

DEFINING HONOR. A LOOK AT MODERN LEXICOGRAPHICAL WORKS

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Orbis Idearum, Vol. 4, Issue 1 (2016), pp. 119-132

ABSTRACT

This article outlines the origins of the word “honor” in Western Civilization, and the definitions given to it in the first modern lexicographical works. The study is limited to major European languages: English, French, German, and Italian. Polish tradition is also included because of the similar spelling, and similar meanings that can be found in given examples. The history of the term-and-concept “honor” reaches at least Ancient Roman tradition and lasts until contemporary times. The conclusion of this analysis is that the existence of the word “honor” in Western Civilization for over two thousand years reveals its culture-forming importance. It is not only because of the huge importance it was given by some of the most prominent Western thinkers. Another reason why the term-and-concept of “honor” is important nowadays is its importance in understanding the phenomenon of modern terrorism.

1. ORIGINS OF THE WORD *HONOR*

The Oxford Dictionary, among many variants, defines honor²⁰⁹ first of all as “high respect; esteem”.²¹⁰ The roots of this word reach back to the Ancient times, mostly Roman tradition. The Old-Latin word *honos* is perceived as the antecedent of the Modernized-Latin language *honor*. *Honos* was the name of one of the Roman gods that was the patron of bravery and justice, especially during warfare. *Honos* at the very beginning was just a name for a god (Platner 1929, 258-260). It was around the 3rd Century BC when the Roman politician and warlord, Fabius Maxi-

²⁰⁹ *honor* is the American spelling for the British *honour*.

²¹⁰ oxforddictionaries.com [25-11-2016].

mus, ordered a temple devoted to this god to be raised (ibid.). Although the temple does not exist anymore, Samuel Ball Platner proves that the god itself was depicted with two attributes, a spear and the horn of plenty implying the military character of this god²¹¹. The spear is a symbol of war, and the horn of plenty reflects inner wealth, courage, and overcoming fear in battle.

The co-appearance of these symbols in the figure of the god reveals the importance of the previously mentioned traits for the Ancient Romans. After almost two centuries, Marcus Tullius Cicero writes about *honor* – a modernized but equivalent version of *honos*. Basically, there are two sources of wealth: the first one is connected to material goods (money, possessions, etc.), and the second source is moral. Although Cicero gives no clear definition of honor, to quote him “honor is the reward of virtue” [*honor est praemium virtutis*] (Stone 2005, 167), and it can be described both as moral and ethical. More than that, it is not completely separated or alienated from business. According to George Bragues:

Cicero is not so naïve as to fail to see that the beneficial and the honorable may come into tension, noting various examples from business to illustrate the dilemma. But he insists a businessperson can be ethical and prosper at the same time once he/she comprehends the social fellowship of humanity (Bragues 2010, 21).

There is also another important work of Cicero, *On Moral Duties*, in which he mentions honor in various contexts almost thirty times (Cicero/Miller 1928). There are also other examples from this period for using the word honor. It can be found in the writings of Titus Livius (Livius / Kościółek 1968), Ovid (Ovid 2004), Plautus (Riley 1912), Quintilian (Quintilian / Butler 1920), Aulus Gellius (Gellius / Rolfe 1927), Sallust (Sallust / Ahlberg 1919), Suetonius (Suetonius / Thomson), Valerius Maximus (Maximus / Kempf 1888) and Tacitus (Tacitus / Church et al. 1942). Besides the different contexts of using this word, such as religion, military warfare, morality, ethics, and many others, one can find a common root for all of them – it is honesty and respect.

Boetius, who translated the works of Aristotle, also contributed to the popularization of honor. Aristotle used the word *time*, translated by

²¹¹ Honos was also depicted on Ancient Roman coins, e.g. see the collection at <da-vy.potdevin.free.fr> [24-11-2016].

Boetius into Latin as *honor*. Despite different origins, it shares the meaning related to respect and honesty. There was also a Latin grammarian, Gaius Marius Victorinus, who translated works of Aristotle, among others. He is also important because he wrote commentaries to the works of Cicero. Paul Vincent Spade claims even that all knowledge about logic, until the 12th Century, is owed to these translations (Spade 2013). From the time of these translations onwards, we can speak of two important phenomena for the further development of Western Civilization: 1) the broadening of the semantics of honor due to the preservation and translation of works from different traditions (Roman, Greek, Hebrew, and Christian); 2) the strong influence of Greek and Roman philosophers on the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages was not a very profound period in history when it comes to honor, mostly because of it being replaced with another related word, *dignitas*, probably more appropriate for the dominant religion at that time, Christianity. Nevertheless, honor still can be identified when it comes to chivalry. Knights' honor is mentioned among others by Richard Barber (Barber 2000), who writes about chivalry in the Middle Ages. As this social group was mainly involved in wars, honor was associated with glory and fame, but also with courage. There are many literary examples proving the usage of the word honor, such as *The Song of Roland*, *Beowulf*, or the tale of King Arthur just to name a few of them. Many works at that time remained anonymous, but we can find some passages on honor in works of one of the most important thinkers of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas. He writes about honor in *Summa Theologiae*, mainly discussing magnanimity. In answering question number 129 on whether magnanimity is about honors, he explains: "But honor is a concupiscible good since it is the reward of virtue. Therefore it seems that magnanimity is not about honors." (Aquinas 1947, II: 129). This is strong evidence that Aquinas shared Cicero's understanding of honor. Since the Middle Ages, honor has become specific for some social groups reinforced by so called "honor codes". These are written or spoken sets of rules and behavior shared by communities or social classes. As chivalry developed into nobility in many European countries, honor was still present in their codes of behavior. It is still visible in dueling codes, but also in the education that aristocrats / nobility received, e.g. the model of education advised by John Locke in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Locke 1693).

Indeed, the peak of popularity of honor codes dates much later, i.e. Modern Times. Enlightened philosophers started returning to the classical philosophy of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, reading it anew, and honor was one of their subjects of interest. Since the appearance of the new, Cartesian model of thinking, we can also speak of more precise conceptualizations and examples of honor.

In order to understand what honor used to mean in the past, and what it means today, it is not enough to identify moments when word honor was only mentioned, but an attempt at reconstructing the meanings of honor is needed as well.

2. DEFINING HONOR. CHOSEN LEXICOGRAPHICAL EXAMPLES

Probably the first methodologically-disciplined work attempting to explain the meaning of honor was *Honor redivivus: or, The analysis of honor and armory* written by Matthew Carter, published first in 1660. There we find a plenty of examples of usage of word honor, also referred both: to the Ancient works and real-life examples (Carter 1660, 2, 7). Carter makes classifications of nobility as the referred to honorableness later. He distinguishes “three *Species*: Nobility supernatural, Nobility natural, and Nobility civil or political” (Ibidem, 2). Per this classification, e.g., not noble man could not marry noble person. The Sense of nobility have influenced the sense of honorability, and effected in shaping society, which is another analogy to Ancient Times. Another thinker outlining meanings of honor, Benjamin Truman, gives honor a specific context of dueling in chosen countries. He combines and compares different honor-related rites and customs related to this form of solving problems. But it is not a type of analysis that could give clear definition of honor. Instead, Truman describes a lot of different duels throughout times and places that could be useful in describing honor as a phenomenon. But there is an essay of Robert Ashley, dated between 1596 and 1603 where he clearly defines honor as “A certain testimony of virtue shining of itself, given of some man by the judgment of good men” (Ashley 1947, 34). This is another evidence for continuation of Ancient meaning given by Cicero, and shared by Aquinas.

The historical momentum signed by the invention of the press, and the enormous work of *Encyclopédistes* turned the attention of scholars to

lexicons, *Encyclopaedia*, and specialist dictionaries, as comprehensive works explaining and defining different words, notions, concepts, ideas. Brief and synthesized definitions not only helped to navigate and communicate in the field of new sciences, but they are also a good point of reference when reconstructing meanings of honor.

Since 18th and 19th centuries, such philosophers as Johann Gottfried Herder, continued to develop the idea of nation that entailed the development of national languages. Instead of *lingua franca*, since Enlightenment we should take into consideration also other languages. Accordingly, national dictionaries of most important traditions (French, Anglo-Saxon, Italian, German) of that time should be investigated to find out whether Ancient meaning of honor given above is anyhow equivalent with new locally-born and linguistically formalized traditions. France, United Kingdom, Italy or Germany were not isolated cultures but they affected each other to some degree. Despite being most influential at the time of Enlightenment, they also influenced other linguistic traditions, such as e.g. Polish. Samuel Bogumił Linde, author of the first edition of *Dictionary of Polish Language* does reveal how impactful Western traditions were in fact. His work appeared after *A Dictionary of the English Language* edited by Samuel Johnson and the French *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, but it came before the famous Grimm brothers' *Deutsches Wörterbuch* – this is the reason why it should be considered in this analysis. Furthermore, comparing the pivotal lexicons and dictionaries to the most recent editions might help finding contemporary definition(s) of honor.

When it comes to early leading European lexicographical works, one has to mention *A Dictionary of the English Language in which the Words are Deduced from their Originals* edited by Samuel Johnson. Surprisingly, there is no entry fully devoted to honor or the British version – *honour* – but this word and its variations, such as *honour*, *honourable*, or *dishonourable* are used to describe other concepts (Johnson 1755). The later, Oxford version of the dictionary of the English language includes a separate entry referring to honour (Sampson / Weiner 1989). Here appears the distinction between the North American and British traditions. Apparently, the major distinction lays in the spelling of the word, but not in its meaning. In this work one can find many other spellings of honor, such as *honur*, *honure*, *honnoure*, *honnor*, *honore*, or *honor-em*. which is supported

by various examples dating back to William Shakespeare literary works. All the above, regarding their context, basically mean: reputation, esteem, official honors, a gift, ornament, or grace and beauty (Ibidem). There is a mention of the mute letter *h* that confirms the Latin roots of this word; it can be supported by the fact that in today's Italian language honor is expressed by the word *onore*.

In general, the analysis of the honor entry in the Oxford dictionary leads to distinguishing approximately ten major meanings: first of all, it means respect, esteem or glory, especially when referring to a high social rank, position or title. This type of honor can be awarded and received, but also reached, e.g. on the battlefield or during a duel. This implies reputation, fame, and the good name of the honoree (Ibid.). Secondly, honor can refer to the last feature above, namely a good name. In the context of the monarchic state it is especially visible in the United Kingdom, a country where the highest social classes use noble titles (Earl, Duke, Lord, etc.). In addition to titles, one can detect honors as privileges. The exclusive character of honorable groups such as aristocrats implies a knowledge of how to proceed in different situations, how to behave and what is the right thing to do in order to follow honor codes (Ibid.). In such groups one's *word of honour* is very important; it means a statement or promise without any backing in legal acts or contracts but the spoken word. Keeping one's promises is the feature of *gentlemen* who are then considered trustworthy. Thirdly, honor oscillates around the chastity of women. This meaning of honor is the highest value appreciated among women, although looked at from a male perspective. When her chastity is lost, then a woman's honor is lost. Today, some cultures still cultivate this type of honor, treating it as being deadly serious. Deadly, because some Pakistani families are entitled to kill their family members when having extramarital sex or living a lifestyle contradictory to a more traditional one.

The fourth meaning, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary* means exaltation or awarding of a special social function, position, or rank. In this sense honor is compared to gold, but with an even higher value. The next meaning is linked to the previous, but accentuating more a feature of a man or woman expressing his/her status. Usually, this type is seen during official ceremonies, celebrations, and manifestations. One can also pay honor to an individual, which means not only awarding some medals but financial prizes, too. Honor also still remains a form of courtesy;

in this regard some references were made to the meaning of “etiquette”, as more broadly described by Denisa Čechová in contemporary literature. What is essential in the context of honor groups is that by not obeying some rules, one can be excluded from them (Čechová 2016, 13). In general, some honor-related manners, rites, and habits are visible in everyday life – from parties, the eating of meals, to funerals (Sampson / Weiner, op. cit.). Moreover, a *salvo of honor* is often committed when war heroes or people of noble birth in some countries die.

Sampson and Weiner mention honor in the educational space, especially the academic and university ones. Honor can mean a special award for proficiency and excellence in scientific disciplines. When somebody is an excellent graduate in France, then usually the highest academic degree is called *très honorable avec félicitations*; this can also be called an “honorable mention”. Not only good work but a minted coin can be a mark of honor. Scholarships and special awards are also marks of honor. Outstanding students are usually offered some extra exclusive courses accompanied by a special honorary paycheck. Academia can be compared to some honor groups as well: hierarchical, with particular codes of behavior, sometimes dress codes, language and other related elements. Esteem is one of the more valuable elements of these societies, and measured by titles, awards, degrees and so on.

The seniority over lands, even during feudal times, is another meaning mentioned in the dictionary (Sampson / Weiner, 357). It can be both a phenomenon as well as a person, but it is not always honorable men who are named heroes. It depends on the actions undertaken to prove honorability. For example, a soldier can be a hero but an aristocrat ruling some lands will not be viewed the same way. Besides this, authors in literature also mention honors in games, especially card games. It appears in many linguistic forms and phrases, for example: a *debt of honor*, *upon one's honor* or *codes and laws of honor*. The meanings change when forming compound words – *honor roll*, *honor-giver/seeker*, *honors degree* are just a few that illustrate this.

Despite the slight difference between the spelling of honor in British and American traditions, the second one in its meaning is very similar to the British. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* edited by William Morris (Morris 1992, 868) defines and describes the uses of the word honor. It is 1) “High respect, as that shown for special merit; esteem”; “A source of cause of credit: *was an honor to the profession*”; “3.a.

Glory or recognition; distinction". They can be symbolized with "A mark token, or gesture of respect or distinction: [for example] *the place of honor at the table*." The same as in previous works, honor has its place in military contexts: "C. A military decoration"; and when referred to titles "D. A title conferred for achievement". It corresponds with descriptions of a man's character and personality: "4. Nobility of mind; probity". According to Morris, honor regulates codes of behavior: "9.a. A code of integrity, dignity, and pride, chiefly among men, that was maintained in some societies, as in feudal Europe, by force of arms; "B. Principled uprightness of character; personal integrity". It does not mean that women are not honorable. The honor of women is expressed as *chastity*: "C. A woman's chastity or reputation for chastity". Again, the analyzed notion appears in sports and academia: "10. honors. Social courtesies offered to guests: *did the honors at tea*" (*Ibidem*). In addition, one can also find synonyms, idioms, and collocations in the *American Heritage Dictionary of English Language* such as *hommage, reverence, veneration, awe, deference, honorable, discharge, honorable mention, honorarium, honorary, honoree, honorific, and honor society*.

When moving forwards in Western specialist works, it is essential to consider the French *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. In this work, reedited until today, one can find very metaphysical references of honor (*honneur*), especially in Augustine of Hippo's works, and the relation of honor to the Christian God (*Dictionnaire... 1694, 568*). Special attention is put on *outer* honor, i.e. its social aspect. Basically, besides these, the other meanings are very similar to the previously analyzed sources.²¹² *Deshonneur* (Eng.: dishonor) and *honneste* (Eng.: honesty) are both very important notions for judging someone's honorability. The latter concepts

²¹² *Ibid.*, On dit prov. *A tous Seigneurs tous honneurs*, pour dire, qu'il faut rendre honneur à chacun selon son rang & sa qualité.

On dit par civilité, *Sauf vostre honneur*, pour dire, Sauf le respect que je vous dois. Il est vieux. *L'honneur sauf je consens à cela, pourveu que cela ne prejudicie pas à l'honneur, l'honneur sauf*.

Honneur, signifie encore, Vertu, probité. *C'est un homme d'honneur, un vray homme d'honneur. c'est un homme plein d'honneur. il aime l'honneur, il aimeroit mieux mourir que de faire une mauvaise action. il y a de l'honneur en son fait. ce sont des gens d'honneur. il n'a ni coeur ni honneur. il est sans honneur. faire reparation d'honneur à une personne qu'on a offensée en son honneur.*

On dit par maniere de serment, *Sur mon honneur. je vous en respons sur mon honneur.*

En parlant des femmes, *Honneur*, signifie Pudicité, chasteté. *C'est une femme d'honneur, sans honneur. Elle a fait faux bond a son honneur. Elle a forfait à son honneur*".

also imply a virtue, a breaking through ethics, and crossing over to morals. More contemporary works, such as *Le Grand Robert de la langue française* (De Paul Robert 1989, 235-239) do not differ much from their enlightened ancestors. Maybe some other examples are used to portray the above-mentioned meanings but the core meanings are basically repeated.

What sketches the semantic bounds of honor in Western civilization is confirmed by the Italian tradition. Although Italy was only formed as a united country in 1861, Italian language came into existence long before political unity. One needs to mention an influential work in the language – Angelo Monosini's *Floris Italicae linguae libri novem*. Nevertheless, the heavy critique of this work²¹³ redirects the analysis onto *Nuovo vocabolario illustrato della lingua italiana* (Devoto et al. 1991), which is comparable with previous sources. First of all, the spiritual or metaphysical meaning of honor is displayed. This type of honor can be preserved even when losing all material goods: *tutto è perduto, fuorchè l'onore* (Ibidem, 2066). Then the military aspect is mentioned, as well as the so-called word of honor: *parola d'onore*. A person who gives their word of honor is truthful, sincere, and such a man is called *un uomo d'onore*. But what is especially interesting – that was not identified in previous works – is a crime or honor killing, or an honourable kill – *delitto d'onore* (Devoto, op. cit.) – that is somehow comparable with honor killing among some Arabic cultures, but also in the southern United States of America (McConnell 2013).

There is also educational aspect elaborated a bit more broadly, namely there is a phrase *scolari che fanno onore al maestro* describing honor that students bring to their master. Not only is this an example of idealistic orientation in education, but the hierarchical structure of educational processes. The teacher is not only an instructor or tutor supporting the individual development of students, but also taking care and responsibility for their morals. Besides further aesthetical meanings, there are some other words describing honorability: *onorévole* means simply honorable, usually referring to a personal feature acting towards honorable deeds, as well as a noun *onorévolezza* – honorability, and *onorévolmente* – de-

²¹³ Cf. A. Monosini: *Floris Italicae linguae libri novem*: cf. H. Burger: *Phraseology*, de Gruyter 2007, Vol.2; F. Pignatti / A. Monosini: *Etimologia e proverbio nell'Italia del XVII secolo - Floris italicae linguae libri novem*, Vecchiarelli Editore 2011; M. Vitale: *Studi di Storia della Lingua Italiana*, LED Edizioni Universitarie 1992.

scribing some actions as honorable. Anyway, these are more social phenomena, rather than straight definitions.

When it comes to Germanic tradition, there is a different word for honor – *Ehre*, although the meanings are covering those previously mentioned. The very first modern dictionary analyzed is *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*. At first one finds the etymology of the word (Grimm 1971, 54-58), and later the meanings: metaphysical, military, female and personal honor, as well as other contexts connected with titles, esteem and others. Even more specific is the contemporary *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* edited by Joachim Ritter (Ritter 1972). In this case, etymological roots are sought in the ancient words of *honor*, *bona*, and *fama* that eventually shaped *Ehre* (Ibidem). By reference to ancient authors, such as Homer, the notion is meant to be central to the meaning of human life – *In beiden zeigt sich die E[hre] als von zentraler Lebensbedeutung* (Ibid., 391).

Finally, to give an example of how impactful these traditions were, let's see the Polish example. In the *Dictionary of Polish Language* Bogumił Linde gives some root-meanings of honor that are: reverence, veneration, and honesty (Linde 1808, 834). He makes references to other European languages, among others German, where *Ehre* is mentioned as being the equivalent to honor. There is also some typology that outlines two major types of honor: inner and outer (Ibid., 24). Inner honor is personal, while outer honor can be much more visible for others because it appears in titles, awards, medals, and other visible signs of honoring each other. At the same time, inner honor is not that well defined because it refers to somebody's morals, wisdom, and deeds perceived as being "honorable". Comparing Linde's work with recent editions of the *Dictionary of Polish Language*, some common meanings of honor can be outlined.²¹⁴ Honor means the feeling of personal dignity, honorableness and good name, some privilege of credit, but honor also appears in card games to describe particular card configurations. Honors (in the plural form) also mean majesty, as well as decorations and visible signs of respect. Various contexts of the use of honor are often expressed with other words, such as 'respect', 'ambition', 'pride', 'esteem', and 'dignity'. The analysis also included the communist version of the dictionary where one can also find the analyzed concept. In this case some elements of heavy political

²¹⁴ *Słownik Języka Polskiego* PWN, <sjp.pwn.pl> [24-03-2016].

correctness and ideological influences can be noticed (Friedman / Narveson 1995). Witold Dorszewski's edition places honor in the context of work, which is the honor and duty of a citizen (Dorszewski 1958-62). Hard work, such as that of miners' for example, is respected even more than others, while post 1989 editions revert back to Linde's meanings, just elaborating them more or less, but eventually without communist ideological baggage.

As can be noticed from the above illustrations, honor has a common meaning repeated in Western linguistic tradition. Moreover, this notion can be expressed in other words which makes it an idea. Thus, it can be found in a *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (Horowitz 2004, 1002). Sonya Lipsett-Rivera sketches the tales of the idea of honor in various contexts, therefore displaying most of meanings identified in lexicographical works. One of main outcomes of her analysis is the application of one model of honor to different cultures. Consequently, she claims that honor is not only a polysemic idea but it can be also expressive of an ethical value, dependent on the social circumstances it appears in. The cultural factor is progressing in parallel with honor.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we outlined the origins of word "honor". They are reaching back to Ancient Rome, but we have also proved that other traditions, mostly Greek, contributed to the contemporary meaning of honor. It is an interesting fact that major European languages preserved the Latin semantic root of *honor*. Local translations are just slightly modified versions of honor (*honour, honneur, Ehre, onore* etc.). It shows that Latin-language tradition was dominant throughout ages, and affected shapes of local / national languages. Moreover, we outlined a variety of different meanings of honor and its linguistic equivalents. Despite this variety we can identify the core meaning that is common for most of conceptualizations. Honor, mostly during the Enlightenment, became a concept (or idea) expressible in many other words, and described by them. Among them we find "good name," "esteem," "respect," "honesty," "chastity," "fame," and others. But this core meaning is always connected to the situation of respecting somebody or something – an honorable deed. This admiration and respect can effect in

improving social status, gaining fame, belonging to a new group. It reveals honor's importance for society, and strong culture-forming function.

Another important aspect is that, in most cases, the meaning of honor implies actions. This word is linked to social actions and interactions since the beginning of its existence. Only the brave, free, honest and truthful, were honorable during Ancient wars. These were deeds, not only spoken declarations, that could prove or redeem somebody's honor – in most extreme cases these were duels meaning bloodshed very often.

Lipsett-Rivera points out another point, namely application of honor to different cultures (than the Western one). The meaning delineated above is specific for Western civilization only, while contemporariness can be characterized with increasing multiculturalism crossing over Western roots. Nomadism is nothing new to the history of mankind. Anyway, in some cases, applications of core-Western concepts, such as honor, to the new context that is not strictly Western, can bring misunderstanding and conflict – see the example of Crusaders. The situation can be even reversed: application of non-Western concepts onto the Western context can bring similar consequences. It should be borne in mind especially when it comes to big concepts shaping human life: e.g. good, god, truth, beauty, common good, and so on. Due to relations of honor to social participation, social rank and esteem, probably we might include honor to these big concepts. There is also an example below to illustrate the seriousness of the intercultural word-applications:

This is why the most belligerent statements of the terrorists mention „honor” or „manhood” much more often than they do any distinctively religious concept. “We believe that we are men, Muslim men who must have the honor of defending Mecca,” says Osama bin Laden, contrasting his own forces with “the weakness, feebleness, and cowardliness of the US soldier” (Bowman 2007, 21).

The new contexts of using word *honor* reveal the importance for further study, namely the analysis of honor as social phenomenon. Maybe honor itself, as a word, is now seen as old-fashioned. Maybe we have more accurate ones, fitting better to contemporary context. Although nowadays we face the realm of contemporary international terrorism that

literally uses word honor as a mean for justification of its deeds. Henceforth, it is not just a matter of historical curiosity about what honor has meant in the past or how knights had run their life. Now it is a matter of security that brings our attention back to this concept-whether we want it or not.

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