Book Review: Honor For Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation, And Defense

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the norms of moral obligation exist in virtue of God’s commands—and this
accountability defense of it. If the really distinctive feature of the obligatory
is the accountability relationship, why must God be cast as the commander
of moral norms, rather than as simply their enforcer, or guarantor?

This is a very good book with which to think through systematically
the case for a divine command account of moral obligation. It gathers in
the most powerful arguments for the divine command account, develops
them further, and generously and fairly deploys them against a range
of argumentative opponents. As Evans predicts (vi), I was not moved
from my antivoluntarism by these arguments. But it did become clearer
to me where there was room for divine command theorists to develop
their view in a way that would place real pressure on nonvoluntarist
accounts.6

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Honor For Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation and Defense, by William
Lad Sessions. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 224 pages. $110.00
cloth.

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In the preface to William Lad Sessions’s monograph Honor For Us, he ex-
plains that he is not joining a philosophical conversation, but rather trying
to start one. Contemporary philosophers haven’t had much to say about
honor, except in passing. (Perhaps the most notable exception is Anthony
Appiah’s The Honor Code, which appeared shortly after Sessions’s book.)
Sessions’s main thesis is that the concept of personal honor, though much
maligned—and admittedly dangerous—might just have something im-
portant to offer us, both in helping us to understand our social reality,
and in providing us with an inspiring ideal. Sessions’s book is engag-
ingly written, philosophically interesting, and provocative—and in these
ways, it does serve as an excellent conversation starter. In other ways,
however, it could have been more effective at drawing readers into the
conversation and convincing them that personal honor might be valuable
“for us.”

Like most contemporary philosophers, I hadn’t thought much about
the concept of honor before reading Sessions’s book. Indeed, I initially
felt a bit disoriented and was well into the book before I felt I had a grip
on what, exactly, Sessions was interested in initiating a discussion about.
Insofar as I am accustomed to thinking in terms of honor, I usually have
in mind either (i) the activity of honoring (i.e., honoring a vow, promise, friend, or family member, etc.), or (ii) something like the moral virtue of integrity. Sessions tries, in Part I of the book, to help us home in on his intended subject matter, which is neither the activity of honoring nor the virtue of integrity, though it is connected in various ways to these things. It wasn’t until chapter 3 that Sessions introduced the concept of personal honor, which turns out to be the main subject of the book. Those of us on the sidelines (or out of the park altogether) would have been brought more effectively into the conversation had Sessions initiated the investigation with a few concrete and relatively developed examples of the central phenomenon instead of marching us through a number of related, but peripheral, phenomena.

Sessions acknowledges that contemporary philosophers (and academics more generally) are going to have a hard time recognizing personal honor and seeing how it applies not only to distant peoples and times but also to here and now. Rather late in the book he discusses this conceptual “blindness” and offers a hypothesis to explain it:

There is reason to suspect that contemporary academics, like the rest of their society are in the grips of a myth so strong that it clouds or even precludes recognition of certain kinds of social facts and values. The myth I have in mind is individualism. (120)

Our habit of thinking of ourselves primarily as autonomous, metaphysically independent individuals might, Sessions conjectures, make it hard to see how we have formed ourselves into a dense interconnected web of honor groups, each with its own distinctive code of honor. This section of Sessions’s book is interesting, provocative, and important—indeed, important enough that Sessions should have put this material right at the front of the book. If one hopes to start a philosophical discussion on a certain topic, but suspects that one’s audience is largely blind to the relevant range of phenomena, one has some important preparatory work to do. The blindness of one’s audience surely needs to be addressed first (and at least partially cured), before the conversation can sensibly proceed. If Sessions’s diagnosis of the situation is right—if readers like me are confused and disoriented because of some conceptual blindness brought about by unreflectively subscribing to a distorting myth—it seems that the minimally charitable thing to do is to offer us some help up front, rather than plunging ahead as if we weren’t blind.

Indeed, I found that Part I of the book, which was devoted to laying conceptual foundations, positively amplified my sense of disorientation and confusion, rather than clarifying the terrain. Sessions identifies six concepts of honor, five of them peripheral to the one that really interests him (i.e., personal honor). He suggests that these six concepts are connected through various relations of family resemblance. While there is much of philosophical interest in this section of the book, the reader can’t help but feel the terrain could be mapped in a more elegant and
illuminating way. For example, Sessions distinguishes *conferred honor* from *recognition honor*. *Conferred honor* is attributed to a subject on the basis of some purported excellence; but this basis needn't actually exist and needn't be excellent. *Recognition honor*, on the other hand, is “public esteem of . . . excellences . . . that merit or deserve such esteem” (14). According to Sessions, these two concepts of honor are distinct. *Conferred honor* is determined by (or “controlled by”) the honorer, whereas *recognition honor* is determined by the excellences of the honoree. What is in common between them is that, in both cases, the existence of the honor depends on the activity of an honorer (with recognition honor, this activity is owed, whereas with conferred honor, it is a “gift”). Both of these are distinguished from *positional honor*, which involves a type of honor one has in virtue of having a high social position (status) or having accomplished some impressive achievement. This type of honor, Sessions says, does not require the activity of an honorer (it needn’t be attributed or recognized in order to exist).

All of this strikes me as rather like saying that there are three concepts of red-headedness: First, there is the kind that is attributed to a person on the basis of the attributor’s (perhaps very confused) assessment of the subject’s hair as being red; second, there is the kind that is recognized because it is there demanding to be recognized; and third, there is a kind that can be there whether or not anyone recognizes it or attributes it. I think it should be pretty obvious that this would be a confused way of mapping the conceptual terrain surrounding red-headedness. The first kind of red-headedness isn’t in fact a kind of red-headedness at all; merely calling someone red-headed doesn’t make them red-headed in any sense. Furthermore, we don’t want to distinguish a concept of red-headedness where it expresses a property that is rightly recognized to be present from another concept where it expresses a property that is there, but may or may not in fact be recognized. Properties can, in general, be recognized because they’re there, or attributed when absent. There is no need to posit conceptual ambiguity to understand or explain this. And just as we would be confused to distinguish between conferred red-headedness, recognition red-headedness and positional red-headheadness, we would be confused to distinguish between conferred, recognition, and positional honor. Most importantly, calling someone honorable (or attempting to highlight their purported honor in some other way) doesn’t make it the case that they have honor in any sense. At best they have *been honored*.

And this last bit points to a partial source for the conceptual murkiness of Part I of *Honor For Us*. Sessions fails to properly distinguish between *honoring* (an activity), *honor* (a property), and *honors* (objects, broadly construed). Here’s a rough first shot that seems to be on the right track: Honor is worthiness to be held up; honoring is holding up; and honors are more-or-less tangible tokens of our attempts at holding up. If one is careful to keep in mind the distinction between the activity, the property,
and the tokens, the temptation to posit many different concepts of honor dissipates. The phenomena that Sessions tries to capture with conferred honor are just an amalgam of honoring (the activity) and honors (the tokens—which often play a part in the activity of honoring); recognition honor is an amalgam of honor (the property) and honoring (the activity); and positional honor appears to simply be fool’s honor—something that many people happen to mistake for honor-worthiness.

Sessions’s remaining two peripheral concepts of honor also look like they are better captured in our roughly-cast framework. First there is what he calls commitment honor, which involves upholding promises, agreements, or principles. This strikes me as involving not a different concept of honor, but rather a different object of honoring. Second, there is what Sessions calls trust honor, which is a kind of trust that some communities jointly (as communities) place in their members. But isn’t this simply one way for members of a community to honor each other, not, as Sessions claims, a “conceptually distinct form of honor” (22)?

Sessions’s sixth concept of honor—what he refers to as the “vital valuational center of honor” (35)—is personal honor. In the beginning of chapter 4, he gives the following characterization: “[having personal honor] means someone possesses an effective sense of honor, understands and is committed to the honor code of some appropriately sized honor group, and openly trusts the members of the group, as they trust him, to act accordingly” (37). The honor code itself is a “mixed bag of rules, principles and ideals guiding conduct, affecting motivation, and luring appetite” (27). Having personal honor, Sessions tells us, is so intimately bound up with a person’s sense of their own identity that “the primary commitment of a personally honorable person, as such, must always be to the honor group and its code, whatever that code may be” (38, emphasis in the original). Again, does this really involve a distinct concept of honor, rather than simply a particular conception of what makes a person honorable? It seems not. According to a particular honor group, it is group membership together with adherence to the group’s honor code that makes one worthy of honoring. Putting things as Session does obscures the very real possibility that the group might simply be wrong about that.

Sessions does, to his credit, see that personal honor—as he understands it—at least appears to be on a “collision course with morality” (37). But he thinks that this is not necessarily so. An honor code, he suggests, can be a moral honor code—that is, it can either (i) contain or (ii) be constrained by morality. Concerning the first option, Sessions notes that the honor code could be such that it “contains at least some moral prescriptions and these dominate non-moral ones.” Sessions says that this will have the effect of “ensuring that the morally honorable person, as such, cannot perform an immoral act in the name of honor” (39). But this is not so, for if the honor code only contains some moral prescriptions (not all of them), it could also contain immoral prescriptions that offend not against the moral prescriptions that the honor code contains, but rather against others which it
If an honor code is going to be such as to be necessarily in harmony with morality, it will need to contain all moral prescriptions, not just some of them.

But suppose that an honor code does indeed contain every moral prescription or limits itself in a way that is deferential to morality (as in Sessions’s second way of characterizing a moral honor code). This still isn’t going to be enough to guarantee that honor—as Sessions conceives of it—will not collide with morality. At least on many views, morality is not just a matter of acting in accordance with moral prescriptions; it’s a matter of following moral prescriptions, which involves acting not only in the right way, but also for the right reasons. Personal honor, as Sessions conceives of it, seems to me to leave no room for this. Remember that “the primary commitment of a personally honorable person, as such, must always be to the honor group and its code, whatever that code may be.” So even when the personally honorable person acts in accordance with a moral precept, it’s not because it’s the right thing to do, it’s because she happens to be committed to a certain group of people and a code of honor that happens to include (or defer to) the precept. At least on a broadly Kantian way of looking at morality, the motivational structure here is all wrong.

This strikes me as the most serious problem for Sessions’s suggestion that personal honor might be valuable and inspirational for us. When he discusses what honor has to offer us, he notes that it can provide a very concrete and particular motivation for acting as morality demands. He says:

As a set of universally binding and overriding principles, morality is rather abstract and general, lacking in motive power. What moral honor adds to morality are social embeddedness, concrete power of motivation, possibly a sense of individual identity, and even a meaningful life. (40)

This is a provocative and controversial set of claims. One might well want to complain that Sessions is mischaracterizing morality here. But even if he’s not, adding an extra-moral motivator (e.g., “living up to others’ expectations” [40]) for moral action is worrisome. Adding the extra-moral motivator arguably drains the moral worth out of the relevant actions by replacing the correct motivation (which Sessions finds too abstract) with one that’s morally worthless (at best!).

As I noted at the outset, Sessions’s main thesis has two parts: the concept of personal honor (i) helps us to understand our social reality, and (ii) might provide us with an inspiring ideal. Above, I’ve been complaining mostly about the second part of this thesis. I think Sessions’s case for the first part is actually much more compelling and interesting (though I’m not yet fully convinced). Part II of Honor for Us casts warriors, sportsmen, patriots, academics, and professionals as honor groups. It is indeed fascinating to look at these groups through this lens. Some of the groups (e.g., warriors) seem to exhibit the characteristics of honor groups more than
others (e.g., academics). This part of Sessions’s book gives us much food for thought, especially in light of what I see as his failure to establish part (ii) of his main thesis. For, if personal honor is indeed zealously sought after in these groups, this is potentially quite worrisome from the standpoint of morality.