

“ROBERT L. OPRISKO’S HONOR: A PHENOMENOLOGY AND HOLDEN CAULFIELD”

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“Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules.”

“Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it.”

Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right—I’ll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game (Salinger, 1945).

Robert L. Oprisko’s *Honor: A Phenomenology* can be perceived as a work of passion, love, knowledge, or perhaps even ego. The book utilizes roughly 200 pages to brutally dissect the many facets associated with the socially politicized concept of honor, en generale. Oprisko spars with and admires the works of a multitude of acclaimed theorists, philosophers, and mythologists such as Pitt Rivers, Aristotle, and Homer; while politely yet forcefully establishing his own theory. While reading, one is forced to arise on the defense of her very own

identity and reality. It is on this defensive edge that readers may find themselves intrinsically offended with Oprisko's language and the directness of his theoretical presumptions. Oprisko leaves little room for anything but the raw in his book. The raw being that which really is, existence at its performative core, one's organic reality. The raw is a key concept in the discussion of Honor, for it assumes a reality that is thick and blistered from a lack of absolute care and external influence.

However an admirer of the work I warn of the offensive nature of the topic's discussed in the book. Honor is similar to J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, both in that it will be no surprise that his theory will be highly contested, and that it focuses on the prelude and aftermath of breaking social norms as well as challenging the status quo. Oprisko's book contains a chapter titled "Face", "...the process by which an individual affines gains, loses, and maintains his or her status as a recognized member in an honor-group." (79) Being familiar with Holden Caulfield and Oprisko, "Face" resonates soundly with both Holden's reasoning and actions, as well as Oprisko's introjected motivation for writing. Salinger's vehicle is not the concept of honor itself, but in honor's practical engagement by Holden Caulfield, the provocative character who secures a social acceptability that is no larger than a small crawl space. *The Catcher in the Rye*, which by no means consists of any overt political or metaphysical theory, contains a stark personification of what is actively presented in every chapter of Dr. Oprisko's book.

Similar to Holden Caulfield, Robert L. Oprisko also has professional social acceptance the size of a small crawl space. While working as a visiting assistant professor (quite the diminished title) of International Studies at Butler University, Oprisko publishes regularly, including "Just Visiting", a monthly column for *The Chronicle for Higher Education*. His most recent column "The Candidates Cometh" should be seen as a personal rebellion against the academic class division that separates the tenured and tenure-tracked from the contingent and precarious. However, on a deeper level, it is also Oprisko's personal anecdote on his annihilation of face. Oprisko's continued lack of support from his fellow academics places him in situation in which he is losing face. Oprisko is brutally direct about his relationship with face as an academic, "While it is not necessity for one to strive to gain face, losing face is a serious matter which will, in varying degrees, affect one's ability to function effectively in society." As an academic, one often hears the phrase, "publish or perish" meaning that one must cultivate thyself with respect to others in the realm of Academia. If one fails to produce an output that the others in the group deem socially valuable, you cease to exist in that member group. Perhaps Oprisko is writing from an egotistical point of view. Surprise, there's that ego!

Paralleling Oprisko’s personal venture, Holden Caulfield serves as a terrific litmus test for the concepts defined in Oprisko’s work. He is, by no means, a likeable character in the literary world, but however he revels in and reflects life lived raw:

. . . I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they’re running and they don’t look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That’s all I’d do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all (Salinger, 1945, p. 224).

The above quote is perhaps the most well recognized quote from the entire novel. Using a literary scalpel one can infer that Holden’s perception of himself as the “catcher in the rye” is about protecting the reality of others from shattering onto the rocks below the cliff. This quote is directed at Holden’s little sister Phoebe, a mere child who has not yet quarreled with “the games” (Ibid., p. 12) as referred to in the opening quote of this review.

Holden has little to no faith in the entirety of humanity. He is cynical and holds society to a standard of hypocrisy and corruption. In order for Holden to keep his face he must serve as a protector and perpetual exemplar, of the raw. Holden strives to attain a standard that is rather unpopular considering the status quo, similar to Oprisko, Holden values consistency and truth in the form of many things, “The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody’d move. . . . Nobody’d be different. The only thing that would be different would be you” (Ibid., p. 158).

In this case, Holden is commenting on his affinity for museums. Museums are known to be places of history, knowledge, and ironically a place to visually observe the changes that occur over time. Once again Holden’s raw comes into play. He does not see the museum as a place honoring the progress of the status quo, but as a mirror of self examination and personal growth. Holden considers himself an exception to the status quo. He ostensibly and explicitly acts against the prescribed norms of society, this is why he is so unlikeable; he is a clear and present danger, a bane to society. If it is not clear by now how similar in form Holden Caulfield and Robert L. Oprisko are; perhaps you should shy away from his book.

Moving away from Holden Caulfield’s interaction with Honor; Oprisko’s book relies heavily, and almost drowns the reader in, high theory, not only because Oprisko ought to support his work with none other than the seasoned veterans of the field, but also because his internalization of honor is so strong that it is unfathomable for Oprisko not to give credit where it is due. For Oprisko to be Oprisko, he must weave together past scholarship to create his grand theory. It is difficult at times

to sort out exactly where Oprisko's theory begins and where past theories end. One ought to not look too harshly upon Oprisko for doing so, for he is only practicing what he is preaching, so to speak. The entire reason Oprisko potentially wrote his book was to preserve his Face, among other things. So, Oprisko affiliates himself with an "honor group", similar to the one that Ho, Pitt Rivers, and Nietzsche belong to. Oprisko discusses in his book that to become a member of a group that you affiliate with you must become valued by the group (bypass the "gatekeepers"). The gatekeepers are, of course, the masters, elite members of the group or society. They are sovereign, the one's who dictate who is us and who is them. In no regards am I stating that Oprisko seeks attention immaturely, but he does seek attention and recognition in the form of value from the group he so wishes to be a permanent member of; rather than a member who is indeed losing face.

Delving more concretely into the structure of Honor; Oprisko breaks up the overarching concept of Honor into 13 distinct chapters, beginning with an "Introduction", and ending with "Lessons from Honor". Oprisko artfully strings together foundational ideas into larger concepts, and then lastly into applied examples. It is in his pedagogy and presentation of his theory that one may find themselves utterly offended. Think of it as a dissection, how I referred to it earlier, except his dissection not only eviscerates honor but also dismembers identity and rends reality.

By the end of Honor, every reader should find themselves reflecting upon their own identity and questioning how honestly they've held to their publicly stated values. This book is not for those who are afraid of self-humiliation or defeat. Oprisko may aim to appeal to a large audience but fails to do so because of his commitment to the raw, which creates the offensive honesty that is the unique character of his pedagogy. Similarly, *The Catcher in the Rye*, was publicly contested after it was published in 1951. The American public was offended at the explicit honesty that Holden Caulfield so terrifically preached. It is this brutal honesty that is most notable in their work; for if Salinger and Oprisko wrote fantasy their works would receive limited attention as well as less critical engagement and feedback.

Finally, it is with high esteem and great affection that I recommend Oprisko's Honor: A Phenomenology. But I must be specific when I say to whom I may make my recommendation to: intellectuals, academics, and those potentially seeking an existential crisis. In one's years of youth you might have had the joy in engaging with Salinger's novel, and hopefully you formulated an opinion about how Holden Caulfield makes you feel. If you were repulsed, unable to accept Caulfield, then Oprisko's book is not the choice for you; it is more explicit and its honesty much more brutal (but from a theoretical standpoint of course). This book is on the cut-

ting edge of contemporary political and social theory, there are certainly others that do not fight back and may serve you more cordially. However, if you are like me and enjoyed Holden’s vulgarity and honesty in the form of Salinger’s anecdotal novel; and now you’ve found yourself engaging in political and international theory, lucky duck! Refraining from reading his book would be but an absolute loss. Tread lightly, for the waters of Honor:A Phenomenology are radical and wicked. Wear a lifejacket.

References

Salinger, J.D. 1945. *The Catcher in the Rye*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
Oprisko, R. L. “Just Visiting: The Candidates Cometh,” *The Chronicle for Higher Education*.