



## **Why Honor Matters**

*Tamler Sommers*

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## **A controversial call to put honor at the center of morality**

To the modern mind, the idea of honor is outdated, sexist, and barbaric. It evokes Hamilton and Burr and pistols at dawn, not visions of a well-organized society. But for philosopher Tamler Sommers, a sense of honor is essential to living moral lives. In *Why Honor Matters*, Sommers argues that our collective rejection of honor has come at great cost. Reliant only on Enlightenment liberalism, the United States has become the home of the cowardly, the shameless, the selfish, and the alienated. Properly channeled, honor encourages virtues like courage, integrity, and solidarity, and gives a sense of living for something larger than oneself. Sommers shows how honor can help us address some of society's most challenging problems, including education, policing, and mass incarceration. Counterintuitive and provocative, *Why Honor Matters* makes a convincing case for honor as a cornerstone of our modern society.

## **Why Honor Matters Details**

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Author : Tamler Sommers

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# From Reader Review Why Honor Matters for online ebook

## David Gross says

Tamler Sommers, a professor of philosophy who specializes in ethical philosophy and the conundrum of free will, has written a book defending “honor” as a way for cultures to regulate justice and other ethical matters.

The book is strangely defensive about its thesis, and seems to go out of its way to depict honor and “honor cultures” in unflattering ways (Mafia made men, pugnacious Boston sports fans, hockey enforcers, and inner-city gangs are among the exemplars Sommers chooses). So you have to work to learn to love honor the way Sommers loves it.

The way Sommers sees it, honor fills a gap in modern Western ethical philosophy. The “WEIRD” minority of humanity (“western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic”) have adopted an abstract, impartial, unemotional ideal of ethical evaluation and of the administration of justice that is foreign to most of humanity and doesn’t really harmonize well with human experience. (Sommers gives these the sobriquet of “dignity”-based in contrast to “honor”-based systems.)

One advantage to honor-based systems is that they have a built-in motivator for people to behave virtuously. Instead of offering people an abstract ethical system and reasons they should live up to it, honor-based systems offer people status and prestige: “They have rituals and traditions for bringing people together, for celebrating exceptional people and behavior, and for holding people accountable.”

There are a couple of varieties of honor: horizontal honor, which you gain (and must uphold) simply by being a member of a particular honor-based culture; and vertical honor, which you earn (or lose) by your deeds. This is also in contrast to dignity-based cultures in which everyone is supposed to have an equal worth without distinction.

In a dignity model, people discover themselves by factoring out all of their social roles to find the essential person underneath. In the honor model, people use their role and how they uphold their responsibility to it as core parts of their identity.

This reminded me of Alasdair MacIntyre’s descriptions of “heroic” societies in *After Virtue*. As I summarized when I reviewed that book:

In these societies, everyone had a role and a purpose just by virtue of being born into a particular station in a particular society with relations to particular people. Nobody is defined by their “hidden depths” or their inner lives, but by their actions relative to their roles; a person is what a person does. Morality and social structure are the same thing; there isn’t even a concept of morality as distinct from, independent of, or superior to the particular social structure. You can’t “step outside” your society and judge its moral system in comparison to some other system.... Virtue is what enables you to fulfill the role you have... the hero does not assert his arbitrary will, but accepts his role as being a real thing worthy of respect; the self is not self-created but is an incarnation or enacting of a socially-defined role.

Dignity is your “human right,” allegedly, while honor is more fragile. You may have to regularly defend your honor against threats and insults. But this may make honor more worthwhile. Sommers compares

dignity to a “participation trophy” and honor to the real thing.

One symptom of the decline of honor culture is a heightened concern for personal safety and more risk aversion. We value our lives more than our honor, and so become increasingly cowardly. Sommers ridicules our insistence on wearing bicycle helmets, for instance, along with the usual helicopter parents and such.

Another symptom is isolation, hyperindividualism, lack of community, and our descent into a sort of Ayn Randian, contractarian abyss in which all of our intercourse is temporary and contingent on mutual gain, with no cooperation in the service of something bigger than ourselves.

In contrast, the better social cohesion of honor societies leads to better mental health (people need belonging) and lower crime rates (potential lawbreakers are deterred by social norms, or by fear of shaming themselves or their families).

There is also greater personal accountability (in honor cultures, people take responsibility for their actions whether or not they accept blame for them). Dignity-based cultures like ours, by contrast, are increasingly shameless. We have an attenuated sense of blameworthiness and so a large-scale refusal to take responsibility.

I found myself wondering about a different sort of honor that didn't seem to match what Sommers was talking about. The honor Sommers describes is very much the product of “honor cultures”?—it is defined by and enforced by these cultures, and the motive to become honorable is the external rewards of esteem and of material goods (a greater portion of the spoils in battle, for instance). But I'm also used to hearing about a different sort of honor, one that is more internally-regulated, and that is its own reward. People who do the right thing even when nobody else is watching: that sort of honor. I didn't see much of that in Sommers's book, and I wish I had.

But to continue with a review of the book I read and not of the one I wished I'd read... Sommers turns to questions of justice. In the modern liberal justice system (“dignity”-based), the people who are most involved in resolving a dispute (lawyers, judges, and the like) are those with little personal involvement in it. Those with the most skin in the game (defendants, witnesses, victims) are given minor supporting roles at best. Because of this, people who go through this process tend not to feel like things have really been resolved satisfactorily. The law has been followed (more-or-less), but there's little sense that justice has been done or that the conflict has been resolved.

The system even denies victimhood to the victim of a violent crime, saying that the case is between the offender and “the People” or “the State.” The victim's desires, whether they be for revenge or for forgiveness, don't count. Emotion, the feeling of being wronged, being victimized, being treated unjustly, is deliberately excluded from the deliberations. This is although emotions like these are key to why we consider something to be a criminal offense in the first place. In their place, the system has erected a sort of post-hoc scaffolding of rational-sounding, measured, consistent rules, but this both masks the ultimately irrational foundations for the rules and prevents them from operating in a way that brings catharsis to these emotions.

Honor societies, on the other hand, make no pretense of creating an objective system that treats all crimes the same and focuses on the blameworthiness of the offender without getting distracted by the feelings of the victim. Instead, their processes are victim-centered, emotionally validating, and seek a cathartic resolution that restores balance in the society. They more authentically reflect human psychology about justice. (This reminded me of James C. Scott's studies of the ways cultures have self-organized complex systems of regulating commons without resorting to the use of governments.)

Sommers puts in a plug for the restorative justice movement in the United States as one way of rectifying this. I've been participating on a small scale with a local restorative justice group and I like what I see so far, but I haven't seen much. Our official justice system is such a travesty that experimenting with promising alternatives seems like a good idea.

Sommers also looks at some of the downsides of honor-based cultures (vendettas and feuds, honor being used to enforce or resist the reforming of reprehensible practices, higher levels of aggression and violence (though he notes that "dignity"-based cultures can have more official violence and repression that makes them only superficially less-violent). He suggests some ways to mitigate these problems, such as the cultivation of trusted mediators to dampen the escalation of violence in honor-prompted feedback loops.

Alas, I went into this book eager to agree with my vague idea of what its thesis would be, but left it not feeling very sympathetic or better-informed. I still think there's probably something to this, I just didn't find it here.

See also:

\* *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* by Kwame Anthony Appiah

\* *The Moral Equivalent of War* by William James

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### **Chad says**

Loved this book. Really easy to read. Well organized. Couldn't disagree with any of his arguments (not that I am qualified to). I am going to re-listen to the Sam Harris podcast where he discusses honor with Tamler now that I have read the book.

I look forward to learning more about the different groups helping with gang violence.

Thanks.

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### **Ron Johnson says**

Saw it at the library, in the "New Books" display. Looked interesting. It was. Very much so.

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### **Jukka Aakula says**

Certainly the most interesting book this year. First time for years I read a book by a philosopher which I really enjoyed.

The reason was certainly partly because Sommers had really studied the subject also from outside the philosophy science:

1. The anthropology of honor cultures like the Pashtu or the Albanian high lands.
2. The evolutionary science of co-operation.

3. The social policy trials in the inner cities of US.
4. The US legal system.

Book discusses honor - instead of human rights, dignity etc. - as a basis for moral behavior. It is a kind of critique of the liberal/enlightenment view where the

- a) morality is based on universal values and rationality/utilitarianism instead of particular communal local honor based norms/values
- b) justice is based on blind impersonal justice with an emphasis on equal level of punishment on same crime - instead of honor based personal justice based e.g. on revenge and face-to-face reconciliation with help of trusted older community members.

It may sound radical or reactionary but Sommers is not proposing a black-and-white approach. Instead, he takes certain problems in the US and Western societies as a starting point and discusses whether we could learn something from the honor based cultures to find methods for solving those problems.

One concrete problem is the high crime/homicide rate of the inner city America. He concretely shows through some social policy trials by Non-Government Organisations how the violence rate was decreased by something like 25%-60% by instead of zero-tolerance concentrate on decreasing violence by trying to increase reconciliation with help of respected community members and decrease revenge as methods to solve problems. Kind of accept the honor based systems with revenge-based justice but reform them in a way that decreases violence in local conflicts.

In honor based cultures you are supposed to solve your conflicts without help from the state - based e.g. on revenge and based on the local traditional law systems like the Pastuan Pasthtunwali <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pashtun...> Sommers discusses the main problems of the honor based systems openly:

1. the content of honor norms may in principle be whatever - e.g. support plainly immoral behavior and non-respect for human rights.
2. if justice is based mainly on revenge, the system may escalate violence out of control.

So it is certainly not black-and-white.

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### **InvestingByTheBooks.com says**

In this his third book the relatively young Texan associate professor of philosophy at the University of Huston, Tamler Sommers, defines the virtue of honor, describes the pros and cons of honor cultures and claims that honor is underrated in our modern world. The author argues that the Western world has made a mistake in suppressing the concept of honor to the extent that has been done and that we need to adapt a "constrained" honor concept to live a good life. Although clearly interesting, Why Honor Matters fails to fully tie together all the loose ends.

According to the author the Western world is virtually schizophrenic when it comes to honor. The concept has little place in the discourse apart from when we horrify over the blood feuds, racism and bullying of women in honor cultures. On the other hand we admire the courageous hero of books and movies that rights the wrongs and in sports honor is still a valid concept. The first two chapters of the book define what honor

is and discusses why it's a problem that the West has abandoned the concept. Chapters three through five, drills deeper in the various aspects of honor cultures. Then "the most ambitious and [...] the most important chapter" six argues for introducing so called restorable justice in the Western criminal justice system. Finally, the last chapter tries to present a picture of how the contained type of honor concept might look.

Sommers distinguishes between a Western dignity framework with its roots in the enlightenment and honor cultures – and to be clear, honor cultures could be attributed to both the populations of the Appalachian mountains and the Afghan mountains as well as the Navy SEALs, Mexican drug cartels and NHL hockey teams. Dignity is in this respect a universal unbreakable value that comes with being a human being and it is as such skeptical of narrowing forms of identifications with for example nation, class, race etc. This is because too close identification risks excluding others from the moral sphere. Honor is a much more fragile value that takes the opposite view. Giving equal moral weight to outsiders and insiders of a group is seen as immoral. While others should be treated with respect and hospitality, caring for your own is absolute priority. In a dignity culture living a moral life is a pursuit and choice of the individual while in honor cultures the individual moral is a part of a group's norms and a moral life a necessity to be accepted by, and gain status in, the group. Dignity is independent of social structures and this has huge value in breaking free from oppressive structures. The downside is a loss of stability and structure plus of the self-respect that comes from standing up for yourself. To the author the western focus on the free will and the independence from others is too abstract where an atomization is prioritized over the meaning and solidarity that exist in honor cultures. Without the, granted not always positive, group cohesion of group norms dignity societies instead come to depend on an all powerful state penetrating deep into civil society.

Although I agree that a person to his best ability should live an honorable life of integrity, I reserve this as a choice for myself. My quarrels with the book are three. The discussion around restorative justice comes up now and again in the book and not just in chapter six. I think that it could have been better flagged that a debate on procedural structures in the US court system were such a large part of the book. Further, at times the author in my view comes a bit too romanticizing of the "honorable savage" of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The ending chapter on how to create the contained type of honor isn't very developed. Basically Sommers says that since honor norms are not universal they are changeable. What we need to do is to have norms that prevent violent escalation and that utilize less violent methods for standing up for oneself. Examples given are the dance-offs in Hip Hop culture, NHL norms, poetry slams and the Chicago BAM-project (Becoming a Man) - a bit slim basis for the change of western culture.

An important debate worthy of a stronger finish.

Mats Larsson, November 7, 2018

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### **Sandra says**

Thought provoking but somewhat under-delivering 3.75/5. Or unrealistic expectations on my part. One of these two.

Single-lense views often fail to deliver anything more than their own validation. This book is more than that, and worth the time, for the number of questions it poses (or reopens) to a receptive reader. Only if I could figure out what *exactly* it proposes we do, and how.

The coverage was not diversified: too much stress on the justice part of the analysis, and too much cheering

on (honor). Some of the items mentioned in the first part of the book weren't developed much or at all, and those I would have found way more interesting, like the impacts of the culture of dignity/lack of principles of honor on our social, mental and emotional well-being.

The argument for replacing the current justice system with a community and honor based restorative justice approach is probably the strongest one here. There were also good points around the positive sides of honor based morality (with bad ones brushed away a bit too lightly, imo - it is not obvious that we should consider something seriously without first dealing with its negative aspects, especially if they are not insignificant). And it all seems a bit male-centered, maybe justifiably so (nothing wrong with that), but it was made implicit rather than explicit and hence some complaints on that front.

Possibly most of all, this book made me think about some of the prescriptions that have made Jordan Peterson so (in)famous and (un)popular. Things like "Don't be a harmless rabbit, rabbits are not virtuous, they're useless. Be dangerous, a monster, and decide not to use your power - now, that's morality." Mr Sommers seems to be conveying the same principle. Some people might not like it, some might not get it, some might be eager to hear more.

In the end, my pessimistic take is that this is one more item on the list of things considered essential and acceptable to only one side of the splintering Western mind.

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### **Jared says**

I actually tend to agree with the author on this topic. But, the book needs fewer anecdotes and more data.

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### **Zb1113 says**

Interesting book about the positives of honor and why we should try to keep as many as we can. Contrasting with "dignity", focus on "personal or community", relationship with group identity (Pos. and Neg.), morality of violence, "Transformative Revenge", Utilitarianism vs Retributivism in our current justice system, Restorative Justice, and a very unique reading of Aeschylus's "Oresteia". I wish Tamler would have focused a couple chapters on the negatives, or would've been a bit more statistical in his arguments.....but that's not really his style.

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### **Adam Di Filippo says**

Interesting.

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### **Pat Hearps says**

Does make a good argument for changing how to deal with extreme ends of the justice system, but I didn't find any convincing arguments for what/how to practically apply his honor system beyond these examples. Other examples like ice hockey convinced me more that I didn't agree with his proposition.



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## **Paul C. Stalder says**

My thanks to the publisher and Netgalley for providing me with an advanced copy of this book.

In this book, Sommers has provided a well-reasoned, and compelling argument for a revitalization of honor within our society. While it is not without its flaws, I found myself tearing through the pages of this work, compelled to find the next argument. Sommers has a way of writing which takes complex ideas, and molds them into digestible tidbits even the most simple of us can understand.

With all that said, I found parts of this book quite unconvincing. Sommers had a tendency to brush off the more unpleasant aspects of honor cultures, focused primarily on the masculine aspects, and offered rather scant examples of how individuals who don't find themselves prowling the streets in gangs can push honor back into the limelight. These shortcomings, however, did not diminish my overall sentiment towards to the book, nor will they stop me from recommending it friends and family alike.

Well-done, Tamler. I look forward to the next.

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## **Marta Kazic says**

while i disagree with basically all of the actual content regarding honor, its written very well. the language is straightforward, points are well made and logical. the chapter about justice system reform is brilliant and quite inspired

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## **Xavier Shay says**

The most fascinating book I've read this year. Literally thought provoking. Contrasts traditional western liberal philosophic ethic, which he labels "dignity", with the much maligned/ignored ethic of "honor". Argues that we should reintroduce "constrained" forms of the honor ethic to various domains. The author is acutely aware of the large potential issues with unconstrained honor systems - excessive retribution, subjugation/killing of women - and so throughout is very careful to keep this foremost in the discussion and to emphasize that the "constrained" modifier is critical. Overall, he's looking to see how we could turn the dial towards honor, rather than flip the switch: "Well-contained honor-oriented approaches may have inherent defects, yet still be morally preferable by a mile to systematic and idealized approaches that could achieve perfection "in principle." The old saying "Don't let the perfect get in the way of the good" is worth taking very seriously here. If we allow honor to work its magic, while limiting its excesses, we can make actual rather than theoretical progress."

Gave me a richer understanding of some issues I've wrestled with:

\* Singer's argument (that basically underpins much ethical altruism) that there isn't a moral difference between saving the life of a drowning child, and saving the life of a starving one half way around the world, has never resonated with me emotionally despite intellectually trying to support it. This dissonance has been ... uncomfortable. Sommers identifies this kind of issue as a fundamental lack: "Dignity can't support "us

against the world” because it sees no division between “us” and the “world.” Dignity’s slogan is “We are the world”—which sounds nice in principle but can be isolating in practice. Individuals can truly belong to a family, sports team, gang, class, or school group. But the “human family”? It’s difficult, maybe impossible, to feel connected to something as massive as all of humanity except in the most abstract and metaphorical manner.”

\* Is violence ever acceptable? When? (ref "nazi punching" from earlier this year.)

"It may sound paradoxical, but today we place too much value on our own lives. Threats to physical safety, no matter how infinitesimal, have come to trump all other concerns, moral and otherwise. This obsession with risk is antithetical to honor, which places supreme importance on courage and being faithful to your group’s principles." ... [later] "Excessive aversion to violence has produced ineffective zero-tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, a massive police state, and the largest prison system in human history." "Dignity doesn’t have much to recommend for the oppressed. Dignity is passive; it tells us to respect others and not to violate their rights. Okay, but how should we respond when our rights are violated? On that question, dignity is silent, and honor has a lot to say. Honor says, “You should be prepared to fight and even to die to preserve your self-respect and the respect of others in your group.”"

He forwards an idea that I haven’t fully processed that conflict is actually necessary of a connected society: "conflicts—both violent and nonviolent—are important for maintaining relationships in an increasingly segmented society. Conflicts provide opportunities for active participation and engagement with other human beings. They reconnect us with others, allowing individuals and communities to discover who they are, what they’re made of, what they believe and feel. Honor-based conflict without insults leads to greater cooperation. As Nils Christie puts it, “Conflicts might kill, but too little of them might paralyze.” It’s impossible to completely eliminate violence without also reducing productive community-building conflict."

\* Particularly relevant now that I don't have a full time job: what activities should I be pursuing and how? In particular, thinking through "connectedness" from the honor perspective was interesting for me.

It also introduced me to a critique of the US justice system, in particular around the idea that having the state handle justice without any regards for victims is a big problem:

"Defenders of the status quo often assume that punishing wrongdoers automatically restores the self-respect of victims by sending a message to the offender that the victim is a person whose rights cannot be violated. But this is a rationalist fantasy with no basis in real human psychology."

... and provides an overview of a proposed solution of "restorative justice" that involves the victims:

"The results of a recent Canadian survey indicate that 89 percent of violent crime victims wanted to meet the offenders. Even in what seems like the most problematic type of crime—sexual assault—victims report positive effects from meeting with offenders. Victims who participated in restorative conferences showed a decrease in PTSD symptoms. Survivors reported that the “experience was empowering rather than traumatizing.” In another recent study, 70 percent of rape survivors reported that they would welcome the opportunity for victims to be able to meet with their offenders in conference settings." "We cede the role of punisher to the state in large part to prevent victim retaliation and vigilantism. But we don’t do this for reasons involving justice. We do it for practical reasons—to prevent escalating feuds and to limit collateral damage."

I particularly liked this chapter: providing practical examples of how reintroducing some ethic on honor could actually make a difference, grounded in actual examples, while constraining it to mitigate downsides. I was worried about potential issues of discrimination, but then so is the author: "At this stage, the worries about racial bias are purely speculative. Restorative justice is a recent movement, and more empirical work needs to be done to gauge the effects of racial bias on restorative processes. But given the systematic and structural biases that infect our current disciplinary practices, it would be difficult for restorative justice to

fare any worse." (The author also provides example of dramatic decreases in gun violence from approaches founded on a constrained honor ethic.)

At the times I don't feel that the author did a great job of "re-express[ing] your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way." when talking about dignity ... but given how familiar I (and presumably you, given how pervasive it is) are already with the concept I was able to read through it. I'm sure that better critiques of this book exist than the author presents, but that doesn't detract from the book. It's given me fuel for thought, not a stone tablet.

Like the "The Righteous Mind", this book has given me new ideas to help understand and interpret the world. Highly recommended.

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### **Farid says**

A must read. Important contribution to western dignity cultures that presents a compelling argument for honour.

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### **Nishanth Pathy says**

Often, from the way Western media talks about (unambiguously bad acts of) "honour killings", retaliatory gang violence, and repression of women's freedoms, it would seem that honour cultures — the underlying generator of these phenomena — are from an objectively more primitive age and should be dispensed with by education and social conditioning. In *Why Honor Matters*, Tamler Sommers does an admirable job of rehabilitating the concept of honour and showing how we can integrate it into a modern, cosmopolitan society in a way that gets rid of the excesses above while keeping the positives.

Sommers's main thrust in the book can be summarised as follows: Western thinking tends to work in ideals; as such, when philosophy is arbitrating between alternatives, it tends to compare the worlds that would emerge in the ideal state of each. Since "honour" is not clearly defined—certainly less well-defined and systematisable than, say, utilitarianism—it has been knocked out of the running for the fact that it does not present an admirable and cogent "ideal state". Sommers argues, however, that when we compare the actual real-world instantiations of Western ethics (which he summarises as "dignity ethics", as in "the ethics that preserve the fundamental and inherent dignity of every human being") to the real-world instantiations of honour cultures, Western ethics come up lacking.

Sommers gives several key examples of this. One is, quite simply, how visceral these moral structures seem to individuals in them: as nice as it might be for humans to settle moral arguments with pure rationality, raw statistics and the good of the "global community" in mind, these tactics fail in practice, and appeals to community, courage and self-respect (all of which are typical of honour communities and inimical to "dignity ethics") tend to resonate far more. Another is the criminal justice system: Sommers argues that the

“equal punishment for equal crime” is, even in theory, an almost fetishised aspect of justice (given how many other aspects it causes us to ignore) and that in any event we often fall woefully flat of the ideal in practice. As such, Sommers compellingly argues that restorative justice (whereby victims and perpetrators of a crime jointly decide the punishment in a mediated environment) presents a compelling alternative to the current justice system, as it addresses the other aspects of justice far better than do retributivist systems, and the abandonment of “equal punishment for equal crime” in theory is a worthwhile trade-off.

Where the book falls flat is in the aspects of honour communities it tries to defend, most pointedly in Sommers’s defences of violence and revenge. I say this not because Sommers does a bad job defending them — he does admirably — more because he himself later argues that these values/actions are incompatible with a modern cosmopolitan society and spends the final third of the book outlining how we can incorporate honour codes into modern society **without** integrating revenge and violence. As such, the chapters stick out like sore thumbs in the final analysis.

That being said, the book is concise, compelling and written in plain prose, and it stands as a worthwhile book for anyone dissatisfied with purely rationalist narratives about ethics and policy.

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