



Universität
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ZAZH-Zentrum
Altertumswissenschaften Zürich

ZAZH- LECTURE

DONNERSTAG,
27. NOVEMBER 2025
18.15



PROF. DR.
DOUGLAS CAIRNS

WHAT IS HONOUR?

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WHAT IS HONOUR?

ZAZH-LECTURE MIT PROF. DR. DOUGLAS CAIRNS (EDINBURGH)

Honour is a topic on which a great deal has been written, but it remains very poorly understood. A typical failing is to ghettoize the phenomenon – as limited only to some forms of interaction (found in some contexts and not in others), as a concern only of one social stratum among many, as a male-gendered phenomenon, as a characteristic only of certain forms of social organisation. This can extend even to the claim that there are ‘honour societies’ that differ fundamentally from ‘dignity societies’ (echoing the older and now widely discredited antithesis between ‘shame cultures’ and ‘guilt cultures’). Such antitheses entail a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic values that is useful for analysing individual tendencies and historical and cultural differences. But there is no group and no historical society (and perhaps, except in extreme pathological cases, no individual either) in which some combination of both tendencies is not found. Despite strong reasons for believing that contemporary Western societies – and especially their elites – are subject to an ever stronger pull in the direction of extrinsic values, educated elites within those societies have used and continue to use labels such as ‘shame-culture’ and ‘honour society’ to denigrate and patronize internal and external others – inner-city gangs, citizens of the US South (and their Scots ancestors), immigrants (e.g. the Irish and the Italians in the US), native Americans, the Japanese, southern Europeans, north Africans – and the ancient Greeks (to name but a few). Ancient Greek evidence on the nature of honour, by contrast, supports contemporary thought in a range of disciplines (such as developmental psychology, sociology, and political philosophy) on the interplay of esteem and self-esteem, recognition and dignity, as fundamental to social interaction in any society worthy of the name.

Wann: Donnerstag, 27. November 2025, 18.15 Uhr

Wo: Universität Zürich, Rämistrasse 71, 8006 Zürich, Raum KOL-F-117

Die Videoaufzeichnung wird ab dem 5. Dezember 2025 auf www.zazh.uzh.ch verfügbar sein.