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What Drives Social Progress? An Argument for Honor

By DWIGHT GARNER

THE HONOR CODE

How Moral Revolutions Happen

By Kwame Anthony Appiah

264 pages. W. W. Norton & Company. \$25.95.

What are the rewards, on this earth, of a well-lived life? John Adams pared the answer down to six words: “the esteem and admiration of others.”

For Adams, this was an animal and not an intellectual need. “The desire of the esteem of others is as real a want of nature as hunger; and the neglect and contempt of the world as severe a pain as the gout or stone.”

Adams was writing about individuals, not nations. But as [Kwame Anthony Appiah](#) argues in his plaintive and elegant new book, “The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen,” countries yearn for the respect of their peers as well, and that yearning can be leveraged. When it comes to ending abhorrent practices — whether [foot binding](#) a century ago or torture today — appealing to a nation’s sense of honor is as vital as appealing to its sense of morality, religion or reason.

Mr. Appiah is a professor of philosophy at [Princeton University](#) and the author of many books, including “[Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers](#)” (2006). The word cosmopolitan applies to Mr. Appiah as fully as to any serious thinker alive. Raised by elite parents in Ghana and educated in England, he toggles easily between vastly different cultural viewpoints. He’s a walking moral interpreter, a suave if sometimes smug ambassador of ideas.

The word honor in 2010 — as Mr. Appiah is aware — is contested territory, and a bit battered around the edges. [Glenn Beck](#), the news commentator who seems to have “contents under pressure” tattooed on his forehead, gave his recent religious rally in Washington a

cheeky title: “Restoring Honor.” Too many minivans advertise, somewhat touchingly, that “My Child Is an Honor Student.” The word honor is often linked, as morality is not, with violence. Consider the practice of honor killings.

Mr. Appiah is out to reclaim the word honor, in philosophical terms, at least, and to attach it to another contested word: revolution. He’s interested in how our best instincts can be churning engines for broad and progressive social change.

To this territory he is a calm and learned guide. If “The Honor Code” occasionally has the whiff of the senior seminar about it — Mr. Appiah tells us what he is going to say, then says it, and then tells us what he has just said — the author also seeks and often achieves a Malcolm Gladwell-like balance between argument and storytelling. He stirs in spoonfuls of narrative honey to help his medicinal tea go down.

It’s impossible to look back at many aspects of recent human history, Mr. Appiah observes, and not ask: “What were we thinking? How did we do *that* for all those years?” His book is a close examination of three deplorable practices (dueling, foot binding and the Atlantic slave trade) and how each came to a decisive end. The fourth practice he considers, honor killing, is with us still.

Running mostly silently beneath all of Mr. Appiah’s arguments is an awareness of America’s tarnished honor in the wake of revelations about the government-sanctioned use of torture in the post-9/11 era. In speaking about this practice Mr. Appiah reaches back to a line from the Declaration of Independence, about how the United States must have “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.” Among Mr. Appiah’s insights is that excellent arguments are not enough to stop a terrible cultural practice.

“Whatever happened when these immoral practices ceased, it wasn’t, so it seemed to me, that people were bowled over by new moral arguments,” he writes. “Dueling was always murderous and irrational; foot binding was always painfully crippling; slavery was always an assault on the humanity of the slave.” What was needed in each of those cases, he suggests, was the awakening of a nation’s sense of honor, an awakening that caused people actually to act. Mr. Appiah writes well about how shame and ridicule, often delivered through a free press, have consistently been sharp moral motivators. He writes so acutely about ridicule, in fact, that you wish his own book weren’t almost completely devoid of wit.

Mr. Appiah brings, to the tidy feast that is his book, a carving knife sharp enough to slice tangled issues of social class thinly. He notes that dueling and foot binding were elite

practices. When they began to spread to the lower classes — quelle horreur! — they quickly lost their cachet. Honor is more important than money as a moral motivator, he points out. We don't give our brave soldiers money. We give them medals.

Mr. Appiah is absurdly well read, and he bounces easily among the ideas of past and present philosophers, pausing now and again to praise or quibble with another's idea. "The Honor Code," being pop philosophy, also has some tricks up its sleeve. At the book's end, prizes are handed out to some especially honorable, if little known, citizens of the world. Mr. Appiah admires those who vigorously act on their morals, on their considered sense of honor. His book's fundamental question is formulated in sentences he quotes from [J. M. Coetzee's](#) recent novel "[Diary of a Bad Year.](#)"

If we understand that our government has sanctioned torture, Mr. Coetzee writes in that book, "then the issue for individual Americans becomes a moral one: how, in the face of this shame to which I am subjected, do I behave? How do I save my honor?"