moral disagreement in other ways, too. Brian Leiter, for instance, wonders whether Southerners mightn’t be more forgiving of violence in the name of honor than permissive of it (Leiter 2008: 334-335; cf. Fraser & Hauser 2010: 546-551). On the competition ethic account, given certain conventions, honor not only permits, but may demand, violence for slights (as practices surrounding dueling demonstrate). Paul Bloomfield notes that Doris and Plakias rest their case on disagreements between Southerners and Northerners on a rather particular matter—violent responses to insult—that mightn’t preclude agreement at the level of principles (2008: 341). But on the present account, the differences between liberals and honor adherents are quite dramatic even at the level of basic principles. Bloomfield also wonders if the violence we see among pastoralists isn’t compatible with liberal principles when applied in lawless, tough circumstances (2008: 343). But as I have shown, raiding in those places is also honorable sport. It is difficult to imagine how liberal values could endorse raiding in that spirit,
even in tough circumstances; and even if they did, why pastoralists refer to this aggression as “honorable” as opposed to merely “necessary” or “regrettable” or even “just”—the usual terms liberals use for permissible violence—would remain a mystery.

Andrew Sneddon suggests that moral experts might repudiate honor if they knew of its supposed roots in pastoral culture (2009: 451). I agree that if the Nisbett-Cohen account of honor were correct, moral experts might well uniformly repudiate the honor ethos, not only because of its ontogeny but also for its content. But honor allows for infinitely more sophisticated manifestations of honor, some instances of which, despite being on the periphery of the Anglophone ethical curriculum, continue to attract adherents. One might point to Nietzsche’s praise of aristocratic morality as one example (Nietzsche 1966), or the “sporting” ethic and its emphasis on “fair play” that is so characteristic of British upper-class morality up to WWI (Loland 2002), or even (in places) the “way of the peaceful warrior” of the Shambhala tradition (Trungpa 1988). But even these are rudimentary forms of a truly sophisticated and compelling theory of honor’s demands. Truth be told, we cannot imagine what a sophisticated theory of honor’s demands would look like at this point. A thousand years ago, justice was held (even by the wise) to demand the most horrible punishments imaginable, both in this world and the next, for actions now seen as minor offenses or even clearly permissible. If philosophers devoted a few centuries to understanding honor, who is to say that this process wouldn’t similarly leave us with a normative system an ideally-situated moral mind would embrace?

That process is already underway. The number of philosophers with some sympathy for honor has rapidly increased in the past decade (Appiah 2010; French 2002; French 2003; Krause 2002; Rhodes 2012; Sessions 2012). None of them conceives of honor as the competition ethic, and not all consider honor to be a “moral” or “ethical” value, but each calls for its revival to some extent. If the above account is on the right track, honor is a moral value and deserves rehabilitation.
Properly applied, the honor ethos presents us with an intuitive account of at least one aspect of morality’s limits: as I have suggested, honor’s principles regulate our pursuit of prestige in a morally satisfactory way. How pervasive competitions for prestige are or should be are important questions I cannot address here. But since some matters of great moment, such as international standing (Lebow 2010; O’Neill 2001; Robinson 2006), political recognition (Krause 2002), and income disparity (Bouwman 2012; Frank 1984) have much to do with prestige competitions, honor theory’s contribution to ethical and political philosophy may be profound indeed. In any event, since these principles are implicitly accepted (even in the West) in the domains of athletics and the higher reaches of academia, it would seem that a commitment to honor, however tacit, isn’t at all idiosyncratic. So although moral experts might well reject honor on the Nisbett-Cohen account of it, it is nonetheless true that an honor tradition in ethics, even one that is importantly at odds with the mainstream ethical approaches taught today, is quite conceivable.

5.3 Contra Doris and Plakias

But wait—something strange has happened. Defenders of fundamental moral disagreement must make plausible the claim that moral disagreement would persist in ideal circumstances. The crazier a practice, principle, or ethos appears to ethicists (and especially realist interlocutors), the less likely they are to accept that people in ideal circumstances would endorse it. So, in common cause with Doris and Plakias in this regard at least, I have tried to show that honor norms aren’t easily dismissed by appeal to irrationality, factual ignorance, or some formal mistake in moral reasoning. To the contrary, the honor ethos is coherent, intuitive, and plausible in certain contexts. And we have seen that it is making a bit of a comeback after a hundred years of disfavor, even among

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9 Or at least prestige based on competitive excellence. The question of whether prestige should attach to non-competitive excellence, or even non-excellences, is left as an open question here. For all I have said, arguments may be constructed to suggest that we should esteem only competitive excellence. If that is the case, honor norms all matters of prestige.
philosophers. But this is to make the case for fundamental disagreement too well: convergence seems to be the order of the day.

After all, neither I nor any of the contemporary honor theorists cited above holds that honor is the only, or even the central, moral value (as liberals sometimes say of justice (Rawls 1971: 4)). Every contemporary honor theorist I know of has deep commitments to liberal values. And what about those from non-liberal cultures of honor—are they warming up to liberal values? If Southern partisans of honor are our guide, then obviously the answer is yes, for they function fairly well in a liberal society such as ours, and are coming to repudiate even their characteristic “culture of honor” beliefs (Nisbett and Cohen 1996: 92). Many thousands of immigrants from the most backward pastoralist societies pour into Europe and North America every year and, careful as we are not to make light of the difficulty that attends such a transition, surely most of them come quickly to embrace many liberal values. I take the liberalization of honor cultures on the one hand, and the revival of honor-mindedness among philosophers on the other, as substantial empirical evidence suggesting that, in ideal circumstances, a robust and sophisticated conception of honor and liberal values (justice preeminent among them) would probably be endorsed as part of a pluralistic picture. Admittedly, no one can confidently say what we would endorse in ideal circumstances, and we should be even less sure about what ideal people would endorse in ideal circumstances. But it seems to me that the empirical case for optimism about convergence, at least in the case of honor and liberalism, is a great deal stronger than the empirical case for pessimism about it.

Anthropological and psychological research is working to make ethicists more sensitive to the moral values discouraged in our tradition. Ethicists in turn may successfully “rehabilitate” these ignored values by distilling out their basic principles and arguing for their moral worth in certain contexts. So pluralism about such radically different moral systems is a live possibility that undermines the antirealist inference based on radical moral disagreement. Obviously, the pluralism
we are imagining would be much richer than Ross'. Here we have, not diminutive duties of “gratitude” and “self-improvement” and so forth, which seem quite narrow in their relevance and arbitrary in their selection, but rather a view urging the moral correctness of multiple and mutually irreducible comprehensive ethical outlooks, each suited to its own dimension of social life. Why should we accept obligations of justice? Because people do, need to, and wish to cooperate, and the principles of justice tell us how to do so correctly and how to maintain institutions governing such cooperation. Why should we accept obligations of honor? Because people do, need to, and wish to compete for prestige, and honor tells us how to do so correctly and how to maintain institutions governing such competitions.

The realist pluralist may well embrace more than simply the norms of justice and honor. In his important response to Doris and Plakias, Sneddon (2009) notes that it has been argued by cultural and social psychologists that there is an ethos of authority, which, based upon a hierarchical command structure, privileges obedience, leadership, and deference. Another is based on a sort of moral or spiritual purity, and structures obligation around avoiding moral taint and expelling the morally “corrupt” or “disgusting” (Haidt 2012, Haidt and Joseph 2007, Rozin et al. 1999, Shweder et al. 1997). Even supposing these moral approaches are as radically different from each other (and liberalism) as the emerging research suggests they are, Sneddon’s thought is that this fact would be compatible with pluralistic realism: realists will say we should expect that some cultures will favor some but not others of these fundamentally different moral values of authority, purity, etc., and that, partly because of this, individuals and even moral “experts” from these cultures are likely to be sensitive to some of these values and not others.

For our purposes, perhaps the most striking example of a rapprochement between liberal and non-liberal moral values comes from Alexandra Plakias herself, who, in a forthcoming paper, convincingly defends the purity ethos against some common criticisms of it. She concludes by
suggesting that, as an ethos portraying good and evil in terms of negative and positive contagion, the purity ethos is well-suited for discussing and regulating morally significant “social contagions” such as racism, which have been found by researchers to spread like communicable diseases (Plakias forthcoming). Plakias is more interested in dismantling criticisms of the purity ethos than positively defending it. But pluralist realists might follow Plakias’ lead on purity and lobby for a sort of pluralism stating that, for matters of social contagion, we should take up a purity-ethical stance, and that for matters of (say) resource distribution, we should adopt a more typically liberal one (Demetriou forthcoming b). But if that’s plausible, why not suppose that, when it comes to competition for status, we should be governed—as we often already are—by the norms of honor?

Conclusion

I have argued that the competition ethic account of the honor ethos both strengthens and weakens Doris and Plakias’ argument from disagreement for antirealism. We can clarify that claim by expanding Doris and Plakias’ original argument into the following:

1. If two cultures subscribe to radically different norms (i.e., norms whose differences are not attributable to errors about the non-moral facts, or irrationality, or misunderstanding of the moral concept), then there is fundamental moral disagreement.
2. Some cultures subscribe to radically different norms.
3. So there is fundamental moral disagreement.
4. Moral realism is incompatible with fundamental moral disagreement.
5. So moral realism is false.

In §5.2, I argued, on the basis of the competition ethic account of the honor ethos summarized in §4, that that premise (2) of the above argument is true, and for better reasons than those the Nisbett-Cohen account of honor provides. So in that respect the competition ethic account of honor helps Doris and Plakias’ case. Nonetheless, Sneddon’s point about pluralism, combined with various facts about honor’s (and purity-ethics’?) intuitiveness and growing appeal, suggests that premise (1) is false. The lesson is that we must distinguish between radically different norms on the one hand, and fundamental moral disagreement on the other. Honor, justice, purity, etc., justify radically
different normative systems. They offer different accounts of the good and the right, require different sorts of responses to offenders, and highlight different sorts emotions as importantly ethical. So an honor adherent and a justice adherent as such will never converge (cf. Doris and Plakias 2008: 325). But what of it? Real people are not adherents “as such” of any value; the honor or justice adherent “as such,” like the “Northern liberal” or “pastoralist,” is a useful construct. You and I may disagree today because we parochially subscribe to fundamentally different values. But that doesn’t mean we ipso facto fundamentally disagree, because in ideal circumstances—indeed, in far less than ideal circumstances—one of us may come around to the other’s way of thought, or we both may adopt a third position. Since we see signs of convergence between friends of honor and liberalism, and even between liberalism and purity (as in the case of Plakias herself), if anything the evidence suggests that thoughtful people might well converge in ideal circumstances on a sort of moral pluralism.

References

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