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HONOUR AND SHAME: COMPARING MEDIEVAL ICELAND AND ANCIENT GREECE

THE NOTIONS of honour and shame have been used in different ways to describe the moral and social world evidenced in the saga literature of medieval Iceland, that of its creators and that of its subject matter; these notions are commonly held to be fundamental to this social world. I propose to consider two specific ways in which scholars have utilised and scrutinised these notions in the context of saga literature. Both involve a comparative effort, whereby the notions of honour and shame at work in saga literature are compared to those of Archaic and Classical Greek literature. One effort is guided by the hope of *clarifying a moral outlook* that holds good in important respects for both literatures and reflects a certain social structure. The other aims less at clarification than at *liberation*; past notions of honour and shame, seemingly remote and alien, primitive even, are morally precious and should be salvaged for the modern world.

I. Four theses in studies of ancient Greece

The comparative approaches I have in mind are fairly recent ones, influenced no doubt by at least four intertwined but distinct theses that gradually emerged and became influential in the latter part of the last century in studies of ancient Greek literature and morality. All of them focused on features relating (directly or indirectly) to honour and shame, and offered opportunities (sometimes quite explicitly) for comparisons with similar social worlds, such as that of medieval Iceland. The ground was fertile, since the use of these concepts was commonplace in the study of saga literature.

The first and earliest of these theses is based on the distinction between shame-cultures and guilt-cultures; it underlines the distinction's validity and interpretative significance as applied to specific periods in the history of ancient Greece. It gained currency after it appeared in E. R. Dodds' widely admired *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), in which he adopted the well known formulation of the distinction made by the anthropologist Ruth Benedict in 1947: "True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism."[1] Using this concept Dodds claimed that "Homeric man's highest good is not the enjoyment of a quiet conscience, but the enjoyment of *tīmē*, public esteem: "Why should I fight," asks Achilles, "if the good fighter receives no more τιμή than the bad [*Il*. 9.315 ff.]? And the strongest moral force which the Homeric man knows is not the fear of god, but respect for public opinion, *aidōs*: αἰδέομαι Τρῶας, says Hector at the crisis of his fate [*Il*. 22.105], and goes with open eyes to his death."[2] Other classical scholars followed suit, but sometimes applied this conceptual apparatus not only to the moral world of the Homeric poems, as Dodds had done, but also to that of later Archaic and then Classical Greece.[3] By the early nineteen-nineties, the conceptual soundness and usefulness of the distinction for the study of the Archaic and Classical Greek world seemed uncontroversial.[4]

[1]   Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Turtle, 2003 [1946]), 223. Benedict's influential passage continues: "A man is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or by fantasying to himself that he has been made ridiculous. In either case it is a potent sanction. But it requires an audience. Guilt does not. In a nation where honor means living up to one's own picture of oneself, a man may suffer from guilt though no man knows of his misdeed and a man's feelings of guilt may actually be relieved by confessing his sin."

[2]   E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), 17–18.

[3]   Conspicuous examples are Arthur W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), and Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), ch. 1. Dodds (*ibid*., ch. 2) did indeed trace the gradual emergence of a guilt-culture discernable, for example, in Sophocles.

[4]   Probably the last major study to make unproblematic use of the distinction is that of N. R. E. Fisher, *Hybris: A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1992). Fisher claims that "Homeric, and later, Greek has many words for feelings of 'shame', and none specifically for feelings of moral guilt; and it is right to classify Ancient Greece as more of a 'shame-culture' than a 'guilt-culture'" (180, n110).

The second thesis, evidently related to the first, tended to reduce moral features, in particular those evident in the Homeric poems, or at least (more generously) to explain aspects of them as social functions. The thesis has become well known through its appearance in Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981). As did the advocates of the shame-guilt antithesis, MacIntyre made much use of the influential description of Homeric society found in Moses Finley's *The World of Odysseus* (1954). Adopting Finley´s view of the heroic society, MacIntyre held that "morality and social structure are in fact one and the same in heroic society. There is only one set of social bonds. Morality as something distinct does not yet exist. Evaluative questions are questions of social fact."[5] He also generalised: "What Finley says of Homeric society is equally true of heroic society in Iceland or in Ireland."[6] In fact, the Icelandic sagas are analogous to the Homeric poems in MacIntyre's view, forming as they did (or so he maintains) "a moral background to contemporary debate in classical societies,"[7] which includes the world of Attic tragedy and philosophy of the Classical age. It is significant, I believe, that he does not explain what is analogous to that debate in the case of Iceland.[8]

The third thesis emerged forcefully in 1993 with the appearance of two studies that undermined reasons for believing in the usefulness of the shame-guilt distinction and the soundness of MacIntyre's picture of the moral landscape of shame-cultures, or at least the inferences he drew. These studies were *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* by Douglas Cairns, and *Shame and Necessity* by Bernard Williams. Although no one has seriously doubted that in ancient Greece, in particular the Homeric world, honour and shame were emphasised to such an extent that these concepts played a major role in the moral

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[5]   Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2007[3] [1981]), 123.

[6]   *Ibid.*, 122. He emphasises the roles of honour and shame (125).

[7]   *Ibid.*, 121.

[8]   For more on the heroic elements common to the Homeric poems and the sagas, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingesagaerne* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1993), 291–94. One could ask about the relation of Eddic poetry to the sagas, with regard to the heroic element. Further, one could suggest that, if Eddic poetry provides the proper counterpart to Homeric poetry with regard to the heroic element, are the sagas not better understood as the counterpart to what MacIntyre calls the "contemporary debate in classical societies". (*Ibid.*, 121).

outlook, their significance for explaining the difference between an ancient Greek moral outlook and a modern one is subject to doubt; the easy distinction between internal and external sanctions implied by the use of the concepts was rejected in this revised consideration: "Concern for honour, even when it is acute, betokens no simple reliance on external sanctions alone."[9] When living within a society shaped by such sanctions, internal motivation can always play a role even through shame by the presence of an internalised other: "The internalised other is … potentially somebody rather than nobody, and somebody other than me. He can provide the focus of real social expectations, of how I shall live if I act in one way rather than another, of how my actions and reactions will alter my relations to the world about me."[10] While Cairns showed what was unhelpful about branding Archaic and Classical Greece a shame-culture, Williams sought depth in the concept of shame absent from that of guilt; the latter is the more confining notion, for shame, as opposed to guilt, "embodies conceptions of what one is and how one is related to others."[11] This was part of Williams' critique of modern moral thought and an attempt to liberate the ancients, in order to draw lessons for the modern world. But the ancients he referred to were emphatically not the philosophers; Aristotle is in fact on the other side of the divide, along with other 'progressives': "Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel are all on the same side, all believing in one way or another that the universe or history or the structure of human reason can, when properly understood, yield a pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations."[12] In short, on the one hand the usefulness of the established shame-guilt antithesis for an understanding of the moral outlook of the ancient Greeks was all but rejected, and on the other, shame (together with honour) was introduced as a moral concept of depth which actually had something to offer the modern reader.

[9]   Douglas L. Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 43.

[10] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 84.

[11] *Ibid.*, 94. Chapter IV of Williams' study is mostly concerned with shame. For a useful analysis of Williams' theses, see Michael Stocker, "Shame, Guilt, and Pathological Guilt: A Discussion of Bernard Williams," *Bernard Williams*, ed. Alan Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 135–54, and A.A. Long, "Williams on Greek Literature and Philosophy," *ibid.*, 155–80.

[12] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 163.

This thesis emphasises the qualified rejection of the supposed moral progression of the moderns beyond the ancients, and outdoes the fourth thesis in its effort to liberate Greek antiquity from the exotic and foreign.[13] That thesis, or set of theses, involves the resurgence of Aristotelian ethics, also known (with a wider scope of reference) as virtue ethics, in the wake of various damning criticisms of current ethics, and its defence as a serious alternative; its emphasis on virtues of character and a conception of a well-lived life were offered either as alternatives to contemporary normative ethics or as a persuasive moral psychology. Arguably prompted by G. S. E. Anscombe's seminal "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958), virtue ethics gained ground through the elucidating efforts of, amongst others, the aforementioned Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre. The role these latter scholars played in this particular re-emergence of classical ideas is evidently quite different from their work on Homeric literature and Attic tragedy; one of the important points is that the earlier literature was pre-ethical. But, while Aristotle is much concerned with virtue and the good life, his account in the *Nicomachean Ethics* places weight on honour; it plays a role in Aristotle that it has definitely lost in modern moral theory.

II. Clarification and liberation of honour

At the outset I articulated two aims of comparing medieval Icelandic and ancient Greek notions of honour and shame: on the one hand, a clarification of a moral outlook in terms of social structure, and on the other, an endeavour to liberate these notions for the modern world. These are distinct projects, in a way opposed to one another, since the first explains honour in terms of its social embeddedness, from which the second attempts to pry it loose.

Consider first the aim of clarification. The second thesis mentioned in the previous section, MacIntyre's claim that morality and social structure are the same in heroic society (Greek and Icelandic), when adapted to the social world of medieval Iceland is fully compatible with a sociological approach to the sagas, which has not least been championed by Jesse

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[13]   The title of the first chapter of Williams' *Shame and Necessity* is "The Liberation of Antiquity".

Byock.[14] Vilhjálmur Árnason has made use of Byock's work and seems to accept MacIntyre's basic idea: "we need to understand [the morality of the sagas] in terms of the social structure of the sagas."[15] Utilising the Hegelian distinction between reflective *Moralität* and unreflective *Sittlichkeit*, the institutionalised ethical order of saga society, he argues that "the saga *Sittlichkeit* is characterized by an aporia that creates a sociomoral conflict which is of the essence in the sagas."[16] This conflict seems generated by the dominance, within this institutionalised ethical order, of competitive virtues created by the demands of honour, at the cost of cooperative virtues: "the conflict that exists between the unconditional morality of personal honor and the social need for peace which promotes more conciliatory values".[17] While MacIntyre is concerned with addressing the ancient Greek moral outlook and explicitly compares it with the medieval Icelandic one, neither Byock nor Vilhjálmur place any weight on comparing the medieval Icelandic social world to an ancient Greek one. What I shall suggest in the next section, however, is that MacIntyre's conception of heroic societies, indebted as it is to accounts of honour in Homeric society, is conceptually flawed in a manner that seemingly tends to mark discussions of cultures of honour.

Now for the ambitious aim of liberating honour and shame for the modern world. The first thesis of the previous section laid down a distinction between shame-cultures and guilt-cultures. This distinction was based on the conspicuous role that honour played in Archaic Greek culture, a role no less conspicuous in medieval Icelandic culture. That role has been clear for a long time, as it has in the case of the Greeks, although the inferences drawn in the case of medieval Icelandic culture have varied.[18] Presenting

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[14] See Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Sagas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), and *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001); see also William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[15] Vilhjálmur Árnason, "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 90/2 (1991): 157–74, at 162), and see also his "Saga og siðferði: Hugleiðingar um túlkun á siðfræði Íslendingasagna," *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 46 (1985): 21–37.

[16] Vilhjálmur Árnason, "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas," 164.

[17] *Ibid.*, 168.

[18] See Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, especially ch. 9, and Helgi Þorláksson, who offers an overview in his "Inngangur" in *Sæmdarmenn*, eds. Helgi Þorláksson *et al.* (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001), 7–13.

shame (and honour), however, by contrasting it with guilt (and conscience) is a more recent phenomenon. William Ian Miller utilises the concept in a particularly clear manner: "The core belief at the heart of most revenge cultures is that man is more naturally a chicken than a wolf. Thus [*sic*] revenge cultures are invariably shame cultures …".[19] Miller is explicit in his application of the terms shame and honour to characterise medieval Icelandic culture and he cites Kant to explain the difference between dignity and anything with a price, like honour.[20]

The first move of those who aim at liberating honour, as found in saga literature, is to undermine this distinction. Hence they embrace the third thesis outlined above and argue against the usefulness and even the legitimacy of the shame-guilt antithesis. As one of the objectives of this thesis is to make ancient Greek morality more readily intelligible to modern readers, or even an alternative to modern conceptions, so, when applied to Icelandic medieval morality, the aim is to rehabilitate the positive notion of honour (rather than the negative one of shame, interestingly enough). Þorsteinn Gylfason, eschewing completely the sociological approach, argues for a timeless conception of honour, according to which it is in fact understood in the same way in the modern world (particularly Iceland) as it is in the world of the sagas. Further, he argues along the lines of Bernard Williams that "[t]here is, in Greek tragedy as well as in an Icelandic saga, plenty of room for a higher honour, independent of received opinion. In our time too."[21] A similar idea informs the work of Kristján Kristjánsson in his attempt to portray the saga moral outlook "as an atemporal, universal moral outlook".[22] He takes over Williams' repudiation of the guilt-shame antithesis but goes further than Williams and in a rather surprising direction, as will presently become clear.

Here we approach the use made of the fourth thesis, that of utilising Aristotelian virtue ethics in an effort to understand and liberate saga morality. In short, saga morality bears a resemblance to the morality championed by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, in particular Aristotle's description

[19]   William Ian Miller, *Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 96; cf. his *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 29, 302–3.

[20]   William Ian Miller, *Eye for an Eye*, 99–100 and 130–32.

[21]   Þorsteinn Gylfason, "Introduction," *Njal's Saga* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1998), xxviii–xxx.

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

of *megalopsychia* or magnanimity. In a manner analogous to that of Williams, Kristján attempts to "dive in at the deep end". He does this by comparing Aristotle's magnanimous person to the *mikilmenni* of saga literature. Honour is central to that account, as it is to saga morality: in both, "honour and dishonour counted as the external criteria of a person's greatness."[23]

This attempt to liberate the honour found in saga literature, an attempt which quite explicitly makes use of analogous attempts within ancient Greek studies, seems to me incoherent. I turn to it in section IV below.

III. Competition and cooperation

While the idea of there being a chasm between the shame cultures of old and modern guilt cultures tends to put any relevance of a morality based on shame and honour beyond retrieval, attempts either to downplay the difference or even to elevate the morality of shame cultures aim at retrieving them. The philosophical complexities (pointed out by Bernard Williams) of the difference between shame and guilt notwithstanding, the emphatic role played by honour in both ancient Greece and medieval Iceland nevertheless seems to invite a characterisation of both as shame cultures, or honour cultures. Hence the persuasiveness of sociological accounts that entrench the morality of honour in social institutions. My misgivings about this project do not pertain to the general idea of such accounts, which I find convincing, but only to apparent connotations of the notion of honour in them.

The social worlds in question are characterised by shame rather than guilt, or honour rather than conscience, as evidenced by the overriding importance of honour which is also to be understood as the social force that determines questions of value. Before venturing further, it is important to distinguish *shame* (*aidōs*) from the *dishonour* (*atimia*) that brings about the shame; shame in turn causes action for the sake of honour (*timē*); hence the social worlds in question are variously called shame- or honour-cultures. But now the role of honour, we are at least often led to believe, makes for a *competitive* social world, in which competitive virtues dominate

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[23]   *Ibid.*, 410.

at the cost of co-operative virtues which, within the institutionalised ethical framework, are at best secondary and at worst nonexistent; hence calamities ensue.[24] But the undoubted importance of honour and shame does not by itself entail the subjection of co-operative virtues to competitive ones, even within the institutionalised ethical framework; the entailment is contingent. Shame can just as easily be created by "a failure to act in some expected self-sacrificing or co-operative manner", as Williams claimed.[25] In order to establish that the one entails the other, we need specific testimonies that simply record the dominance of competitive virtues. In the case of ancient Greece, it had indeed long been held that as a culture of honour it was ruled by competitive virtues.[26] Later, it was forcefully and persuasively argued that the record showed no such thing.[27] Likewise, I submit, in the case of medieval Iceland: the importance of co-operative virtues at all levels seems incontestable, *within* the institutional framework of honour.[28] That they often lose out gives the saga narratives their peculiar poignancy. Tying honour especially to competition, as opposed to co-operation, simply seems fallacious: "... like so many features of Icelandic culture, honour is repeatedly tied to competition," Jesse Byock says, implying that there is a closer connection between honour and competition than honour and co-operation.[29] But he also convincingly maintains when analysing feud as an organising principle that: "Rather than a socially destructive force to be controlled by sheriffs, bailiffs and royal agents, as in many contemporaneous European societies, feud in Iceland became a formalized and culturally stabilizing element. Respected men served as negotiators, and feuding became the major vehicle for channelling violence into the moderating arenas of the courts and into the hands of informal arbitrators,

[24] For ancient Greece, see Moses I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979² [1954]), and Arthur Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*; also, albeit more guardedly, MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 125, 133–34, 138–39.

[25] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 38.

[26] Finley, who claimed that "[o]f necessity ... the world of Odysseus was fiercely competitive, as each hero strove to outdo the others" (*The World of Odysseus*, 118), is clearly echoed by Adkins and MacIntyre.

[27] See especially Cairns, *Aidōs,* 50–51.

[28] This seems especially evident from the account of the feud system in Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Sagas*, and in his *Viking Age Iceland*, as indeed from that of Miller's *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*.

[29] Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 14.

where public pressure was applied. In Iceland's single 'great village' envi-
ronment *goðar* found honour in containing disruptive behaviour. Leaders
gained prestige and standing by publicly playing the role of men of mod-
eration (*hófsmenn*) and goodwill (*góðviljamenn*)."[30] Honour in saga litera-
ture, it seems, is as much tied to co-operative virtues as to competitive
ones, or so I would suggest, just as in the Homeric poems.

MacIntyre's thesis in particular emphasises what Bernard Williams has
termed the *moral thickness* of a culture dominated by the institutionalisa-
tion of honour, its unreflective character, where questions of value are
questions of fact. The idea of 'thick moral concepts' is useful. In short,
thick moral concepts unite fact and value: "We can say … that the applica-
tion of these concepts is at the same time world-guided and action-
guiding."[31] Examples of such concepts would be *coward*, *lie*, *brutality*,
gratitude. Hume is one of many philosophers who have been quoted in this
connection. He discusses words "whose very names force an avowal of
their merit, there are many others, to which the most determined scepti-
cism cannot for a moment refuse the tribute of praise and approbation."[32]
The sagas, I submit, frequently introduce persons by descriptions that use
precisely such thick terms and therefore forestall the possibility of misun-
derstanding the person's character; by a few strokes the authors make clear
as a matter of fact the virtues or vices of the players.

This use of thick terms characterises traditional and homogeneous soci-
eties, Williams suggests, that are not particularly given to ethical reflec-
tion.[33] They are the offspring of moralities without second order ethical
theory. Thin moral concepts, in contrast, like *right*, *just*, and *good*, are held
to characterise reflective moralities, moral communities that have evolved
an ethical theory in the sense that they have a second order ethics on the

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[30] *Ibid.*, 79. But then Byock says again (208): "The taking of vengeance was understood as
       action that satisfied honour … The exchanges … were rooted in competition." The emphasis
       is also explicit in Helgi Þorláksson, "Vitrir menn og vel metnir," *Sæmdarmenn*, ed. by Helgi
       Þorláksson *et al.* (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001), 20–21.

[31] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Uni-
       versity Press, 1985), 141, cf. 140–45. See also the lucid and critical exegesis of Mark P.
       Jenkins, *Bernard Williams* (Chesham: Acumen, 2006), 133–40. He traces the ancestry of
       the idea to the "thick description" of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (in *The Interpretation
       of Cultures* (1973)), who in turn claims indebtedness to philosopher Gilbert Ryle.

[32] *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* VI.1 *ad fin.*

[33] See Williams, *Limits*, 148.

truth of their first order moral judgments: "The very general kind of judg-ment that is in question here – a judgment using a very general concept – is essentially a product of reflection, and it comes into question when someone stands back from the practices of the society and its use of these concepts and asks whether this is the right way to go on, whether these are good ways in which to assess action, whether the kinds of character that are admired are rightly admired."[34] The ethics of Plato would be a case in point, Kantian ethics another. The sagas do not include an external view-point from which a character's action can be assessed; no moral judgment is passed on actions, as Halldór Laxness noted long ago, calling their spirit amoral or morally pessimistic.[35] Now, if this distinction is tenable in gen-eral, and in this context in particular (as a conceptual instrument with which to clarify the moral landscape of the sagas — and hence to elucidate the morality that gave birth to them) it seems to me that a morality, like that found in the saga-literature, can gain its distinctiveness in one of two ways. Either, and more likely to my mind, saga morality is very thick, although not just teeming with competitive virtues, but also co-operative ones. As such it may have much in common with Archaic and to some extent Classical Greek morality. Or, its distinctiveness is due to its being on the borderline between the two, the thick and the thin, in transition, so to speak. According to MacIntyre, the Greek tragedians and philosophers of the Classical period might be regarded as such borderline cases.[36] That position would then be the determining factor, and would explain the elu-siveness of the morality portrayed in the sagas; the idea is that moralities in transition, from the thick to the thin, are fertile grounds for unique cul-tural products.

Vilhjálmur Árnason advances the latter idea, namely that within the *Sittlichkeit* of the Icelandic republic an *aporia* is created when social condi-tions demand co-operative virtues in place of the dominant competitive

[34]   *Ibid.*, 146.

[35]   Halldór Laxness, "Minnisgreinar um fornsögur," *Sjálfsagðir hlutir* (Reykjavík: Helgafell 1980, 3rd pr. [1946]), 43: "… í þeim skáldverkum íslenskum sem eru af hreinustum toga og sterkast teingd norrænni fornöld, þarámeðal Egla Njála Gretla Laxdæla og konúngasögur Snorra, er yfirleitt ekki lagður dómur á verk manna … Andi þessara verka er, þrátt fyrir kristilegt yfirborð hér og hvar, ýmist siðblinda eða siðferðileg bölsýni. Þannig gerast í fornsögum vorum þeir feiknstafir … að bestu mennirnir … vinna að jafnaði verstu verkin og hinir verstu menn … eru fyrirvaralaust farnir að vinna þrifnaðarverk."

[36]   See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ch. 11.

virtues. But now, if Vilhjálmur is correct, we are faced with a problem. Either the *aporia* is internal to saga *Sittlichkeit*, and the co-operative virtues are as thick as the competitive ones, or the *aporia* is created from without, arising from the need of exchanging competition for co-operation. While the latter possibility seems to demand a *reflective* ethics that is nowhere to be found in the saga culture, the former admits the co-operative virtues into the moral realm dominated by honour. Since Vilhjálmur argues for the latter interpretation, he seems hard pressed to explain the fact that the morality of honour surely includes virtues of co-operation, in medieval Iceland just as in Archaic Greece, as I already suggested. Within such a culture, the dominant moral concepts employed depend on honour as a kind of focal concept. But if moral concepts that denote co-operation are just as weighty as those that denote competition, the tension generated by their clash is internal to the culture itself. And insofar as it is internal, it is part of the unreflective moral thickness of the culture. For moral (or political) reflection to upset this culture one would expect an external view to be needed, as in the case of the Greeks.[37] The thick values of Homeric culture tumbled down first through constitutional changes (by the gradual devaluation of aristocratic ideals of manly excellence in pursuit of honour, especially associated with democratic Athens), and then forcefully through the moral and political reflection culminating in the works of Plato and Aristotle.[38] There does not seem to be anything quite analogous to that process in medieval Iceland. Eventually, the republic crashes through internal paradoxes, no doubt generated by clashes between competitive and cooperative virtues. The sagas, however, do not seem to reflect *on* the inadequacy of this culture to deal with internal problems, but rather simply to reflect the thick moral world of the culture.[39] Here we return to a previously mentioned flaw in MacIntyre's comparisons of Homeric literature and that of the sagas. While for the Classical Greeks, the Homeric poems

[37] Vilhjálmur finds reflection in the importance of advocacy itself ("Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas," 173). But that is internal to the culture itself.

[38] For a study on the changes in the Greek conception of honour, see Gabriel Herman, *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 194–203, 258–68.

[39] Gunnar Harðarson has suggested to me that the reflection needed was supplied by Christian ethics, in a way explained most conspicuously by Hermann Pálsson. Although this interpretation remains an option, it does strain the notion of *reflection*; cf. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, ch. 12.

did without doubt provide a moral background, the sagas do not provide a similar background to any later similarly classical age, and they cannot be their own background.

IV. Liberating honour

Consider now the aim of liberating honour as found in ancient Greece and medieval Iceland. Here, too, there is room for misgivings. Fundamental to this project is either debunking the shame-guilt antithesis or elevating shame (and honour) as a moral notion at the cost of guilt. Within the study of medieval Iceland, Þorsteinn Gylfason and Kristján Kristjánsson have attempted to return to honour its due importance, wrenching it as it were from its (previous) embeddedness in (misconceived) shame cultures, and endowing it with a timeless quality, depriving it of its contingency. I suggested that this attempt is incoherent.

First, such an aspiration is at odds with its inspiration, the work of Bernard Williams. One of his fundamental points in arguing for the relevance of shame as a moral notion is precisely its embeddedness in cultures that are characterised by thick moral concepts and an aversion to what he repeatedly and rather antagonistically calls that peculiar institution of morality.[40] Williams' point is – and he is surely right – that the value of honour in these contexts resides in its embeddedness. His objection – more controversial – is against the ambitions of moral theory, that of Aristotle just as that of Kant, to ground morality in a reflective system by employing thin moral concepts, and thus alienating the individual from his own life's project. But that seems to be precisely what scholars seek to do when they elevate honour to a timeless moral concept; they attempt to thin it out. That is also the reason why this approach is opposed to that of MacIntyre and others who attempt to explain the thickness of this concept of honour.

Secondly, Aristotle, to whom Kristján appeals when he offers honour as a moral concept of choice, has a very different idea of honour and shame than that found either in the sagas or Archaic and most Classical Greek

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[40]   This is one of the main points of his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. MacIntyre makes similar points (*After Virtue*, 126–27).

literature. Honour, although the most important of external goods, is what the virtuous person deserves; correctly judging his desert, the virtuous person is *ipso facto* magnanimous and conscious of his own great worth. But he does not act for the sake of his honour in any straightforward sense, nor does *dishonour* move him in the least; it creates no shame. To be sure, shame would move him (just insofar as he would fail to be virtuous – *per impossibile*), but that shame has little to do with social expectations; dishonour does not affect him, but that is precisely what affects the characters of the sagas (as it does those of the Homeric poems).[41] Hence, when Bernard Williams defends the importance of shame, Aristotle is only mentioned as one of the builders of that peculiar institution of morality.

The analytical tools of moral thickness and thinness that Bernard Williams has used on Greek culture have not gone unchallenged; their soundness as philosophical concepts has been questioned.[42] Their usefulness, however, is to my mind clear. They help scholars to navigate unfamiliar seas, such as the morality of saga culture. They help to expose the social embeddedness of moral terms, how matters of value are, within that culture, matters of fact. But why should gaining an insight into that culture, for example by being clearer on the social embeddedness of honour, encourage one to make its values one's own or rue their disappearance? In fact, awareness of this embeddedness should (if anything) prompt one to circumspection regarding the social embeddedness of contemporary values. But more importantly for the study of medieval Icelandic culture, these insights offer the opportunity of clarifying the roles of competitive *and* co-operative virtues within the framework of honour, the tensions between them, and their resolutions.[43]

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[41]   See especially the *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3.1124a4–29.
[42]   See Jenkins, *Bernard Williams*, 135–40.
[43]   Thanks to Gunnar Harðarson and Vilhjálmur Árnason for corrections and criticisms, as well as to the journal's anonymous readers.

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SUMMARY

This paper explores two approaches to the literary history of the Icelandic commonwealth. Each uses the concepts of honour and shame to analyse morality and society; and each compares the respective roles of these concepts in the medieval Icelandic commonwealth and in Greek antiquity. One approach seeks to identify those elements in the two literatures which give expression to their respective understandings of ethics/morality and society; by doing so the role of 'thick-morality' within each society is explained. The other approach seeks to dehistoricize these particular notions, arguing (perhaps with limited success) for the timelessness of these moral concepts.

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