CONSIDER YOUR MAN CARD REISSUED: MASCULINE HONOR AND GUN VIOLENCE

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Abstract. In this article, Amy Shuffelton addresses school shootings through an investigation of honor and masculinity. Drawing on recent scholarship on honor, including Bernard Williams’s Shame and Necessity and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s The Honor Code, Shuffelton points out that honor has been misconstrued as exclusively a matter of hierarchical, competitive relationships. A second kind of honor, which exists within relationships of mutual respect between equals, she suggests, merits theorists’ further consideration. In its hierarchical mode, honor is often a source of violent action, but honor in its egalitarian mode can play an important role in peacemaking. Shuffelton turns to Homer’s Iliad and Adrienne Rich’s “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying” to explore honor’s potential. Linking both kinds of honor to masculinity and the issue of gun violence, this article contends that to address gun violence in and outside of schools, masculine honor needs to be “reissued” as a matter of egalitarian relationships based on honest communication.

In Rampage, sociologist Katherine Newman and her coauthors identify five conditions for the kind of school shootings they term “rampages”: episodes of gun violence in which the shooter intends to kill but does not target particular individuals. Newman and her colleagues conclude that the following five conditions are necessary, though not sufficient:

1. The shooter perceives himself to be extremely marginal in the social world that matters to him.
2. The shooter suffers from psychological problems that magnify the impact of his perceived marginality.
3. Cultural “scripts,” which function as prescriptions for behavior, are available to lead the way toward armed attack.
4. There is a failure of surveillance systems intended to identify troubled teens before their problems become extreme.
5. Guns are available.¹

National conversation about how to prevent school shootings has focused primarily on points 2, 4, and 5 — mental illness, school procedures, and gun availability. At worst, the issue is framed as a counterproductive either/or: Should policymakers increase access to mental health care or decrease access to guns? At best, reformers have proposed improvements on each of these fronts, but due to a lack of political support, these proposals have made limited headway.

This article is concerned with the remaining two conditions: the shooter’s perception of himself as marginalized within a social world that matters to him, and that social world’s provision of cultural scripts that lead him to respond with violence to those who constitute that world. These conditions have ethical dimensions that are appropriately addressed using the tools of philosophy. How ought a person respond to peers whose words and actions, in his perceptions, fail to recognize him as the person he is committed to being? What kind of action ought an agent take to maintain his ethical identity in the face of disrespect? These are questions of honor. Honor names an aspect of our thinking about how to live a flourishing life that has been little addressed by philosophers of late but that remains an important aspect of people’s ethical thinking and motivation. School shootings are typically portrayed as “senseless violence,” but the ethical demands of honor indicate their logic. Nor is the compulsion of that logic exclusive to the shooters. Masculine honor, this article contends, also underlies U.S. resistance to the gun control and social welfare provisions that would be required to address the more technical problems of gun legislation and mental health care.

This article’s title comes from an advertisement for Bushmaster rifles, one of which was used in Newtown, Connecticut, to murder twenty elementary school children and six educators. In the wake of that tragedy, the advertisement’s association of manhood with assault weapons provoked outrage, but it captures something crucial about the connections among gun violence, masculinity, and honor. Masculinity is never an identity a man can establish permanently: it needs to be “reissued” by those in a position to judge a man’s masculinity. This article begins with an exploration of honor as an ethical framework that treats identity as constantly in need of “reissue.” Honor, it finds, depends upon a peer group qualified to judge whether one deserves the identity-based respect one claims. Like the Bushmaster rifle ad, this ethical framework is troubling, as it may divorce the demands of honor from other ethical standards. And yet, insofar as it attends to aspects of our identity that matter to us and to the relationships that give human lives meaning, an ethic of honor is as powerful as it is dangerous. The second section of the article asks what honor has to offer and what relation it has to notions of the good that stand beyond social convention. Along the way, it addresses one “reissue” of the “man card,” namely Plato’s revision of Archaic notions of what it means to be a man. The third section of this article directly addresses the relationship between contemporary masculinity and gun violence, drawing on Douglas Kellner’s correlation of gun violence, media spectacle, and a

2. For another interpretation of the “sense” in school shootings, see Gabriel Keehn and Deron Boyles, “Sense, Nonsense, and Violence: Levinas and the Internal Logic of School Shootings,” in this issue.

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crisis in masculinity. The final section turns to Adrienne Rich’s “Women and Honor” to suggest a better reissue of identity cards.

Like an advertisement, honor has sometimes been thought a matter of mere surface appearance. Rich draws out deeper dimensions: honor’s implication of honest speaking and listening. Honor is honesty’s etymological root; to be honest was originally to be a person of honorable character, truly to be what one seems. Rich notes the gendered inflections of honor, and their entanglement of honor with deceit, and she calls for a reissue of honor as honest communication in relationships. In such a reissue, I see promise for addressing gun violence in schools. School shooters have seen guns as their only recourse for “saving face,” a necessary tool for preserving threatened masculinity. Honest communication opens up alternative possibilities, including the expansion of available masculinities and the improvement of relationships between and among men and women.

What Is Honor?

In an influential essay published in 1970, Peter Berger declared honor obsolete. Honor is an “ideological leftover” from premodern times, he asserted, surviving within modern societies only in the consciousness of “obsolete classes, such as military officers or ethnic grandmothers.” In Berger’s analysis, the obsolescence of the concept of honor is part and parcel of modernity, with its new moralities and political arrangements. These have replaced “honor” with “dignity,” for better and for worse. Honor and dignity each supply a rationale for interpersonal respect, Berger argues, but they do so on importantly different grounds. Honor is often considered an aristocratic value, and it remains a feature of sociopolitical hierarchies, though a person of any status can lay claim to honor, provided his or her behavior conforms to the requirements of honor dictated by his or her position within a particular social hierarchy. Berger points out that

all the qualities enjoined by honor provide the link, not only between self and community, but between self and the idealized norms of the community. Conversely, dishonor is a fall from grace in the most comprehensive sense — loss of face in the community, but also loss of self and separation from the basic norms that govern human life.

In the rationale of honor, as Berger explains it, a person’s claim to respect depends upon his or her ability to meet the norms prescribed by his or her “institutional roles” within a particular social system. Modernity, whose moralities and politics free the individual from institutional roles, has replaced honor with dignity, which


6. Ibid., 174.
is respect owed to a person qua person, who has dignity as such. Dignity rests on an altogether different conception of the self and its relationship with society. “Institutions cease to be the ‘home’ of the [modern] self; instead they become oppressive realities that distort and estrange the self.” The modern core self, which stands free of institutional roles that are always provisional, has become the moral self owed respect. In important ways, Berger notes, the replacement of honor with dignity has served people well, and there is no reason to turn the clock back.

Given honor’s association with oppressively hierarchical systems, it is unsurprising that in recent decades few political and moral theorists committed to progressive politics — or simply to modernity — have wanted anything to do with it. It has been picked up by conservative theorists like Allan Bloom and Harvey Mansfield in their lamentations for the lost virtues of manhood, but otherwise relegated to the philosophical basement. There might seem to be little a committed egalitarian could say in its defense. All the same, Berger suggested, a rediscovery of honor by modern society was both empirically plausible and, with qualifications, desirable. “It seems clear to us,” he writes, that “the unrestrained enthusiasm for total liberation of the self from the ‘repression’ of institutions fails to take account of certain fundamental requirements of man, notably those of order — that institutional order of society without which both collectivities and individuals must fall into a dehumanizing chaos.” Inevitably, Berger predicted, the tide would turn and institutions would come back into favor. “The ethical question … is what these institutions will be like.” Arguably, instead institutions have become even more irrelevant, as liquid as the postmodern self. Indeed, from the vantage point of several decades into postmodernity, “unrestrained enthusiasm for total liberation of the self from institutions” seems another ideological leftover, the province of college sophomores and unreconstructed hippies tilting at windmills.

Honor may be salvageable, however, on grounds other than those Berger imagined and other than Bloom’s and Mansfield’s. Kwame Anthony Appiah, drawing on work on honor in and outside philosophy, emphasizes features of honor that flow from its definition as an ethical code that links the self to a community and its idealized norms: its attunement to identity, motivation, and interpersonal relationships. Honor, Appiah contends, is a “crucial” but “neglected” topic

7. Ibid., 179.
10. Kwame Anthony Appiah, The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen [New York: Norton, 2010]. A look at the eclectic sources that contemporary theorists of honor draw on confirms Appiah’s claim that philosophers have neglected the topic. Berger’s article was first printed in a sociological journal. Appiah turns to historical sources and to anthropologist Frank Henderson Stewart’s Honor. Honor opens with anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers’s claim that before the social sciences addressed honor in the 1960s, little about it was written outside literature. This is not quite true, Stewart writes: he acknowledges that the philosophical literature has been undistinguished except for Italian theorists.
for contemporary moral philosophy, and crucial for the same theoretical and practical reasons as the philosophical consideration of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and other social identities: “Like our social identities, it connects our lives together. Attending to honor . . . like noticing the importance of our social identities, can help us to treat others as we should and to make the best of our own lives.”

Appiah conceptualizes honor not in terms of institutional roles but of interpersonal relationships. Because having honor means being entitled to respect from others, it is relational from the ground up. Drawing on Stephen Darwall’s differentiation of two kinds of respect — appraisal and recognition respect — Appiah delineates two types of honor. One type — which might also be called esteem — is accorded to persons based on others’ appraisal that they have demonstrated excellence in some field deemed worthwhile. A person can be honored, for instance, as a superior musician, or warrior, or scientist. This type of honor, which rank orders persons against a standard, is intrinsically competitive and hierarchical. The other type of honor, however, which Appiah (following Darwall) calls recognition respect, accords respect equitably on the grounds that a person meets certain standards of behavior that are expected of anyone so situated. All decent teachers, for instance, have a claim to honor as teachers (recognition respect), but this is different in kind from the honor we accord a “teacher of the year” (esteem).

Frank Henderson Stewart’s Honor, another source for Appiah’s analysis, distinguishes between “vertical” and “horizontal” honor. While the “vertical” honor that functions in hierarchies accords more honor/esteem to some persons than others, “horizontal” honor exists among peers. Berger’s argument treats honor exclusively in its vertical/appraisal/esteem sense, ignoring honor in its horizontal/recognition aspect. Insofar as “dignity,” post-Kant, implies a self whose claim to respect exists regardless of its social relationships, it denotes a kind of respect that is distinctly different from honor. Berger is correct that we have added the notion of freestanding dignity to our conceptual repertoire, but dignity has not rendered honor in its sense of recognition respect obsolete.

Although they are dealt out differently, esteem and recognition respect have core features in common. Honor of both kinds involves an honor code: a rationale for according or denying honor based on expected standards of behavior. Both also rely upon the notion of a group qualified to accord and receive honor. Appiah calls this group one’s “honor peers,” and they are intrinsic to the accordance of respect. My honor peers are the people whose respect matters to me, in part

of the sixteenth century, but points to legal scholarship as his counterexample. Insofar as honor is a matter of social relationships and motivation, it makes sense that serious thinking about it would be spread across literature, social sciences, and law — fields in which these are central concerns — as well as philosophy. Frank Henderson Stewart, Honor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).


because I believe they — and only they — are qualified to grant me respect worth having. For instance, a gentleman could never preserve his honor by accepting a challenge to a duel from a butcher. The butcher is not his honor peer; to accept the challenge would acknowledge him as a peer, and thereby undermine the gentleman’s claim to honor as a gentleman.14 In terms relevant to school shootings, the honor peers of an adolescent boy are other members of the honor peer group of adolescent boys — other boys, or those recognized as legitimate constituents of that world [the basketball coach perhaps, but probably not mothers]. Most people have multiple, partly but not entirely overlapping, sets of honor peers, for example, fellow professionals, local community members, aficionados of the same hobbies. This is less true of people in tightly integrated communities, such as Achaean princedoms and small-town American high schools, in which “honor groups” overlap such that a person’s status in one realm carries into the others.15

Honor, in sum, is inherently a matter of person-relevant ethical standards maintained in relationship with others. As such, honor does not necessarily support hierarchical and politically retrograde notions of value, and it has never become obsolete. Its potential to support unjustified social conventions makes it a volatile ethical rationale, but theorists unfazed by instability can find in it plenty that merits further consideration. Like Appiah, I find honor worthy of philosophical analysis because it attends to features of human life that make it worth living: one’s relations with others, commitment to ideals that give one’s actions meaning, and obligations to others who have an equal claim to respect.

A fleshed-out notion of honor supports a richer understanding of what it means, existentially and ethically, for a person to perceive himself as marginalized by a community that matters to him. Marginalization at the hands of one’s “honor peers” cannot be taken lightly. To be dishonored is to “lose face,” which connotes the loss not only of one’s visibility but, if “face” cannot be restored, one’s very claim to personhood. Dishonor is both profoundly personal (because it threatens a person’s sense of self) and profoundly relational (because the existence of that self depends on how one appears to, and has one’s appearance reflected back by, others). If honor enables us to “make the best of our own lives,” the continual experience of dishonor makes it impossible to live well.

Honor and Agency

Why dishonor should be a reason for violence, however, calls for further exploration of the connections between honor and action. As Appiah understands honor, 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." Honor, that is, is a motivational force. Appiah claims honor as the engine driving ethical and political progress, and in chapters addressing dueling in Western Europe, foot binding in China, and the Atlantic slave trade, he shows how a shift in public conceptions of what was honorable drove progressive social change. In all three cases, Appiah contends, reasonable arguments about the injustice of the institution gained limited traction until reformers shifted the public’s understanding of what honor required, after which change came remarkably quickly. In China, for example, would-be reformers had for years provided reasons to end foot-binding, reasons that were understood and recognized as valid but to no avail. The practice quickly ceased, however, after reformers emphasized that it made China appear uncivilized in the eyes of Europeans. National honor, not reason, drove change. Appiah makes a compelling case for addressing lingering injustices not by heaping rational argument on top of rational argument but by shifting majority opinion to align what honor demands with the aims of justice. This might seem no easier to pull off than reform through reason giving, but note that, as in the case of China, a reconstitution of the honor peer group can spur change. In the late nineteenth century, Chinese elites came to see Western elites as their honor peers, and, from that new perspective, foot binding seemed shameful. If this is so, revision of the “cultural scripts” that support school shootings and revision of the gun culture that supports easy access to guns could be effected by such a realignment. Before accepting that conclusion, however, two questions need to be addressed: Why is honor the “engine” of change, and what relation does honor have with genuinely good ends?

In *Shame and Necessity*, Bernard Williams teases out the relationship between the two terms of his title and, although honor is not its explicit focus, his analysis connects honor to agency. Shame is not synonymous with dishonor, as shame is an emotion whereas dishonor is an experience, namely a rupture between the individual and his or her ideals that is recognized by the community that gives significance to those ideals, which is reflected back to and perceived by the individual. Shame is, however, the appropriate emotional response to dishonor. As Williams shows, through an analysis of Greek drama and epic poems, the shame that characters feel in the wake of dishonor, or know they will feel if they behave dishonorably, drives their decisions and actions. This is not, he argues, merely a feature of the psyche of ancient Greeks. The need to preserve one’s honor, in Williams’s account, remains a wellspring of agency.


18. Philosophical and ethnographic analyses distinguish shame from guilt. Shame is tied to honor, guilt to having broken a rule or disobeyed a rightful authority. This distinction opens a host of corollary connections of shame to honor, relationality, and socially situated/practice-based ethics and guilt to disobedience and deontological/Kantian morality.
In Sophocles’s *Ajax*, the hero (who is supposedly the second strongest Greek, after Achilles — the proper recipient of esteem, as well as recognition respect) is slighted when, after Achilles’s death in the Trojan war, the Greek leaders award his armor to Odysseus rather than Ajax. To keep Ajax from killing the Greek army in revenge, Athena makes him go mad, and he slaughters a flock of sheep and cattle, believing them to be the army. When Ajax recovers from his madness and realizes that he has made himself absurd, he resolves to commit suicide. He has been dishonored twice over, by the Greek decision and by his own mad actions. Williams hone in on Ajax’s statement “I must go,” the last words he speaks before killing himself. Why must he go? Because, Williams argues, given the [Achaean, heroic] ideals to which Ajax is dedicated, it has become clear to him that there is literally no way he can go on living:

|Ajax| knows that he cannot change his ethos, his character, and he knows that after what he has done, this grotesque humiliation, he cannot live the only kind of life his ethos demands. . . . Being what he is, he could not live as the man who had done these things, it would be merely impossible, in virtue of the relations between what he expects of the world and what the world expects of a man who expects that of it.20

Ajax’s actions are strikingly similar to those of rampage shooters, and Williams’s analysis of their ethical import shines some light on the sense in “senseless” violence. The boys who turn guns on their classmates and then often themselves are, like Ajax, motivated to act by the sheer impossibility of continuing to live without honor. Newman describes school shooters Michael Carneal and Mitchell Johnson, for instance, as feeling that their masculinity was under siege. Carneal had been called gay in a middle-school newspaper, and Johnson, who had been sexually abused as a child, was described by peers as intensely concerned with projecting a “hard,” masculine image. Peer skepticism of their “man cards” led both to contemplate suicide, but suicide, in Newman’s words, is “a weak way to die, one at odds with the script of masculinity. School shooters are looking for status-winning, manhood-enhancing departures.”21 Their decision to shoot may, she suggests, be a choice of “death by cop” as a twofold escape from dishonor. As many adolescents have a limited comprehension of death’s finality, this can also be accompanied by fantasies of enhanced post-shooting status. Carneal imagined himself walking through the halls of his high school after the shooting, when “maybe [other kids] would be scared and then no one would mess with Michael.”22

Rampage violence followed by suicide, however, is not the only possible response to a loss of face. Williams offers as a counterexample Euripides’s play

22. Ibid., 152.
The Madness of Heracles, but a somewhat more promising example [because Heracles does kill his children, though not himself] would be that of Achilles. In the pivotal scene in the Iliad where he considers killing Agamemnon after Agamemnon dishonors him by taking Briseis, his war prize and the symbol of his personal worth, Achilles reconsiders. Instead of killing the king, he avenges his honor by publicly showing restraint and then withdrawing himself and his Myrmidons from the fighting.

Achilles’s reconsideration and restraint are, importantly, brought about through an internal dialogue between different “parts” of his psyche. When angered by Agamemnon’s disrespect, Achilles is initially unsure what to do: “within his shaggy breast the heart was divided two ways, pondering whether to draw from beside his thigh the sharp sword . . . or else to check the spleen within and keep down his anger.” Note that both alternatives are portrayed as actions: Achilles must overcome either Agamemnon or the parts of him that are divided against other parts. While Achilles “weighed in mind and spirit” these two possible actions, Athena — the goddess of orderly warfare and wise judgment — “caught him by the fair hair” and gave him the additional information that, should he refrain from killing Agamemnon, “some day three times over such shining gifts shall be given you by reason of this outrage.” Achilles checks his spleen; Agamemnon lives. Yet, although Achilles is a savvier preserver of his honor than Ajax and is presented as fully sane throughout this episode, he is hardly an exemplar of nonviolent conflict resolution. His withdrawal from battle nearly destroys the Greek army, and by the end of the Iliad his actions have caused the deaths of the friend whose life he held most dear, countless Greeks and Trojans, and himself. Plato said as much, and in the Republic he simultaneously reconfigures the terms in which crises of honor are internally debated and opens up new ways of living.

The part of the soul associated with honor in Homer, Plato, and other Greek literature is the thumos, usually translated as “spirit.” As Achilles’s internal debate between “mind and spirit” suggests, it was treated by the Greeks as one seat of deliberation, and in Plato it is the part of the soul that, in these internal dialogues, supports the aims of time, honor. The Republic first explicitly

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23. Williams, Shame and Necessity, 73.
25. Ibid., 80.
27. In English, “heart” has this sense of a body part that is the seat of feeling, as in “lion-hearted” or “wearing one’s heart on one’s sleeve,” and perhaps “heartbroken.” Thumos, unlike English “spirit,” has to do with worldly human concerns and relationships, not supernatural entities; the latter may seize one’s hair but not one’s thumos.
mentions *thumos* in Book 2, when Socrates and Glaucon are considering the problem of warfare and whether guardians can be sufficiently courageous to defend the city yet sufficiently loyal to avoid turning on it. Although this is a brief section of the *Republic*, the question they raise resonates throughout the rest of the book and continues to haunt political life. It is the problem at the heart of contemporary gun violence, of rampage shootings but also chronic violence among the dispossessed and the militarization of the police force. How can a society that thrives on competition for consumer goods, and that relies upon force to protect insiders who have these goods from outsiders exploited to produce them, simultaneously cultivate defenders of its way of life and avoid becoming prey to these armed defenders? How can it defend itself against outsiders without creating outsiders within? As Glaucon exclaims, “By Zeus, it won’t be easy.”

Plato’s resolution of this problem depends upon appropriate education of the spirit. Socrates notes living exemplars of this desirable alliance of courage and loyalty: dogs, who are gentle to familiars and fierce toward enemies. Like a dog, this analogy implies, the spirit is part of human purposes but less than completely human. Dogs, who defend property, are a necessary element in elevating a political community over the “city of pigs,” in enabling citizens to live a fully human life, but they are still dangerous unless properly trained. By analogy, the spirit usefully keeps the appetite in check but needs to be put under the control of reason. This marks a shift from Homer, in which mind and spirit negotiated as equals. For Plato, the spirit remains a source of agency, but it should not select its ends. In *Phaedrus*, Plato uses another animal analogy that recognizes *thumos* as a crucial aspect of agency but not a guide to its direction. Socrates likens the soul to “the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer.” Without the horses, who represent spirit (the “beautiful and good” horse) and the appetites (“the opposite”), the chariot cannot move; if the charioteer does not direct the horses, the chariot veers off course. This analogy perhaps better captures how *thumos* works as an honor-focused engine, although the dog analogy better captures the prospect of violence and internal sabotage.

To direct the soul toward the aims of reason, which is the soul’s proper ruler as the person is of the domestic animal, Plato turns to the arts to stamp the spirit with an impression of the good. Among the stories the young in the *Republic* will

29. *Thumos* is evoked but not named in Book 1 when Thrasydamus leaps up in anger at Socrates and insists that justice is support of one’s friends and harm to one’s enemies. Thrasydamus is a case study of what the *thumos* is capable of when unchecked by reason. His interpretation of justice, of course, correlates to the traditional notion of what honor demands. See J. R. S. Wilson, “Thrasymachus and the *Thumos*: A Further Case of Prolepsis in *Republic* 1,” *Classical Quarterly*, n.s. 45, no. 1 (1995): 58–67.


not be told is the story of Achilles. Achilles, driven by honor nearly to destroy his own army, can be no model for a guardian. The education Plato describes in the *Republic* will create a new kind of leader, the philosopher, whose spirit is dominated by reason such that honor aligns with justice. When Plato traces the decline of the ideal republic through four lesser political arrangements in Books 8 and 9, the first stage of decline is “timocracy,” a politics guided by honor, whose rulers are persons dominated by their spirits. A timocracy is the best of the inferior modes of government but inferior all the same, as it represents the domination of honor over justice, spirit over reason, the dog over its master. In presenting the just republic as a better alternative, Plato opens up new ways to be human and a new kind of sociopolitical order in which such persons could thrive. He thus offers a way out of the shame-driven necessity that drove Ajax to suicide and Achilles to destruction. An Achaean warrior might need to kill for the sake of his honor because he could not change his character, but the philosopher would never need to do so. In envisioning an alternative rationale to convention, and alternative ways of being human, Plato counteracts the necessity of violent action.

Plato, that is to say, issues a new kind of “man card.” He does so in response to the question Glaucon and Socrates raise: how a wealthy society can be protected from attacks by both the outsiders it exploits and those inside who, seeing the opportunity to benefit, attack insiders. His resolution to the problem of honor — to respect it as a motivating force but require it to align with justice rather than follow its own ends — might seem a promising basis for addressing gun violence, which proliferates in just such a situation. Yet Plato's answer raises new problems even as it resolves others. Above all, the “guard dogs” within any society — that is, those who are educated to use violence to achieve their ends but expected always to subordinate their own interests to the aims of persons higher in status — are not dogs but human beings and unlikely always to accept their subordination. In establishing a hierarchy of persons within society, and treating those moved by honor as destined to be fighters but not rulers, Plato creates the conditions for a militarized notion of honor that ties it even more firmly to violence. That hierarchy also creates the conditions for competitive, esteem-seeking honor at the expense of equitable relations among peers. And the demotion of spirit from its equal place at the table of decision making becomes grounds for dismissing certain kinds of people — those deemed too influenced by spirit in its various manifestations, for example, “emotional” women and “aggressive” men of color — from equitable access to authority. Insofar as Plato’s “man cards” could only ever be issued to some men, they cannot serve as an alternative to honor

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33. The connections among violence, state sovereignty, and individual self-rule are also analyzed by Harvey Shapiro, drawing on modern and postmodern texts. Harvey Shapiro, “When the Exception Is the Rule: School Shootings, Bare Life, and the Sovereign Self,” in this issue.

34. Plato is famous for also offering guardian status to women. As Jane Roland Martin shows, however, women are allowed this status only insofar as the cards they carry are man cards. See Jane Roland Martin, “Plato’s Female Guardians,” in *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), chap. 2.
to those deemed unqualified to receive them. Honor, having been associated with conventional masculinity and violent aggression, becomes an even more dangerous dog.

In more pragmatic terms, when people feel tugged in one direction by the demands of honor and in another by the demands of reason, telling them one more time to listen to reason is unlikely to have much effect. This is what Appiah’s historical–philosophical case studies establish. It is no solution to gun violence at all to tell gun owners what reason demands. The judgment of school shooters may be clouded by mental illness, but reason is also of limited use where it might be thought better to apply: gun regulation. Although reason can clarify what kind of gun regulation a society might put in place to control internal violence, it can do little to convince citizens to support such regulation when honor tells them otherwise. And honor does tell them otherwise. Most gun owners say they keep a gun to protect themselves and their families against crime. Public health experts warn that keeping a gun in the household creates a risk far greater than the risk of a violent intruder, but this logic has limited sway with those who stake their honor on being able to respond to potential violence with violence. What I hope the preceding analysis of honor as an engine, perhaps but not necessarily aiming toward the good, suggests is that rather than yet more reasons for laws and policies likely to reduce violence, progressive political reform requires a shift in the notion of what honor demands of a man.

Gun Violence and the Crisis in Masculinity

Douglas Kellner’s *Guys and Guns Amok* provides a focused exploration of gun violence’s connection to masculine identities in the contemporary United States. In accentuating “right-wing” extremism, his book obscures the continuity between moderate gun owners’ commitment to gun rights and violent extremists, but it provides insight into how specifically masculine identity is implicated in U.S. gun culture. Kellner argues that rampage violence in American public spaces, which he extends to include acts of domestic terrorism as well as school shootings, is fueled by a toxic brew of media spectacle, a crisis in masculinity, and the availability of guns. In referring to media spectacle, he adopts and adapts Guy Debord’s conception of spectacle as “the overarching concept to describe the media and consumer society, including the packaging, promotion, and display of commodities and the production and effects of all media.”35 Like Debord, Kellner treats media spectacle as relevantly one aspect of an economically stratified society. Kellner addresses the linkages between the actions of domestic terrorists, including school shooters, and the media, with the media serving both as the source of violent scripts addressed to culturally specific identity groups (for example, alienated white men) and as the public stage on which shooters expect their actions to be broadcast.36


36. For a rich consideration of the media’s link to gun violence, see Jane O’Dea, “Media and Violence: Does McLuhan Provide a Connection?,” in this issue.
Noting that contemporary youth are frequently portrayed as a menace (Plato’s dogs again), other times as subject to unprecedented hazards, Kellner emphasizes the inequitable distribution of advantages and disadvantages among them. Young men, especially young white men, are still a privileged group, but they face diminished prospects as compared to earlier generations. Kellner explores the refuge some white men have taken in ultraviolent masculine identities. Cultural, political, and economic changes, Kellner notes, have “robbed white men of positive identities (as family providers, farmers, union members, and so on) and left them feeling besieged and confused.” Some men, Kellner points out, have “made the transformation smoothly, expressing solidarity with other groups and identities in an egalitarian spirit, and constructed identities that were multiple, flexible, and politically progressive.” Others, however, have created a “new strain of white male identity politics fueled by intense rage, resentment, paranoia, and apocalyptic visions, often exploding into violence.”

According to Kellner,

The crisis in masculinity drove many men to seek solace in guns and weapons. Guns and military culture in particular fetishize weapons as an important part of male virility and power, treating guns as objects of almost religious veneration and devotion. In this constellation, the expression of violence through guns and the use of weapons is perceived as an expression of manhood. In recent years, however, gun culture has mutated into a more diffuse military culture where explosives and more lethal weapons are deployed by extremist white male groups and individuals to try to reconstruct even more exaggerated hypermale identities.

Kellner’s account of white male identity politics and extremist groups provides useful social context for understanding the actions of school shooters and other domestic terrorists.

Guys and Guns Amok, however, is less useful for making sense of the wide middle ground between militant extremists and progressives committed to fluid, flexible, gender-egalitarian identities. Many men who disdain expressions of white male identity culture, such as foul-mouthed talk shows and militia movements, enjoy hypermasculinized professional sports and video games. The “amok” metaphor, which connotes a state of battlefield madness, captures the problem of Ajax and school shooters, but not the problem of Achilles, the self-controlled and successful but ultimately more destructive man of honor. A polarized account like Kellner’s, which divides men into the two camps of good progressives and bad right-wingers, is an unsatisfactory means of understanding the logic of men like Adam Winkler, a legal scholar whose Gunfight chronicles recent judicial interpretation of the Second Amendment. Winkler’s analysis is evenhanded and reasonable; the reader gets the sense that he is committed to expansive gun rights but is not one of the extremists he calls “gun nuts.” In the last, affectionate words of his acknowledgments, he reveals why he favors the right to bear arms: his wife (“the love of my life”) and his “beloved” daughter (“who made me want

37. Kellner, Guys and Guns Amok, 92.
38. Ibid., 7–8.
to make the world a better place”). “They embody,” he writes, “the reason a law-abiding person might want to own a gun.” There is evidence that “the absence of guns from children’s homes and communities is the most reliable and effective measure to prevent firearm-related injuries in children and adolescents,” but as a husband and father, Winkler is apparently unconvinced. What the lens of honor provides that Kellner’s analysis lacks is a way to understand why a rational and loving man might put his family at risk for the sake of his self-respect. The masculine ideal that a good man is the protector of his family, as staunch as any guard dog, is widely shared. It can seem benign, but it upholds the arguments of Winkler and other moderate proponents of expansive Second Amendment rights and thereby makes guns widely available within American communities, where they are terribly dangerous. In upholding their honor, such men may find, as did Achilles, that they have inadvertently destroyed those they most love.

**Women and Honor and Human Beings**

Plato’s *Republic* and Kellner’s *Guys and Guns Amok* both respond to a sharply perceived and persistent problem: the threat to good order posed by men of honor who are simultaneously empowered defenders and second-class beneficiaries of that order. Their solutions, however different, share a commitment to stabilizing honor by aligning it with right order, with order founded on a “grand narrative.” For Plato, the ideal republic and its idealized constituents are based on metaphysical certainties, namely the order of the cosmos and the corresponding order of city and soul. After establishing that ideal city and soul in his readers’ imaginations, Plato traces its historical decline, with honor/timocracy/thumos playing parallel roles as first steps down from the ideal. Kellner aligns his theory with cultural studies and Frankfurt school critical theory, and the Marxist influences on the latter continually surface in his references to “progressive” reforms, with “right-wing” men of honor functioning as a drag on that historical trajectory. For Plato and Kellner alike, honor can support good human purposes because those purposes are stable, ascertainable, and historically situated.

What, however, is to be done about honor if one is skeptical of grand historico-metaphysical narratives, unconvinced that there exists a clear path and a designated driver to whose chariot honor should be hitched? One answer is to reissue honor afresh. In “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” Adrienne Rich offers an alternative interpretation of honor that has several appealing features. Her account of honor as honest communication is hitched to no grand narrative. It lends itself to an ameliorative rather than revolutionary, pragmatic rather than


idealistic, approach to addressing gun violence. Furthermore, in both Plato’s and Kellner’s accounts, the esteem/competitive sense of masculine honor predominates, with the mutual recognition sense of honor falling nearly out of sight. In contrast, Rich’s essay parallels the *Iliad* and Appiah’s *The Honor Code* in its awareness that honor also indicates peer-to-peer relationships of equality and respect. Rich reissues honor — masculine and otherwise — in terms that have something to offer those concerned about gun violence in schools.

Whereas “male honor” has had “something to do with killing,” as she notes, and is “something needing to be avenged: hence the duel,” women’s honor has been “something altogether else: virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband.” Strictly gendered delineations of what honor requires are also evident in the realm of interpersonal communication. A man of honor could give his word to a personal or public commitment, and “a man’s ‘word’ sufficed — to other men — without guarantee.” Honesty has not been expected of women, however, and as Rich points out, women “have been expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, pluck eyebrows, shave armpits. . . . We have been required to tell different lies at different times, depending on what the men of the time needed to hear.” Expected to lie, women have become, Rich laments, liars. Men, meanwhile, have been expected to tell the truth — but “about facts, not about feelings. They have not been expected to talk about feelings at all.” Nor have men been expected to tell the truth to women, and Rich accuses “patriarchal lying” of manipulating women “both through falsehood and through silence.”

The question that interests Rich in this piece is whether, through new commitment to honest communication in relationships, “a truly womanly idea of honor [is] in the making.” In reorienting honor from visual spectacle to (honest) speech, Rich’s account of honor is at odds with the predominant metaphor of honor as a matter of surface appearances that runs through Plato, through the correlation of honor and “face,” and through the Latin etymology of “respect” (to look back). Yet her correlation of honor with honest communication in relationships harks back to another scene in the *Iliad* on which Achilles’s honor pivots: his meeting with Priam over the return of Hector’s body. This scene is not conventionally read as about honor at all, but rather as about compassion overcoming rage. I would contend that it is about honor, though in its mutual recognition rather

41. Rich’s piece is, indeed, “notes.” It is an essay in the true sense of an exploratory foray, an attempt. In calling it pragmatic, I mean loosely to associate the ideas in this particular essay of hers with Dewey’s invocation of “the better” rather than “the good,” as well as with Appiah’s look at what honor means in practice — and to suggest it as a practical approach.


43. Ibid., 189.

44. I am grateful to Bryan Warnick for pressing me to clarify my interpretation of this scene. More broadly, I am grateful for his critical feedback on several drafts of this article which improved it throughout.
than its esteem aspect. As the recognition aspect of honor has been relatively neglected, the honor-relevant dimensions of this scene have also been overlooked. Recognizing these dimensions makes Rich’s essay, like Appiah’s analysis of honor as recognition respect within relationship, the reissue of older ideas rather than a complete novelty.

When Priam comes in supplication, Achilles has for twelve days desecrated Hector’s body by dragging it behind his chariot and refusing it proper burial. By overreaching in his use of violence, he stands to lose the honor on which he has staked everything he values. Even the gods are appalled by his behavior, which dishonors Achilles as much as it does Hector. Apollo and Hermes — both gods of good speech — therefore help Priam reach Achilles’s tent, where the two men sit down to talk. Priam’s honest account of his feelings for his son Hector, and his appeal to Achilles’s feelings for his own father, finally move Achilles to pity. Their conversation starts with Priam catching Achilles’s knees in a gesture of supplication, a display of esteem that recognizes Achilles as “dangerous and man-slaughtering,” but after hearing Priam’s grief, Achilles “took the old man by the hand, and set him on his feet again,” thereby recognizing Priam as a respect-worthy equal. Through honest communication in and about relationships between men, Achilles comes to treat the dead Hector and his kin as he ought to, thus reestablishing his honor. While Achilles’s claim to esteem as the greatest of warriors is maintained through the public spectacle of his quarrel with Agamemnon and its eventual resolution, his identity as a good prince can only be maintained through this conversation (which takes place, appropriately, in his private tent).

Rich declares that honor’s requirement of honest communication among peers has been shamefully neglected by men and is rightfully taken up by women. Although she explicitly states that “[t]hese notes are concerned with relationships between and among women,” her insight need not be limited by that focus. “The possibilities that exist between two people, or among a group of people,” she concludes, “are a kind of alchemy.” Rich associates the transformative potential of honest relationships with political, as well as personal, change. “Truthfulness, honor,” she writes, “has to be created between people. This is true in political situations. The quality and depth of the politics evolving from a group depends in very large part on their understanding of honor.” Plato and Homer would concur.

When relationships are determined by manipulation, by the need for control, they . . . are repetitious. The shock of human possibilities has ceased to reverberate through them. . . . It isn’t that to have an honorable relationship with you I have to understand everything, or tell you everything at once, or that I can know, beforehand, everything I need to tell you. It means that most of the time I am eager, longing for the possibility of telling you. That these possibilities may seem frightening, but not destructive to me. That I feel strong enough to hear your tentative and groping words. That we both know we are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth between us.

The reissue of honor along such lines would reissue man cards, perhaps even human being cards.

In regard to the problem of gun violence in America, fostered by notions of honor that make guns available and marginalize some for the sake of upholding social hierarchies, this suggests a deceptively simple response. Masculine honor needs to involve listening to outsiders, recognizing them as equals even when their truths are painful to hear, and speaking honestly in response, about feelings as well as facts. Remember that Chinese elites ended foot binding when their “honor peer group” expanded, and that rampage shootings happen rarely in urban schools, where adolescents have a varied range of social contacts. Boys who are exposed to a variety of ways of being a man, to peers with diverse aspirations and values, and to images of masculinity that align with a plurality of values, I suspect, have more ways to consider their man cards issued. The trick, of course, is that alternative masculinities are only plausible as honorable alternatives if they are recognized as such by those positioned to confer honor — by an honor peer group, that is. Feminist poets are well poised to envision social change, but it requires man card holders actually to change masculine honor. By Zeus, as Glaucon might say, it won’t be easy. Why, after all, would those already holding these cards want to change the terms of their issue? Because, perhaps, not to do so puts at risk both the honor and the relationships that they, like all human beings, hold dear.