**Review of THE HONOR CODE: How Moral Revolutions Happen**

By Kwame Anthony Appiah 264 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. $25.95

In the Eyes of Others **By JONATHAN HAIDT Published: October 22, 2010**



Kwame Anthony Appiah ***Photo by Greg Martin***

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Western societies got weird in the 19th century. I mean that not as an insult but as an acronym. The cultural psychologists Joe Henrich, Steve Heine and Ara Norenzayan recently showed that many psychological processes work differently in people raised in Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies. The normal, or default, mode of human cognition, for example, is holistic, given to seeing relationships among elements, but people in WEIRD societies think more analytically. They see a world full of discrete objects, like balls on a billiard table, whose properties are best analyzed individually.

The WEIRDing process has been particularly visible in moral philosophy. In his 2008 book “Experiments in Ethics,” the Princeton philosopher [Kwame Anthony Appiah](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/a/kwame_anthony_appiah/index.html?inline=nyt-per) described the loss of relevance that philosophers inflicted on themselves, beginning in the late 19th century, when they abandoned philosophy’s ancient interest in messy human nature and retreated into the conceptual analysis of moral terms.

Appiah is one of the most relevant philosophers today. He writes about ethics in diverse modern societies, where it is often a challenge to find solid ground, let alone common ground. His work reveals the heart and sensitivity of a novelist — or perhaps a mystery writer, given that he’s written three whodunits — and he develops ideas the way a writer develops characters. He shows them in action, in relationships, in context and in flux. He helps us think holistically before turning analytic.

In “The Honor Code,” we accompany Detective Appiah as he tries to figure out who killed three morally repugnant practices: dueling among British gentlemen, foot-binding among the Chinese elite and slavery in the British Empire. In each case he shows how notions of honor sustained the practice for centuries, and how (spoiler alert) it was honor that later killed the practice in just a few decades, making these cases the “moral revolutions” referred to in his subtitle. Appiah also presents a fourth case: honor killings in present-day Pakistan, in which women and girls who are thought to have had sex outside of marriage, even in cases of rape, are murdered by male relatives to preserve the family’s “honor.” In this case the revolution has not yet happened, but Appiah draws on the other three cases to suggest how this horrific practice might someday meet its end.

Take the practice of foot-binding. Nobody knows precisely why aristocratic Chinese parents began, more than 800 years ago, to change the shape of their daughters’ feet. But once tiny, pointed feet became a difficult-to-attain ideal of feminine beauty, an obstacle to infidelity and a mark of elevated social status, there was no way for parents in the upper social strata to abandon the practice without losing honor — and reducing their daughters’ marriage prospects. Honor overpowered compassion: silk straps were used to pull up the middle third of the foot, like an inchworm, gradually bringing the ball of the foot and the heel together over many years. Even a poet who found such feet erotic wrote, “*Can’t bear to hear* — the cries of a young girl as her feet are bound for the first time.”

As Christian missionaries spread throughout China in the late 19th century, they were appalled by the practice and formed societies opposed to foot-binding. Allied with members of the Chinese literati, they made arguments that appealed to China’s national interest, like the need for strong and healthy women to bear strong and healthy children. Yet these arguments had no effect on the practice until members of the elite class discovered that they and their nation had become objects of ridicule. Foreigners were taking pictures of women’s tiny feet and sending them around the world. Combined with the shame of recent military and commercial defeats at the hands of Japan, Britain and other foreign powers, the thirst to restore national honor created an opening. The anti-foot-binding ­societies recruited high-ranking families to make a dual pledge: to refrain from binding their daughters’ feet, and from marrying their sons to women with bound feet. With ­upper-class boys growing up ready to marry a new pool of upper-class, unbound girls, there was now an honorable alternative, and the practice essentially disappeared within a generation.

I have just one criticism of this fascinating, erudite and beautifully written book: Appiah thinks honor survives in WEIRD societies. He distinguishes “competitive honor,” which accrues to people who excel, from “peer honor,” which governs relationships among members of an “honor world” who acknowledge a shared code. Appiah is certainly right that people in modern societies seek competitive honor — earning the highest grade or largest bonus, for example — but this pursuit often motivates unethical behavior, and so this is not the kind of honor that most interests him. Rather, he believes that we moderns have retained a form of peer honor, stripped of gender and re-engineered for a large and diverse society whose moral triumph has been the extension of dignity to all. “Honor is no decaying vestige of a premodern order,” he writes. “It is, for us, what it has always been, an engine, fueled by the dialogue between our self-­conceptions and the regard of others, that can drive us to take seriously our responsibilities in a world we share.”

Yet by Appiah’s own analysis, peer honor can survive only in an “honor world,” and that is precisely the kind of world that WEIRD societies asphyxiate. At the [University of Virginia](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/university_of_virginia/index.html?inline=nyt-org), for example, we have a student-run honor system, created in 1842 by a few hundred sons of Virginia planters whose families vigilantly tracked one another’s reputations and arranged marital and commercial alliances accordingly. In that world, a gentleman could not tolerate a stain upon his honor, and neither could a community of gentlemen. We therefore have a “single sanction” based on a psychology of purity: any dishonorable behavior contaminates the whole community, so any violation of the honor code is punishable by expulsion.

Today, however, the university’s 21,000 students come from all over the world, and concerns about purity are mostly confined to the cafeteria. The moral domain has shrunk — as it must to accommodate the individualism, mobility and diversity of a WEIRD society — to its bare minimum: don’t hurt people, treat them fairly but otherwise leave them alone. Students at Virginia work hard and care about their grades, but when they learn about fellow students’ cheating, they usually do nothing. They understand that cheating harms others (in courses graded on a curve), but because WEIRD moral calculus involves only individuals (not the honor of the group), they feel that expulsion is too harsh a punishment. And because they do not feel personally dishonored by a cheater, it’s not clear to them why *they* should step forward and press charges. The result is that our purity-based single sanction, still in force long after the death of its natal honor world, increases students’ willingness to tolerate dishonorable behavior.

A more accurate subtitle for “The Honor Code” might have been: “How Moral Revolutions Used to Happen, and What We Gained (and Lost) When We Replaced Peer Honor With Respect for All Persons.” That subtitle would have made it clear that Detective Appiah is really working on the hardest case of all: Who are we, morally speaking, and how did we get here?

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**A version of this review appeared in print on October 24, 2010, on page BR22 of the Sunday Book Review.**

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