

Sommers, Tamler. *Why Honor Matters*, New York: Basic Books, 2018.

The primary goal of Tamler Sommers's *Why Honor Matters* is to offer a critical analysis of "dignity culture" and argue for the benefits of a "constrained honor culture." According to Sommers, "dignity frameworks" focus on abstract and ideal conditions.<sup>1</sup> Under such frameworks, every person has an objective value in virtue of being a person and, as such, there is little need to defend one's self-worth, as it cannot be diminished.<sup>2</sup> Sommers claims that, because of this, self-respect is free and shame has less force in dignity frameworks. "Honor frameworks," however, are both personal, as honor is closely tied to one's identity, and social, in that one's value is rooted in how others perceive you (pp. 26 and 17). Honor is notoriously difficult to define, but Sommers holds that honor is social, local, and committed to the idea that one's worth and respect is earned (pp. 15-24). You have honor, if those in your community respect you and value your worth in terms of local custom.

Sommers rejects dignity cultures because individuals in those cultures fail to take responsibility, expect inherent respect, are subject to hyper-individualism, and develop an increased aversion to risk, all of which lead to many of the problems we find in Western cultures. He, instead, argues that "honor has a lot to teach us and that we are wrong to ignore or reject it" (p. 9), in part because there are benefits to

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<sup>1</sup> Sommers uses "cultures" and "frameworks" in very similar ways. A culture is defined, in part, by its evaluative framework. Thus, a dignity culture is one which operates with a framework that evaluates persons and actions based on a person's immutable dignity and self-worth.

<sup>2</sup> The inherent self-worth of individuals in a dignity framework, as I see it, functions as a baseline from which one gains social respect. All that the dignity framework needs to be committed to is that self-worth cannot fall below a certain point. If this is true, then much of Sommers's objection with dignity frameworks, that an assumption of inherent respect makes people less responsive to important social pressures for promoting and discouraging behaviors, doesn't hit its mark.

reviving honor culture and utilizing its methods for social order. For example, Sommers thinks that we can reduce some of the problems we face, such as young people of color getting swept up in the school-to-prison pipeline, and increase social cohesion as a way to fight oppression.

One aspect of Sommers's project that I find particularly interesting is his case for introducing restorative justice, which he considers an "honor-based approach" (p. 153), into Western criminal justice systems, which are largely retributivist. Retributivist theories are grounded in the belief that we ought to punish in virtue of the fact that wrongdoers deserve punishment (p. 130). According to retributive justice, punishment is proportional to crime, crimes are committed against the state as a whole and not just the victim, and reason rather than emotion should dictate verdicts (p. 163). These demands make retributive justice dignity-based. Under dignity frameworks, justice is performed by a neutral third party because they will be better able to see the objective facts about guilt and culpability (p. 37).

However, retributivism fails to include the interests of those involved, such as victims, and misses the personal nature of being harmed. Honor-oriented systems of justice reject the view that justice has to be blind and impartial, so they are opposed to retributivist models of criminal justice (p. 157). Retributivism's commitments alienate victims and denies them a say in the punishment of the crime committed against them. While this claim is not a new one, the use of honor to defend it is a unique contribution to the literature. A personal approach where a victim can defend themselves to their attackers is, Sommers argues, a deeply honor-driven view. This can allow a victim to feel empowered and engaged in the justice process. In honor cultures, it is seen as shameful for someone else to settle a dispute; they "are expected to handle their own business" (pp. 17, 35, and 150). The ability for victims and offenders to engage each other, if they desire to, is clearly compatible with an honor framework, as it promotes a victim dealing with their victimizer (p. 36).<sup>3</sup>

An honor framework, though, can lead to oppression. Violence and aggression in honor cultures is a looming issue that Sommers's view faces. He attempts to address this concern by explaining the

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<sup>3</sup> Sommers doesn't argue that restorative justice is a replacement for our current system, only that it be included. He does think, though, that core principles of the criminal justice system should be abandoned (p. 153).

benefits of constrained honor while recognizing the risks of unconstrained honor cultures. A well-functioning honor culture strikes a balance between social rules that must be followed and personal freedom that keeps individuals from being oppressed (p. 29). A lot of work, however, is being done by the term “constrained” in order to produce a “well-functioning” honor culture. Constrained honor cultures promote individual virtues and healthy ways to address conflict in a wide range of cases, without abstracting away from the individuals and communities involved. Sommers argues that by restricting what kinds of rules ought to be adhered to, we can eliminate certain courses of action as clearly illegitimate.

In honor cultures, we can introduce constraints by having trusted elders in those communities call for them. The kinds of restrictions that would be necessary are those that Sommers points out in groups like *Becoming a Man (BAM)*, which argues for integrity, accountability, positive anger expression, self-determination, respect for women, and visionary goal setting (p. 207). First, they must be flexible and focus on building moral character. Second, they should be small in size and relatively egalitarian. Third, they ought to have a mix of younger and older members so that the older ones may impart knowledge and constrain the younger members’ actions. Fourth, they should have ways of resolving conflict that are personal and managed by skilled mediators. Fifth, they need to ensure that everyone’s needs are met in the group (pp. 208-10).

I’m sympathetic with this project and agree that many of what Sommers calls honor virtues, like courage, are undervalued, which can lead to a poor moral education. I also agree that improving moral education by promoting such virtues can solve many social problems. Much like Sommers, I’m partial to non-ideal theories of justice, as they are more sensitive to victims. One size rarely fits all. That being said, I find there are reasons to be skeptical of the project as it is described here: the first is theoretical, while the second is practical.

First, and most importantly, I have some theoretical concerns about the relationship between a commitment to honor culture and a constraint, such as those listed by *BAM* or the five elements of a properly functioning honor culture. While Sommers tries to mitigate oppression in honor cultures by introducing proper constraints, using constraints like those above can go two ways. First, such principles could be compatible with denying many basic standards of treatment, which could easily lead to oppression. Second, these principles could

have a dignity framework built into them. Either way, Sommers's view has a problem. I'll discuss these in turn.

First, principles like the five elements identified by Sommers are compatible with oppressive treatment. Flexibility, with an emphasis on building moral character, sounds nice. If it were too restrictive, it would fall afoul of the "one size doesn't fit all" view. However, the kind of moral character being built is purposely left ambiguous. It is well within the realm of possibility that moral character includes doing things that are "emotionally difficult" because it is "right," like honor-killing a loved one. The flexibility might be used to argue that one could choose other kinds of actions when dealing with an insult to the family honor, but notice that the ability to do otherwise does not constrain one from acting in this way. The fifth element is similarly compatible with oppression, as having basic needs met does not mean that the risk of maltreatment is lower. As in cases like segregation, basic needs were often met: communities were not denied access to food and water, or shelter or education. However, they were denied fair and equal treatment and the standard of the goods they were provided reflected the systemic oppression that existed. The fact that their basic needs were met served as a shield behind which racist oppressors hid.

The second of Sommers's elements is relatively unproblematic aside from the risk of xenophobia in one's own group and a distrustfulness of others. While not a significant risk for oppressive behavior, keeping groups relatively small is not clearly a constraint on it either.<sup>4</sup> The third element of cross-generational learning is also not itself a risk, but it is also not a clear constraint on oppressive behavior. The fourth element, which indicates a need for personalized conflict-resolution with the help of skilled mediators, may be better in helping to de-escalate potentially problematic situations, given that the mediator and the kinds of conflict-resolution are not prone to adopting violent or oppressive techniques. I can be a skilled mediator by manipulating one of two parties to be submissive or quiet in their oppression, which would de-escalate a situation and remove conflict. Beyond this, the need for a mediator at all seems in conflict with

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<sup>4</sup> There may be a further egalitarian concern that the second element risks constraining individualism too much. Maintaining a small group of people who constrain each other's behavior through social pressure may push too far in the direction of homogeneity and uniformity. This homogeneity may be oppressive in and of itself.

Sommers's view that it is disgraceful for the honor-bound person to have someone else handle their problems.

What about the second way of approaching these elements, so that they can stop oppressive kinds of behavior? In that case, a different problem arises. Honor cultures would be constrained to minimize the risk of oppression and other negative kinds of behaviors, but a dignity framework seems to have been smuggled in at the ground level. The only way to constrain honor behavior so as to avoid oppression, is to presuppose dignity-oriented terms and conditions. If it takes dignity to constrain honor so that it avoids the common objections regarding illegitimate violence, then why adopt the honor framework at all?

If we, instead, argue that such constraints still allow for honor to do its work in managing behavior, then we should still worry about internal conflicts between the two frameworks. If dignity means that people are due a certain level of treatment and respect and as such cannot be manipulated into submission by a mediator, while honor means that respect is not something we have inherently but is something earned, then we cannot hold both at the same time. If Sommers is right that constraints of this kind are compatible with dignity-oriented constraints, there needs to be a clearer argument for how they are compatible.

My second objection to Sommers's view concerns its practical implications. I will first explain Sommers's view about the practical benefits of honor language. Dignity culture, he argues, lacks the motivational oomph to get agents to act. This is because "it's difficult, maybe impossible, to feel connected to something as massive as all of humanity except in the most abstract and metaphorical manner" (p. 89). Honor frameworks, however, employ strong motivational moral emotions, like shame, through an instilled sense of concern regarding what others think. Sommers claims that without a deep sense of shame for acting wrongly, it is less likely that we will feel responsible for our actions (p. 17). Honor cultures also allow for the possibility of using honor language, such as shame, to produce real results. For example, shame language could decrease homicides that are caused by gun violence and participation in lifestyles that lead to imprisonment. Gangs already function within an honor framework, so the task is to determine how best to introduce constraints that can make it a well-functioning honor culture.

Despite Sommers's optimism about the efficacy of shame, the use of shame in communicating wrong action is, at best, overstated.

Those studying shame in the context of incarceration find that shame is both psychologically harmful to the incarcerated and ineffective in producing empathetic responses and decreasing recidivism.<sup>5</sup> Tangney et al. show that “shame often prompts defensive efforts to project blame outward, presumably hindering the ability to accept responsibility, to learn from one’s mistakes, and to use the pain of shame to motivate constructive changes in the future.”<sup>6</sup> The negative response to shame, along with a desire to hide from the pain of having a negative assessment of the self as worthless and powerless, leads to an externalization of blame.<sup>7</sup> Such responses increase the likelihood that an inmate will lash out and externalize blame, deny responsibility, or engage in escapism.

Furthermore, if we want restorative justice, then shame may be a bad method for achieving it. Tangney et al. state that “shame-proneness is (depending on assessment method) negatively or negligibly correlated with other-oriented empathy and positively linked with the tendency to focus egocentrically on one’s own distress.”<sup>8</sup> Such moral responses are not well suited for restorative justice, as empathetic responses seem essential to the effectiveness of this kind of justice. Thus, the practical outcome that Sommers claims his approach provides does not seem to be supported by the evidence. The role of honor as fundamental in ameliorating crime and oppression is, at best, unclear and, at worst, exacerbates problems regarding empathetic responses. While I’m sympathetic to the use of honor language as one aspect of moral development and to the importance of developing all of

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<sup>5</sup> June P. Tangney, Jeffrey Stuewig, Debra Masheke, and Mark Hastings, “Assessing Jail Inmates’ Proneness to Shame and Guilt: Feeling Bad About the Behavior or the Self?” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 38, no. 7 (2011), pp. 710-734; quotation at p. 723.

<sup>6</sup> June P. Tangney, Jeffrey Stuewig, and Andres G. Martinez, “Two Faces of Shame: The Roles of Shame and Guilt in Predicting Recidivism,” *Psychological Science* 25, no. 3 (2014), pp. 799-805; quotation at p. 801.

<sup>7</sup> Verda Konstam, Miriam Chernoff, Sara Deveney, “Toward Forgiveness: The Role of Shame, Guilt, Anger, and Empathy,” *Counseling and Values* 46, no. 1 (2001), pp. 26–39; quotation at p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> June P. Tangney, Jeffrey Stuewig, Debra J. Mashek, “Moral Emotions and Moral Behavior,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 58, no. 1 (2007), pp. 345–72; quotation at p. 350.

the virtues, there are theoretical and practical problems with the argument Sommers provides.

Although I cannot endorse Sommers's view, I do think the book is worth reading. It does a good job of detailing how focusing too much on dignity can lead to problems in accepting responsibility and mobilizing action in the face of oppression. Sommers also makes a compelling case for restorative justice, despite the concerns I have raised regarding his argument for constrained honor. Retributivist justice excludes victims from criminal justice. Incorporating their wishes into our proceedings would benefit them by restoring their self-respect and by allowing inmates to see the pain they have caused, which may be effective in promoting guilt rather than shame.

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