

VILHJÁLMUR ÁRNASON

AN ETHOS IN TRANSFORMATION: CONFLICTING VALUES IN THE SAGAS

THIS PAPER is divided into two parts. In the first part, I discuss how interpretations of saga morality harbour different conceptions of honour. I am critical of attempts to analyze the “moral outlook” of the sagas in terms of ideas and character traits, taken out of social context. Though I stress the close relationship between saga morality and social structure, I warn against the tendency to reduce morality to a mere function of social processes. It follows from my basic approach that in order to compare ethical models and value orientations, thorough knowledge and analysis of the societies in question is required. I lack the resources to evaluate to what extent saga morality is unique but I rely largely on Jesse Byock’s analyses of medieval Icelandic society which provide reasons for showing why the saga virtues take on a distinctive form.

In the second part of the paper, I argue that the overarching values related to unconditional claims for honour on the one hand, and social need for peace on the other hand, exemplify a tension between two different types of morality. I discuss examples of classical virtues in *Njáls saga* which require both genuine moral analysis but also awareness of how they are channelled in distinctive ways because of the special social and political structure of the Icelandic Free State. This structure relies heavily on personal characteristics and the saga demonstrates how virtues are by themselves inadequate to solve the main task of morality. I argue that the uniqueness of saga morality resides primarily in describing virtues and political processes that contribute to peaceful settlements.

I

There is no framework of ethics in the sagas, no reflective attempt to analyze moral behaviour or norms. By telling about human interaction in a social world, however, the sagas of the Icelanders inevitably describe a morality, portray an ethos impregnated with values and virtues, norms and obligations. The narrative of the sagas is rather silent about orderly domestic life but is fuelled by disruption or conflicts of interest that have consequences in the public sphere. Hence they tell us more about public morality relating to conflict resolution than about private morality. These two aspects of morality are inevitably related, however, because every morality requires a political environment which facilitates orderly existence and protects values that are sought after in people's everyday dealings. This has been recognized by all the major thinkers in the history of ethics, most explicitly by Aristotle who regarded politics as the master science of the good for man: "For even if the good is the same for the individual and the state, the good of the state clearly is the greater and more perfect thing to attain and to safeguard."¹ According to my reading, the sagas are concerned with politics in this grand sense, morality in "the headless polity", as Jesse Byock has referred to the Icelandic Free State.² Morality in the narrower sense of mundane interaction is often left to the silence mentioned in phrases like "var nú kyrrt um hríð", "now everything was quiet for a while".

Everyday interaction takes place against a more or less tacitly assumed background of norms. When conflicts occur, they tend to make some of these norms more explicit and to provide reasons for reconsidering their validity.³ From the standpoint of narrative this emphasis on conflict is understandable, there is no need to tell about the ordinary. But by telling about the extraordinary – the episodes when orderly co-existence was disrupted – the sagas place basic values and social norms into sharp focus. At the same time, they portray interaction where individuals' virtues and vices, as well as their ability to uphold their obligations, are put to the test.

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1962), 4–5 [1094b].

² Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 2.

³ "Moral judgment serves to clarify legitimate behavioural expectation in response to interpersonal conflict resulting from the disruption of our orderly coexistence by conflict of interests." Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 9.

In this way the ethos of the Free State appears clearly, yet admittedly from a limited perspective.⁴

Let me explain this by means of an example. It has been convincingly argued that in the context of the sagas, *sæmd*, or honour, was “at stake in virtually every social interaction”.⁵ This interaction takes place against a rich normative background which provides meaning and validity to everyday conduct and underpins the self-understanding and identity of the actors. Presumably, these elements would not become subjects of a narrative unless they were somehow threatened so that they had to be explicitly defended. It is the means of defending them, the ways in which conflicts are handled that are in focus in the sagas. A major reason why the procedural aspects of honour come to the fore is that it affects the entire society how conflicts are handled. So conflict brings not only the normative background to awareness but also makes at least some of the actors aware of its relevance for the entire polity. Personal honour – how it is regarded and the way in which it is upheld and defended – thus becomes a concern of the state or of the community at large.

There are various interpretations of the morality of the sagas and elsewhere I have roughly divided them into three main categories.⁶ I will briefly summarize them here, draw out their distinctive characteristics and relate them to recent interpretations of saga morality. I do this in light of the question concerning whether or not the sagas portray value orientations and ethical models that may be considered part of a distinctive Nordic civilisation. Since interpretations agree that *sæmd*/honour is a key concept of saga morality, but conflict as to how *sæmd* is to be understood in the context of the sagas, I use their portrayal of this notion to tease out their differences.

I distinguish between romantic and humanistic interpretations of saga morality which imply a radically different understanding of honour. In the

⁴ In her book, *Ethics and action in thirteenth-century Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), Guðrún Nordal provides a rich general analysis of ethical norms and behaviour which goes far beyond the political.

⁵ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 29.

⁶ Vilhjálmur Árnason, “Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 90 (1990:2): 157–174; also “Saga og siðferði. Hugleiðingar um túlkun á siðferði Íslendingasagna,” *Timarit Máls og menningar* 46 (1985:1): 21–37.

romantic view, *sæmd* is understood as a personal sense of honour and pride, and saga morality is analyzed primarily in terms of individual qualities and attitudes. This also explains the dynamics of the sagas: disputes were started when somebody's sense of honour was hurt and he or his family had to make up for it. For the hero, life without honour was worthless, and the only thing of lasting value was an honourable reputation.⁷ Gísli Súrsson provides a good example of a hero from the romantic point of view.⁸ Gísli was a great man, who in his killings was fulfilling his duty to his fosterbrother and defending his family honour, even though it meant killing his sister's husband, who was also his brother's best friend and the family's chieftain. Typically seen as a tragic figure, the romantic hero is said to exemplify values and virtues of Nordic heathen origin which were radically opposed to Christian ideals.

Under the heading of "romantic" readings of the sagas, I have drawn out the typical views of many saga scholars, especially those from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. But no less important is the "layman's view of the sagas and the principles they embody: a reading which", the Icelandic philosopher Kristján Kristjánsson recently argued, "still prevails in the public consciousness".⁹ Kristján has reconstructed this popular reading of saga morality and argues that it "represents a virtue based ethics where he or she who achieves moral excellence becomes a great minded person (*mikilmenni*)."¹⁰ "Great minded persons," Kristján writes, "are paragons of moral virtue, guided by a strong sense of self-respect, and they are not lacking in self-esteem either, being well aware of their own merits."¹¹ Kristján observes that "every saga reader has their favorite exemplar" of a hero who portrays this great mindedness.¹²

Kristján does not think that the moral outlook of the sagas is unique.

⁷ Cf. Ólafur Briem, *Íslendinga sögur og nútíminn* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1972), 32–33.

⁸ Gísla saga Súrssonar, *Vestfirðingasögur*, ed. by Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson. Íslensk fornrit 6. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), 3–118. In English: *The Saga of Gísli the Outlaw*, transl. by George Johnston with Notes and Introduction by Peter Foote (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963).

⁹ Kristján Kristjánsson, "Liberating Moral Traditions: Saga Morality and Aristotle's *Megalopsychia*," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (1998:1): 407.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 412.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 410.

¹² *Op.cit.*

He compares saga morality to the ancient moral outlook of the Greeks and contrasts both with what he calls the modern moral outlook. The modern moral outlook is characterized by Christian and Kantian assumptions about purity of heart and moral equality of persons. Kristján is critical of sociological readings of the sagas and makes no attempt to relate these moral outlooks to different social structures or to historical development. For him, moral values and virtues can be liberated from their original traditions and made viable in the contemporary world. Instead of seeing it as parochial, he argues that there is good reason to study saga morality “as an atemporal, universal moral outlook, relevant to modern concerns.”¹³ According to Kristján, the sagas of the Icelanders, as the Greek ethics of antiquity, present us with an option “at which we need to take a hard look; or at any rate as a potential sources of values to be incorporated into other moral outlooks.”¹⁴

Another Icelandic philosopher, the late Þorsteinn Gylfason, argues in his introduction to *Njáls saga* that some of the moral characteristics that people take to be peculiar to the sagas, such as honour, are very much alive today. He writes: “The importance of honour in *Njála* (and other sagas) is often said to reflect a special morality of honour which is sometimes said to be characteristic of shame cultures, for instance that of the Greece of Homer and the tragedians.”¹⁵ Þorsteinn rejects this reading and, on the basis of a few examples which show that in Iceland “the language of honour and dishonour is perfectly colloquial to this day” and still a major motivation for conduct, he concludes that the “fundamental moral conceptions of *Njála* are shared by us.”¹⁶

Kristján and Þorsteinn both reject the sharp distinction sometimes made between moral cultures of shame and the more modern one of guilt, the former being primarily motivated by received opinion and the latter by more independent conscience or moral conviction of the individual.¹⁷ Both refer to examples where a saga character’s conception of his own honour

¹³ Ibid., 407.

¹⁴ Ibid., 422.

¹⁵ Þorsteinn Gylfason, “Introduction” *Njal’s Saga*, transl. by C.F. Bayerschmidt and L.M. Hollander (Ware: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 1998), xxvii–xxviii.

¹⁶ Ibid., xxviii, xxx.

¹⁷ On this distinction, see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

invites him to go against received opinion (the famous example of Síðu Hallur in *Njáls saga*). But there is an important difference between the positions of Kristján and Þorsteinn. Kristján's reading is characteristically romantic in the sense that he admires the individual qualities of the saga characters and nostalgically inquires about ways to make their virtues – especially that of *stórmennska*, which he takes to be the Icelandic equivalent to the Greek *megalopsychia* – more viable in a contemporary context. Þorsteinn, on the other hand, who maintains that the Icelandic medieval society “was in all essentials the same as that of the rest of medieval Europe, with frequent feuds between clans,” defends two contentions that draw him closer to what I call the humanist position.¹⁸ First, he talks about many acts that in romantic vocabulary would be regarded as tragic result of the duty of vengeance, such as Flosi's action in the burning of Njáll, as “an heinous crime by the laws of his society as well as by his Christian faith.”¹⁹ Secondly, as mentioned before, he takes the fundamental moral conceptions of the sagas to be largely shared by contemporary Icelanders, who are often motivated by a conception of their honour, independent of received opinion.

The major spokesman for the humanist position, Hermann Pálsson, invites us to concentrate on the moral ideas of the text rather than the qualities of individuals.²⁰ If we do so we will see, he argues, that the sagas are to be understood as Christian lessons about the deserving defeat of those who show excessive pride and arrogance. The sagas were not written in order to glorify the so called pagan heroes but rather to preach peace and moderation in the spirit of medieval Christianity. They have the conscious moral objective of teaching people what to aim for and what to avoid in their own lives. The duty of vengeance, which according to the romantic view is a major vehicle of the heroic virtues, becomes a cruel criminal act from the humanistic perspective. From this viewpoint, Gísli Súrsson is a coldblooded criminal who murders his brother-in-law and therefore justly deserves his defeat.²¹

It follows from the humanistic reading that the value orientation and

¹⁸ Ibid., xii.

¹⁹ Ibid., xxi.

²⁰ Hermann Pálsson, *Úr hugmyndabeimi Hrafnkelsögu og Grettlu* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1981), 15.

²¹ Hermann Pálsson, “Icelandic Sagas and Medieval Ethics,” *Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (1974): 64–65.

ethical models portrayed in the sagas of the Icelanders are shared by Christian medieval culture at large, both in their condemnation of pagan conduct and in their presentation of Christian ideas. Both the romantic and the humanistic interpretations can be substantiated by textual references. But they are limited by their guiding hermeneutic ideas that saga morality can be analysed primarily in terms of the moral conceptions or ethical elements – values, virtues, rules and obligations – as such, without inquiring about the particular shape they take in the context of medieval Iceland. In this way, these positions prematurely and erroneously invite comparisons with other cultures. For example, the virtues of the Greek *megalopsychos* are nurtured by a moral context which is radically different from the “modern” ethos and will, therefore, hardly be revived within it.

While similar basic features of morality can be found in every social interaction, they take on a distinctive shape in their interplay with the particular culture of which they are a part. Although there is a common core at the surface or at the abstract level, a study of a concrete, socially conditioned morality cannot isolate the moral elements from the social context.²² If this is not taken into account, then otherwise interesting interpretations of saga morality are endangered by subjectivistic and idealistic reductionism, reducing saga morality to abstract moral values, religious ideas or personal character traits. Such interpretations deal with the subject matter without tracing its roots to the socio-moral substance: the duties and norms of conduct that were peculiar to the Free State, and their relation to the social institutions and political processes which enveloped the distinctive *ethos* of saga society.

It is here that the third interpretation of saga morality marks its field of investigation. It is difficult to generalize about sociological readings of the sagas but they account for individual actions portrayed in the sagas in light of the social structures and political institutions, or rather the lack of them, in the Icelandic Free State.²³ Such readings of the sagas have enabled us to place actions and attitudes in a social setting against which they can be better understood. One of the most interesting and important questions in

²² For an interesting discussion of this point and its relation to relativism, see Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1987), 36–43.

²³ See, for example, Gísli Pálsson, ed. *From Sagas to Society. Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (London: Hisarlik Press, 1992), and Richard Gaskins, “Félagsvísindamannasaga”, *Skirnir* (1997): 237–259.

this context is how the Free State managed to function without executive institutions. An intricate account of this is found in Jesse Byock's theory about feud in the Icelandic sagas.²⁴ Byock argues that the sagas demonstrate how an original system of decision-making and conflict-solving functioned. This "system of advocacy" structured feuds in the Free State, directed disputes into socially accepted channels and brought them to a resolution.

Byock's structural analysis provides a background for understanding and explaining saga morality which differs from both romantic and humanistic interpretations. What is most striking in his account is the displacement of individual heroism in the sagas: "In saga literature brokerage is characterized as a form of worldly societal interchange rather than as the heroic actions of an individual."²⁵ Moreover, some of the most cherished heroes of the sagas, like Gísli Súrsson, are characterized as socially inept individuals who do not know how to employ the socially accepted and available tools. They are like misplaced Vikings, unable to honour the norms of an agrarian society where peace and order are vital. Gísli, for example, makes a deadly mistake, Byock argues, by following "the traditional Norse code of family honour which was no longer appropriate to the settled conditions of Icelandic society."²⁶

The fruitfulness of Byock's analysis lies in the grounding of these phenomena in the social order. Instead of abstracting individuals from their social conditions, he carefully analyzes the social systems and processes which channel and condition human interaction. Byock discusses the framework of human behaviour in medieval Iceland in terms of power relations, creation and distribution of wealth and the specific life conditions of a small nation on a large island in the North Atlantic. He shows how the society of the Icelanders was built both on Scandinavian heritage but also developed in a distinctive direction, mainly due to a unique "proto-democratic" political process. The following words from Jóhann Páll Árnason's book, *Civilizations in Dispute*, can be used to describe the differences between Byock's structural analysis of the sagas on the one hand, and the romantic and humanistic readings on the other hand: "The most funda-

²⁴ Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

mental change of perspective is a shift towards relational conceptions of power: the focus is now on structures, constellations or apparatuses rather than on subjective capacities or dispositions.”²⁷

Within this sociological hermeneutical frame, *sæmd* tends to be regarded primarily as a social asset or commodity that people acquired in their interaction with other people or which was assigned to them by other social actors. Byock calls it an “honorable recompense” paid to a third party for intervening in the affairs of others.²⁸ In a similar vein, William Ian Miller analyzes the “economy of honor” and refers to it as “a precious commodity in very short supply,” even though it was, as cited earlier, “at stake in virtually every social interaction.”²⁹ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has a similar idea about *sæmd* as a limited social good.³⁰ This objectification or commodification of *sæmd* implies that one person’s honour cannot increase except at the cost of somebody else’s honour.

As Helgi Þorláksson has argued and substantiated with convincing counterexamples, this position is not tenable.³¹ Helgi makes a distinction between personal and social honour and maintains that much depends on making this distinction clear. He argues that only the latter can be regarded as goods in short supply, continually competed for by those who were in positions of power or had ambition to gain them.³² Helgi describes personal honour in terms of improving oneself, showing greatness of mind and readiness to defend oneself against attacks. “This personal honour would not be increased by attacking others,” Helgi writes, invoking some of the themes of the romantic reading.³³ I believe that Helgi is right in rejecting the reduction of *sæmd* to a social commodity and thus depriving it, in effect, of important moral features.

²⁷ Jóhann Páll Árnason, *Civilizations in Dispute. Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 202.

²⁸ Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

²⁹ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press), 30 and 29.

³⁰ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortelling og ære. Studier i islændingesagaerne* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1993).

³¹ Helgi Þorláksson, “Virtir menn og vel metnir,” *Sæmdarmenn. Um heiður á þjóðveldisöld*, ed. by Helgi Þorláksson et. al. (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001), 15–22, especially 17–19.

³² *Ibid.*, 20–21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21.

Interpretations of the complex concept of honour in the sagas require a careful contextual reading.³⁴ Honour has both personal and social dimensions and must not be reduced to either. Moreover, the distinction between the personal and the social cannot always be clearly drawn in this context, especially in the cases of powerful men who could bring conflicts to a resolution. Byock writes: “The *goðar* early became political entrepreneurs adept at forming ad hoc interest groups of often unrelated backers. They specialized in advocating client’s interests through arbitration both in and out of courts, and found it honourable and profitable to engage in resolving moderately mature, that is ‘court ready’, conflicts.”³⁵ Byock argues convincingly that in order to succeed in playing the role of an advocate, the individual had to be “a *hófsmaðr*, a person of justice and temperance”.³⁶ It is hard to imagine a person reaching that kind of moral maturity without engaging in the efforts of self-improvement and self-restraint characteristic of personal honour. At the same time, these elements are preconditions for gaining the social capital of increased estimation among the public. In this way, the personal and social aspects of honour seem to be interwoven.

This relates to the question dealt with by both of the aforementioned Icelandic philosophers Kristján Kristjánsson and Þorsteinn Gylfason, whether “honour and shame essentially depend on the received opinion of a community,”³⁷ or whether they reside in the self-conception of the individual, independent of received opinion. If the former, sometimes seen as characteristic of shame cultures, honour is in effect reduced to a social product, leaving little room for genuine moral excellence. This must not be too sharply stated: the question is not about the personal *or* the social, in the sense that personal virtues can be independent of social reputation. Since socialization is individualization the two are obviously interrelated.

A more interesting question in this context concerns the nature of moral thinking and whether it is primarily a strategic or instrumental skill of those who are clever readers of the social landscape of praise and blame, or whether moral prudence is of a more distinctive nature. Sociological

³⁴ Excellent examples of such a reading are found in Vesteinn Ólason, *Samræður við söguöld* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998).

³⁵ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 218.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁷ Þorsteinn Gylfason, “Introduction” to *Njal’s Saga*, xxx.

readings usually disregard this distinction. Byock writes that “Iceland exhibits many aspects of a shame society, in which the conviction of members of the peer group and public opinion at large carried significant influence.”³⁸ To flesh out his point he refers to the episode in *Njáls saga* when Hrútur gives a precious ring to a boy who ridicules him. Byock writes: “Though Hrut is the object of the joke and is shamed by the children’s antics, he is able to prevent utter disaster to his reputation by demonstrating both restraint and generosity. With a sense of graciousness and a largeness of spirit, which he is wise enough to know will be held in high regard and spoken of long after the event, he gives the boy a fine gift.”³⁹

There is a striking shift in this passage, which goes to the heart of the question I am pondering. In one sentence, Byock describes Hrútr’s action as exemplifying “a sense of graciousness and a largeness of spirit” which Kristján takes to indicate the moral excellence of the one who desires to *be* virtuous and not merely to be *seen* as virtuous.⁴⁰ (It might be noted here that in a purely social conception of *sæmd* or *virðing*, seeming to be virtuous could be sufficient; cf. the etymological relations between “seem” and “sæmd”, “virðing” and “virðast”.) In the next sentence, Byock threatens to undermine Hrútr’s largeness of spirit by explaining it in terms of his wisdom of knowing that his noble acts “will be held in high regard and spoken of long after the event.” This makes the nobility of Hrútr’s act dependent on its social reception rather than being the fruit of his fine character and exercise in self-improvement. This and other examples indicate that Byock’s shrewd analysis of medieval Iceland shares, to some extent, the shortcomings of sociological readings when it comes to evaluating the moral dimension of the sagas.

It is instructive to make use of Jóhann Páll Árnason’s civilizational analysis to evaluate the shortcomings of all three interpretations of saga morality that we have considered. He writes: “it seems appropriate to distinguish between economic, political and ideological spheres of the social world. The task of civilizational analysis would then be to show that the constitution, differentiation and interaction of these recurrent clusters of

³⁸ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 226.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁰ Kristján Kristjánsson, “Liberating Moral Traditions”, 415.

social practices take a specific turn at the civilizational level.”⁴¹ One way to describe the limitations of the romantic and humanistic interpretations is that they give the ideological sphere too much independence from the political and economic spheres of the social world, by analyzing the moral constellations in abstraction from social structures of wealth and power. From this viewpoint of civilizational analysis, the major limitation of sociological interpretations is, to the contrary, their tendency to see the ideological sphere as a too passive reflection of the political and economic spheres of the social world. Structural and functionalist perspectives of sociological analyses tend to reduce morality to a function of social processes. As a consequence, human actions in the sagas are not interpreted in the light of moral characteristics but as manifestations of material and societal interests perpetuated by the social system.

In the conceptual framework of Jóhann Páll Árnason’s civilizational analysis, this limitation amounts to a neglect of the ideological sphere, a disregard of the “constellations of meaning” that play a major role in any worldview or articulation of society. In his theory, Jóhann Páll draws upon the implications of Castoriadis’ analysis of the imagination for social theory. “At the most fundamental level, social imaginary significations set up an ontological framework: ‘every society defines and develops an image of the natural world of the universe in which it lives.’”⁴² In the words of Alfred North Whitehead: “Without metaphysical presupposition there can be no civilization.”⁴³ If this is correct, one must ask which metaphysical presuppositions are behind the civilization in the Icelandic Free State. Surely, “the ideology of honour”, as Vésteinn Ólason has described it,⁴⁴ has metaphysical elements which require careful textual analysis and need to be placed in the social context portrayed in the text. The notion of fate is a good candidate for this.

As is to be expected, views on the role of fate in the saga narrative differ radically in the different hermeneutical grids of scholars. For Kristján Kristjánsson, fate serves as this metaphysical underpinning in the sagas. Kristján has been critical of interpretations of saga morality such as my

⁴¹ Jóhann Páll Árnason, *Civilizations in Dispute*, 207.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 227. Jóhann quotes Castoriadis.

⁴³ This is the motto of Árnason’s book, *Civilizations in Dispute*.

⁴⁴ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, 226.

own, which emphasize the relation of saga morality to the social structure and play down the role of religious and other conscious moral ideals. Kristján writes: “any significant ethics must rest on metaphysical presuppositions and I am of the opinion that the sagas are shot through with at least one: ideas about *freedom* and *necessity*.” He argues that the “morality of the saga heroes can only be understood as reactions to outer necessity and inner freedom.”⁴⁵ Kristján rejects the view that the saga characters act unreflectively and takes the words of Gunnarr á Hlíðarendi about his relative reluctance to kill people as an example of moral reflection. Kristján writes: “Indeed saga characters are constantly reflecting upon, hesitating, rejoicing over or regretting their deeds. And in at least one area their moral ideas had profound metaphysical underpinnings, namely, in the upholding of a view about destiny and free will ... a kind of Stoic fate-leads-the-willing-and-drags-the-reluctant attitude to their destiny.”⁴⁶ Kristján argues that the objective style of the saga narrative is delusive in this regard, by neither delving into the depths of the human soul and emotional life nor telling about the complex philosophical ideas the characters had about the nature of the universe.

In his introduction to *Njáls Saga*, Þorsteinn Gylfason considers the role of fate and concludes that there is no fatalism in the saga: “Generally speaking, not a single action of any consequence is presented in *Njála* as being necessitated by fate or planned by any external power.”⁴⁷ This wording shows how radically the notion of fate is decontextualized because the Icelandic fate is interwoven with self-understanding and immanent worldview but does not have an explicit reference to external power. Much in the way as Þorsteinn argued that the fundamental moral notions of *Njála* are shared by us, he states that the author of *Njála* “conceives of *gæfa* and *ógæfa* in the same ways as we do. Hence it is only through an overinterpretation of these words that scholars have been able to read fatalistic beliefs into them.”⁴⁸ Fate plays little or no role in Byock’s interpretations of actions in the sagas. In light of the emphasis he places on “the choice that

⁴⁵ Kristján Kristjánsson, “Að geta um frjálst höfuð strokið,” *Þroskakostir* (Reykjavík: Rannsóknastofnun í siðfræði, 1992), 169 and 172. My translation.

⁴⁶ Kristján Kristjánsson, “Liberating Moral Traditions,” 406.

⁴⁷ Þorsteinn Gylfason, “Introduction” to *Njal’s Saga*, xxiv.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

individuals faced between violence and compromise"⁴⁹ in the Free State, one could argue that from his standpoint the reference to fate is used as a justification for resorting to violence or at least for evading consensual solutions.

There are reasons to believe that in their own way, each of these three accounts of the role of fate in the sagas are misleading, one-sided: mainly because they do not give due consideration to the way in which the metaphysics of fate is related to the ideology of honour that is rooted in cultural conditions which are foreign to the new Icelandic society. The metaphysics of fate provides a perfect background to the old morality of unconditional honour, the rigid imperative of revenge, which does not give people much leeway for deliberation and doubt but provides them with an interpretative key to their personal existence and social world. When the conditions that nourished this old morality are undermined in the transformation of the ethos in the Icelandic Free State, the bonds of the metaphysics of fate inevitably slacken and a space opens up for a rationalizing use of the idea. This goes hand in hand with the opening up of options between responding to the imperative of revenge on the one hand, and adopting a more consensual view towards honourable conflict resolution on the other. Playing on a famous title by John Rawls, I will suggest that what is of primary importance for the distinctive morality and civilization described in the sagas is political, not metaphysical.

II

In my discussion so far I have tried to show how different interpretations of the sagas lead to different understandings of *sæmd*. But there is another general value that is prominent in the sagas, though it is more in the background of the narrative. This is the value of *peace* and the related cluster concepts of *gríð*, *sattir* and other things conducive to peace. Some of the sagas show how the traditional ideal of unconditional *sæmd*, which is associated with the standing of individuals and families, clashes with efforts to secure peace which is of general interest to society as a whole. Vésteinn Ólason has called this "the tension between the desire for revenge and the

⁴⁹ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 2.

impulse for reconciliation“.⁵⁰ Considered from this perspective, the morality of the sagas is primarily procedural in the sense that the main issues are how conflicts are dealt with and peace restored.

Obviously, *sæmd* and peace are not comparable concepts. *Sæmd* is intimately bound up with the self-understanding, self-respect and reputation of the actors on the social scene. Its internal logic relates to the (special) interests of the persons involved but not to the general welfare of the community. It is a thick substantial morality with rigorous imperatives rooted in vulnerable identity.⁵¹ This leads to certain competitive ways of handling disputes – e.g. duty of revenge and duelling – which can threaten the social order. Peace, however, is in the interest of all and co-operative attempts to secure it may require the sacrificing of individual interests. This marks a tension in the sagas between elements of an ethos characterized by particular interests, and moral features which secure the more general interests of the community. This also implies a different understanding of honour; the traditional unconditional *sæmd* is in conflict with a more reflective notion of honour which relates to the co-operative virtues and processes conducive to peace.

One way to account for this moral tension or ethos in transformation is to see how the virtues are depicted in the saga narrative and how they reflect conflicting values. This will help us see how classical virtues take on a distinct shape in the early Icelandic cultural context. It also illustrates how moral elements call for a separate interpretation and cannot be reduced to mere functions of social processes. Classical moral analysis of the virtues can throw light on different characters in the sagas which is not revealed from sociological perspectives.

There is a cluster of characters in *Njáls saga* which exemplify different types of virtues and vices. For the sake of analysis, I will focus on four different positions represented by four typical characters, or rather two types of positions and their antitheses. The first is the traditional hero who thinks primarily of his *sæmd* and is ready to uphold it by performing the duty of vengeance or by duelling. A clear example of this type in *Njála* is

⁵⁰ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, 201. The wording of the Icelandic original text, “Átök milli hefndarkrófu og sáttavilja ...” (*Samræður við söguöld*, 168), is somewhat stronger; “hefndarkrafa” denotes an imperative or demand for revenge rather than desire.

⁵¹ On thick and thin morality, see, for example, Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1994).

Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. The description of him emphasizes his physical characteristics and fighting skills as well as his uprightness and spontaneity. Even though he says at one point: “Sáttgjarn hefi ek jafnan verit” – “I have always been ready and willing to make a peaceful settlement” (Ch. 56),⁵² he proves the opposite when he decides not to hold the agreement to leave the country in the wake of his killings. It is a proof of his heroic character that he does this in spite of knowing that it will lead to his death, as Njáll had premonitorily warned him. But Gunnarr’s flaw is revealed in the way that he dishonours the workings of the social system on which peace in the ‘Great Village Community’, as Byock calls the Icelandic Free State, depended.⁵³ In so doing, he chooses to resort to violence although the saga suggests that this action is a mixture of fate and heroism. The unconditionality of the heroic virtues places a fatal weight on the shoulder of the hero and does not provide leeway for options that open up more reconciliatory thinking.

Gunnarr’s example demonstrates clearly the relationship between morality as (i) a system of moral/social norms: in this case the demand to uphold one’s honour and reputation; (ii) the real behaviour of individuals observing or defying these norms: Gunnarr observes the norm of honour while defying the norm of keeping a settlement; (iii) individual self-formation and self-understanding in light of these norms: Gunnarr accepts his fateful choice with courage and serenity.⁵⁴ It is significant that throughout his story he does not, unlike Skarphéðinn for example, instigate the disputes that lead to his killings.

The opposite of this heroic type is a man like Hrappur who has much the same characteristics as a hero – physical strength, fighting skills, spontaneity and the strength of character that is needed for courage. However, this strength is not a virtue in his case because it is deliberately used for reprehensible objectives and lacks the relationship with wisdom and moderation (these clearly need to go together). He even exhibits a kind of naïve

⁵² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag 1954), 145. *Njáls Saga*, transl. by C.F. Bayerschmidt and L.M. Hollander. (Ware: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature 1998), 114.

⁵³ Cf. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 228–229.

⁵⁴ This distinction is made by Michel Foucault in *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality* 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 25–29.

honesty that also marks the hero, as well as loyalty to Hallgerður, his guardian. This type of man is, in fact, not driven by honour, which has channelled the hero's life forces into a coherent unconditional pattern, but more instinctively by jealousy and aggression. The most common label used in the saga about this character is *ójafnaðarmaður*, although it is rather associated with a man of a higher social standing than Hrappur (who does not get a separate introduction in the saga). The incentive for action of the *ójafnaðarmaður* is also different since he is preoccupied with power which he seeks to increase through means that are not accepted in society. In their own way, each of these types can pose a threat to the need for peaceful co-existence in an agrarian society.

The other main type serves the major role of channelling disputes into processes that could lead to peace and settlement. In this role we find more reflective and diplomatic characters who exemplify, at best, the virtues of *hóf*, benevolence and friendship. Heinrich Beck has described such persons as social heroes with a "clear insight into the existing social rules" and with "the reputation, wealth, and authority to guarantee a balance, like Óláfr pái", or as bargainers aware of "all the shrewd ways of handling social affairs, like Snorri Goði".⁵⁵ But in order to be worthy of the title "social hero" this man needs to be well-intentioned. Moreover, he must not be guided by the unconditional demand of *sæmd*, even though he is aware of the importance of honour in all social affairs.

Using Aristotle's distinction, social heroes are characterized more by reflective intellectual virtues than non-reflective moral virtues, which are the distinctive mark of the romantic hero. The former is a matter of good judgment while the latter is a state of character shaped in upbringing and socialization, such as courage and moderation. However, full virtue requires a proper interplay of both types of virtues. Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi displays moral virtue but it is not enlightened by practical wisdom (which he usually seeks in Njáll's advice). *Njáls saga* creates the "illusion" that the characters get their virtue and vice stamp from their very first appearance in the saga but the effects of their actions are much more ambiguous as they weave into a complex web of interaction; "því at allt orkar tvímælis,

⁵⁵ Heinrich Beck, "Laxdæla saga: A Structural Approach", *Saga Book of the Viking Society*, XIX (1974–77), 383–402.

þá er gort er”, says Njáll, “once a deed has been done there will always be two opinions as to whether it was justified or not” (Ch. 91).⁵⁶

Wisdom is a prominent virtue in Old Icelandic literature and is distinguished from mental capacities exercised for ignoble objectives. Njáll is introduced in these terms: “vittr var hann ok forspár, heilráðr ok góðgjarn,” or as it says in the long-winded English translation: “He was learned and had the gift of second sight. He was benevolent and generous in word and deed, and everything which he advised turned out for the best” (Ch. 20).⁵⁷ In his case, wisdom is related to good advice and is thus primarily practical wisdom. Mǫrðr Valgarðsson, on the other hand, is said to have been “slœgr maðr í skapferðum ok illgjarn í ráðum”; “He was a sly and wily fellow and the worst troublemaker” (Ch. 25).⁵⁸ As Byock puts it, he “skillfully uses the political tools of his own society to his own advantage,”⁵⁹ while caring less about how they may affect his fellow men in the process. Mǫrðr is neither guided by an unconditional demand of honour nor is he benevolent in his dealings. He lacks the virtue of *góðgirnd*, benevolence. But he can play the game to his own advantage. In fact, he exhibits a certain type of intellectual virtue but is lacking in moral virtue. In *Njála*, a man is not regarded as wise or prudent unless his advice is given with benevolence or *góðgirmi*. If they are given with malevolence, *illgirmi*, it is mere cleverness or knavery. Sociological analyses of the sagas which reduce honour to a response to received opinion and conflate social success with moral virtue have difficulties in separating such clever scoundrels from social heroes.

The deliberation of benevolent men in the sagas has two major aims. The first is that a man can bring conflicts to a resolution in such a way that his honour is increased or at least not damaged. An example of this is the plan that Njáll lays out for Gunnarr in his dealings with the brothers Hrútr and Hǫskuldr. The plan is quite cunning and implies deception and play-acting in order to lead Hrútr into a trap. This deliberation is mainly instrumental or strategic, finding the necessary means to reach a desired end.

⁵⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., 226. *Njal's Saga*, translation by C.F. Bayerschmidt and L. M. Hollander, 181.

⁵⁷ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., 57. *Njal's Saga*, translation by C.F. Bayerschmidt and L. M. Hollander, 40.

⁵⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., 70. *Njal's Saga*, translation by C.F. Bayerschmidt and L. M. Hollander, 49.

⁵⁹ Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 200.

The saga concludes: “ok hafði Gunnarr ina mestu sæmð af málinu”, “and Gunnarr won great acclaim from the suit” (Ch. 24).⁶⁰ In this case, the benevolence of Njáll’s advice is judged from the individual point of view of Gunnarr’s *sæmd* and the personal relations of friendship between Gunnarr and Njáll. Most deliberated advice which Njáll gives in the saga is of this kind.

The most striking example in the saga of malevolent deliberation is when Mǫrðr, on the advice of his father, manages to deceive the sons of Njáll into killing Hǫskuldr. “Svá kom, at hann kom sér í svá mikla vináttu við þá, at hvárigum þótti ráð ráðit, nema um réðisk við aðra.” “In the end they got to be such close friends that no counsel was taken but all shared in it” (Ch. 108).⁶¹ Njáll comments on this: “Ekki em ek í ráðagerð með þeim ... sjaldan var ek þá frá kvaddr, er in góðu voru ráðin.” “I am not in their plans ... in the past I was rarely kept out when something good was being considered” (Ch. 110).⁶² It is clear that Mǫrðr is determined to get Hǫskuldr killed and for most people, his death is “hǫrmulig tíðendi”, “most distressing tidings”. But even though this is considered to be an evil deed, it makes sense in the saga ethos; it can even be “justified” by following the reasoning or internal logic of the *sæmdar*/feudal morality. In that web of reasoning, Njáll’s benevolent advice and actions contribute to the tragedy by “surcharging the father-son bond with excessive burdens,” as William Ian Miller has argued.⁶³ As has often been pointed out, Njáll’s well-intended advice has unintended consequences which culminate in tragic events. This is one manifestation of the limits of virtue-based morality in the sagas.

The other main aim of benevolent deliberation is that conflicts can be brought to a peaceful resolution through an agreement which will hold. Some of Njáll’s advice is clearly aimed at this objective. But the most striking and distinctive deliberation of this kind is that of Síðu-Hallr near the end of the saga. What makes his position remarkable is that it goes directly

⁶⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., 68. *Njal’s Saga*, translation by C.F. Bayerschmidt and L. M. Hollander, 48.

⁶¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., 276. *Njal’s Saga*, translation by C.F. Bayerschmidt and L. M. Hollander, 215.

⁶² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., 280. *Njal’s Saga*, translation by C.F. Bayerschmidt and L. M. Hollander, 219.

⁶³ William Ian Miller, “Justifying Skarphéðinn,” *Scandinavian Studies* 55 (1983): 316–344.

and consciously against the prevailing ideas of greatness and honour. His famous words: “Mun ek nú sýna þat, at ek em lítilmenni.” “Now I shall again show that I am a humble man [small minded or ignoble man]” (Ch. 145),⁶⁴ express his decision not to ask for reparations for his son, Ljótr, while at the same time offering his adversaries “pledges of peace”. This rather unexpected and apparently revolutionary move does not, however, meet with astonishment: “varð rómr mikill ok góðr gǫrr at máli hans, ok lofuðu allir mjök hans góðgirnd.” “His words were received with loud approval, and all praised his good will.”⁶⁵ And later he receives fourfold reparations for Ljótr. This act by Síðu-Hallr breaks the vicious circle of violence by upsetting the feudal scales of payment and repayment. Neither Njáll nor Hallr are warriors, both are men of good will and practical wisdom, but Hallr exceeds Njáll in understanding the roots of the problems that they are both apparently fighting. This is underlined by Njáll’s explanation for not accepting the offer of leaving his burning house: “Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at em ek maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm.” “No, I will not come out, for I am an old man and little fit to avenge my sons, and I do not want to live in shame” (Ch. 129).⁶⁶

The words of Síðu-Hallr are revolutionary because they break with the “old morality” of *sæmd* and shame. This amounts to breaking the “first person perspective” and adopting a more general perspective which takes the common interest into account. When I say that the virtues-based morality of honour is limited to the first person perspective, I do not only mean that it is fuelled by personal emotions but also and primarily that it aimed to protect and defend the vulnerability of the particular person and thereby his family. In the context of the sagas, Hallr’s position sounds unrealistic since there is no institutional structure to uphold it. Síðu-Hallr’s position is often associated with Christianity but as such, it is only an abstract idea that lacks all concrete content except the pledge. The pledge is dependent upon the will and virtues of individuals but cannot be

⁶⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., 408. *Njal’s Saga*, translation by C. F. Bayerschmidt and L. M. Hollander, 316.

⁶⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., 412. *Njal’s Saga*, translation by C. F. Bayerschmidt and L. M. Hollander, 318.

⁶⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., 330. *Njal’s Saga*, translation by C. F. Bayerschmidt and L. M. Hollander, 258.

substantiated by a community and therefore appears in the form of hope or a vision. In this way, Síðu-Hallr's position points beyond the ethos of the Free State while the apparently conflicting position of others does not. The case of Síðu-Hallr shows that the narrative does not dissolve the perspective of ideal morality in ethical substance (in Hegel's sense). His position provides a critical vision that works against the ruling moral order and, in fact, reveals its own limitations.

Among several things, *Njáls saga* demonstrates the enormous effect that individual vices can have on society: repeatedly, defects of character and individual inability or unwillingness to control temper are mentioned as reasons for unfortunate chains of events. Virtues and vices are all the more important where institutions are weak.

One of the effects of a good social structure is to neutralize the effects of personal virtues and vices. This requires political processes that are conducive to peace and flourishing of the community, a system of political institutions that channels conflicts and secures the rights of citizens. A well-functioning political system is a precondition both for social peace and the flourishing of individuals. The virtues are necessary in moral life but the precondition for this is a political structure which reduces the effect of personal virtues and vices upon the handling of social affairs. This is a political reading of the virtue-based morality of the sagas. It rests on the argument that the morality of virtue is, as such, insufficient to solve the main task of morality, i.e. to resolve conflicts that threaten our very co-existence.

On the basis of this reading, it makes sense to say that *Njála* describes a society that is groping its way toward the rule of law.⁶⁷ From a primarily ideological perspective, it makes sense to say that the saga describes an ethos in the process of transformation from heathen values to Christian values. But a political interpretation emphasizes the role of the social need for peace and sees the ethical transformation as one from a rigid imperative of revenge to a more deliberative means of handling conflict resolution. The latter breeds a culture of negotiation and reconciliation which fosters a strong emphasis on good will, moderation and *sáttgirni*. A case can be made for the position that this "willingness to find compromise solutions"

⁶⁷ Cf. Þorsteinn Gylfason, "Introduction" to *Njal's Saga*, xxvii.

is the spirit of the unique political structure of the Icelandic Free State.⁶⁸ The political structure provided space for fundamental choices between resorting either to violent, or to consensual means in the handling of conflicts. This resulted in a transvaluation of values, where honour became gradually more linked to peaceful settlements.

The main lessons about virtues I draw from this moral-political reading of *Njála* are the following. (i) The virtues that are necessary to uphold the morality of unconditional honour, which are partly sustained by the social structure of the Free State, must be rechannelled and harnessed for peace and social order. (ii) The virtues of those wise and benevolent men whose efforts aim at seeking peace and reconciliations, e.g. by giving good advice and acting as intermediaries in conflicts, are by themselves doomed to failure in the social structure of the Free State. (iii) At the heart of saga morality there is a conflict between the unconditional morality of personal honour and the social need for peace which promotes more conciliatory values. It is my contention that the uniqueness of saga morality resides more in these characteristics than in the virtues of individual great-mindedness that are found in some form or other in all heroic societies.

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⁶⁸ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 209.

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SUMMARY

In this article I seek to show how in the representation of morality in the *Íslendingasögur* a tension is discernible between two different concepts of honour, both of which need to be understood in the light of the particular social and historical circumstances of the Icelandic commonwealth. On the one hand, there are those notions of honour that go with the duty of revenge in a kinship society; on the other hand, there is the honour that accrues to individuals who succeed in resolving disputes and securing settlements. I analyse a variety of characters in *Njáls saga* from these perspectives, arguing that full understanding of such portrayals depends on detailed analysis of individuals' vices and virtues. Such analysis must take account of the distinctive social circumstances described in the *Íslendingasögur*; comparisons with different societies provide, in my view, only a limited insight into the values of saga heroes. I argue that the sagas reveal the severe limitations of human virtue when confronted by problems rooted in the basic structure of society; this helps to explain why the advice of benevolent and peaceable men can prove so ineffective. *Njáls saga* depicts a society that disintegrates for the want of institutions able to transform the desire for reconciliation into the rule of law, and to direct conflicts into a legal process. Such institutions create conditions for a political morality intended to guarantee people access to due judicial process, thereby reducing the importance of an individual's vices and virtues.

Vilhjálmur Árnason
Faculty of History and Philosophy
School of Humanities
University of Iceland
vilhjarn@hi.is