

Iago's Evil

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Evil has nowhere else been portrayed with such mastery as in the character of Iago.- A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*

1. Introduction

There are those who love to throw the term “evil” around, and there are those who would get rid of it altogether. My sympathies lie with the latter, for the emotive charge the term carries lends itself to that easy moralism which would prefer to condemn thoughtlessly than to take the risk of understanding. But it would be wrong to let this possibility determine our reactions, for there is a serious and discriminating use of the term which does pick out a distinctive kind of agency not adequately comprehended in the ordinary moral vocabulary of right and wrong, just and unjust, virtue and vice.

To make my case I am going to discuss a particular character, Iago, fully aware that he *is* a “character”, and so an inhabitant of the world of fiction. But while Iago is a fictional character, the characterization I offer of his evil-doing, and the understanding of it I develop, throws light on those real agents whose actions see many of us prepared, despite the risks, to speak of evil.

2. The Distinctive Sense of “Evil”

I suggest that we are tempted to speak of an “evil agent” when a person exhibits an existential pathology in which two conditions are satisfied. The first condition is that they have performed, or have set themselves to perform, terrible deeds, where this means deeds that involve severe moral transgression. This condition is not sufficient of itself, if only because the bad, or very bad – indeed, even the righteous – may perpetrate severe moral transgressions. The second condition to be satisfied has itself two sides, and is a matter of the *explanation* we offer of such transgression. The first side is profoundly anti-Aristotelian: *it is that the agent in question is manifestly a human being, and not a monster or a God.* The second side is profoundly anti-Kantian: *it is that they are at the same time as being a human insider, a moral outsider in a way that the bad person, even the very, very, very, very bad person is not.*

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Take the anti-Aristotelian point. By saying that the evil agent is a human being, I am saying that the state they are in is not something outside and alien to the range of human possibilities, but something that may threaten to engulf any of us. Evil is a perennial human possibility, not a matter of falling out of humanity into the realm of the irretrievably alien. I show what this means in my discussion of Iago.

Take the anti-Kantian point. By saying that the evil agent is a *moral outsider* I mean that though certainly one of us, they are not morally one of us in the sense that *blame* and *meaningful punishment* can reach them. This claim calls for further elaboration.

To blame someone for wrongdoing is to open the possibility of their reintegration into the moral community whose values they have violated.² Attributions of blame constitute a form of *moral recognition*: we blame someone for wrongdoing to the extent that we see, or are willing to see, the object of our attentions as someone *there* in the moral world with us, and so potentially open to the force of those moral values, those moral reasons, they have flouted. We may condemn them as bad men, even very, very, very bad men, but in this condemnation is to be found a spirit of hope and fellowship; we condemn and make an offering at the same time and in the same action, and thus it is that punishment or retribution for such violation is morally meaningful, even, on occasions, redemptive.

To say, on the other hand that a person is, or has in their actions shown themselves to be, evil, is to condemn them utterly. It is to deny the possibility of their reintegration into the moral community. It follows that despite the temptation to do so, it makes little sense to *blame* them, though we may certainly hold them – or what there is of them – responsible, if we can get our hands on them. It is for this reason that the evil-doer sometimes seems like a natural phenomenon, as with an earthquake or typhoon. Confronted with such natural evils we do not blame, but we do aggressively defend ourselves. If there is a difference between natural and moral evil here it does not lie with the applicability of the concept of blame, but with that of *pity*. For we may pity the evil-doer in a way we cannot pity a natural phenomenon like an earthquake or typhoon. Thus, as we shall see, to blame Iago is to trivialise and misunderstand him and the state he is in, but not so to pity him. For pity, as Rai Gaita has argued, is partly constitutive of our understanding of what it means to suffer, and

² Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (London: Fontana, 1985), Chapter 10, "The Morality System".

certainly Iago suffers.³ A fact not at all negated by the suffering he causes others.

3. Understanding Iago as Evil

The character of Iago has puzzled actors, audience and critics since *Othello* was first performed. For what is it, what motives, what reasons, lead him to destroy all those close to him and to his own painful, silent, death? What is he after, and why is he after it? Can we make sense of his actions, or is he finally opaque to us?

The literature on Iago gives opposed answers to these questions. One reading I shall call "Kantian" insofar as it insists that Iago is a man, and so, in his own way, a moral man. I call the other reading "Aristotelian", in that it recognises Iago's evil only by attributing it to something non-human, and so impenetrably mysterious.

Under the Kantian reading Iago is *domesticated*. He is to be understood, and all the way down, as *one of us*. For Tucker Brooke he is "an honest, charming soldier, a man of honesty and innate kindness" who has been profoundly provoked, and so pushed into his terrible actions in the way that anyone so provoked might be.⁴ For later critics he is "a pitiful plaything of circumstance"⁵, or "a good man brought, like Oedipus, to commit enormities unforeseen."⁶

On this view Iago is a man who has, in his not unjustified view, been wrongfully passed over for promotion to lieutenant, and resents the wrong done him. He is a man who suspects his wife may have been intimate with his commanding officer. He is a man jealous of the way that his commanding officer has bound his life to that of a young and impressionable girl, on whom he too has designs, indeed designs better favoured by matters of race and custom. He is, in short, a man who thinks his "natural honour" has been insulted, and reacts accordingly, or rather over-reacts, so undoubtedly, but understandably, slipping into wrongdoing. He aims to defend his honour as one does in an heroic society by seeking revenge on all those who have wronged him, thereby reasserting the legitimacy of his self-identification in the face of its wrongful denial by unworthy others.

This comforting view has a clear attraction, for rather than place morality under pressure it reinforces it by seeing Iago as driven by motives

³ See the sensitive discussion of the relationship of evil to pity, and its distance from blame, in Raimond Gaita's, *Our Common Humanity: thinking about love and truth and justice*, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. xii-xv

⁴ Tucker Brooke, "The Romantic Iago", *Yale Review*, VII (January, 1918), p. 349.

⁵ Allardyce Nicoll, *Studies in Shakespeare*, (London, 1927), p. 94.

⁶ J. W. Draper, "Othello and Elizabethan Army Life", *Revue Anglo-Americaine*, (April, 1932), p. 324.

and desires deeply informed by the values of his moral community. He may go way too far, but he answers the question "what shall I do?" in a way that is informed with morality, if not in just the way we might like. It is a comforting view in that it denies his evil, or the need to understand him in terms of evil. It is also utterly unbelievable.

The first point is merely suggestive, but it surely counts against such a reading that the Folio edition lists Iago unambiguously as a "villaine". While something has certainly shocked or traumatised him into his risky and outrageous heckling of Brabantio, it is not as if he has suddenly swung from an unsullied virtue to a virtue-informed vice, for it is clear he has been ill-using Roderigo and Emilia for a long time previously. But more importantly the motives Iago avows are manifestly inadequate to explain the scale of his nefarious activities, are too many and inconsistent, and do not seem to be satisfied when they should. All of these points can be found in Coleridge's fine appreciation of the play.⁷

Thus, while it is true that an "insult to one's natural honor" may excite terrible feeling of resentment and revenge - as with Julius Caesar taking such an "insult" from the Senate to license his destruction of the Republic, or Achilles the insult from Agamemnon over Briseis as licensing his withdrawal from battle and the looming defeat of the Achaean forces - Iago is no Caesar or Achilles. He does not seek, as they do, to prove his worth to his enemies, and so their mistaken judgment of him, through the power and majesty of his violence and hostility. Iago proves nothing of the kind to anyone in the play. His actions are secretive, they operate through indirect manipulations, and they leave naught but mystery and death.

Consider, too, the various motives Iago at different times avows - jealousy and resentment at Cassio; at Othello for promoting Cassio; at Othello for sleeping with his wife; lust for Roderigo's money; lust for Desdemona. It is surely suspicious, as Coleridge points out, that there are so many in the first place. If it be said they merely overdetermine his actions (and in their number perhaps help account for the grotesque scale of his assault on others and their world); that is not to see that they stand in a certain tension with each other. So, if Othello has been sleeping with

⁷ Frank Kermode would have us take the variety of motives Iago avows to indicate nothing essential to the play, but mere authorial incompetence. Such variety is, he writes "unconvincing, almost an admission of confusion in the author... a muddle of implausible motives where none was needed other than the established foulness of the man's imagination" (*Shakespeare's Language*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 173). Kermode would appear to think this because he finds Iago to be an instance of a familiar type: "that almost invariant type, the foul-mouthed NCO" (p. 166). This certainly tells us something about Kermode and his wartime experiences, but it is a bit much to think it tells us anything interesting about *Othello*. Certainly Iago is not presented as a stock character-type, and nor does this approach explain what is now Othello's noteworthy failure to see Iago as a familiar military type. Not only does it fail to make sense of the extraordinary irruption which is the first scene, but it involves, as we shall see, an unwarranted and uncharitable attitude towards Iago's soliloquies.

Emilia, why should Iago expect him to promote him, rather than Cassio, to the position of lieutenant in the first place? Has not the general already shown his contempt for his "faithful ensign"? And if the idea is that he expects the job as a pay-off from his duplicitous leader, why the resentment at Cassio, who is blameless in the proceedings? And if the problem is with Cassio and his promotion, what on earth has the utterly unsubstantiated insinuation of cuckoldery got to do with anything? And if it is a matter (as he insists to Roderigo all things are) of "put money in thy pocket" (I.iii.339), then why the reckless personal risks and wild improvisations?

And there is a deeper problem. For if resentment at Othello for promoting Cassio to a position Iago desires and feels he deserves is a motive (and if is not, then why believe in the force of the others?), why is not Iago, even to a tiny degree, placated in his purpose and his hostility when he is later made lieutenant after authoring Cassio's disgrace? Surely to have a motive, to have a desire, is to require of the world that it become a certain way, and do so at least in part through one's efforts to that end. When such is achieved then the desire is sated, the motive fulfilled. But there is no sign, *not even the slightest*, that Iago is placated. He simply goes on, as he did before, with a "motiveless malignity" that knows no limits, no conclusion, no satisfaction.

It is this "motiveless" character of Iago that Coleridge points to when he directs us to Iago's last "terrible soliloquy" as an example of the desperate "motive-hunting" that haunts his actions, as if even he does not know why he is doing as he is, and is desperately seeking for some, for any, motive that might bear the weight of explanation and so, self-understanding.

I have rubb'd this young quat almost to the sense,
And he grows angry. Now, whether he kill Cassio
Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,
Every way makes my gain. Live Roderigo,
He calls me to a restitution large
Of gold and jewels that I bobb'd from him
As gifts to Desdemona;
It must not be. If Cassio do remain,
He hath a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly; and besides, the Moor
May unfold me to him; there stand I in much peril.
No, he must die. Be't so. I hear him coming. (IV.iii.11-22)

The idea that Iago manifests a “motiveless malignity” may seem to require the Aristotelian reading. On this view Iago’s evil is real, but its reality is not of a kind compatible with his remaining a human being. Iago is “a devil in the flesh...a fiend”⁸, he is “a black angel”⁹, he is “undefined, devisualised, inhuman”.¹⁰ But if it is tempting to identify Iago’s evil as something that takes from him his humanity, and so preserves ours, it would be a mistake to succumb to that temptation.

4. The Three Faces of Iago

The key to understanding Iago’s uniqueness, and his stubborn humanity, is to see that he presents three faces to the world, of which only the last can claim to be his real face.

The first face is that of “Honest Iago”, true friend and confidant of Othello, Cassio and Desdemona. Upright, loyal, he seems to them epitomised by the demand he makes on all men that they:

...should be what they seem. (III.iii.126)

This Iago is both within the moral world, and a fine exemplar of moral virtue. He is the man of goodwill and clean and sympathetic understanding of the frailties of others. Witness his concern and care for Cassio after the latter’s drunken indiscretions. He recommends Cassio make his apologetic approach to Othello through Desdemona, a reasonable and judicious strategy as he points out:

And what’s he, then, that says I play the villain?
When this advice is free I give and honest,
Probal to thinking, and indeed the course
To win the Moor again? (II.iii.319-322)

Of course, such a comment immediately makes us doubt his probity, for it may not be an invariable rule, but it is pretty much so, that the good man, the honest man, the modest man, just *is* these things, and is not some kind of spectator to himself, congratulating himself on his virtues. The good man sees what is to be done, and sets about doing it just as the Samaritan saw the bleeding man lying on the road and tended to him. But Iago, even when parading his virtue, is no Samaritan.

⁸ E. E. Stoll, *Shakespeare and Other Masters*, (Cambridge, 1940), p. 231.

⁹ John Jay Chapman, *A Glance towards Shakespeare*, (Boston, 1922), p. 47.

¹⁰ G. W. Knight, *Wheel of Fire*, (London, 1930), p. 131.

Iago's second face appears most obviously in his relationship with his "gull", the fatuous but wealthy Roderigo. It is the "Virtue? A fig!" (I.iii.319) face Marvin Rosenberg neatly captures in *The Masks of Othello*:

Here is a clever, ambitious man coolly manipulating others for his own ends... He denies the reality of loving feelings—they are only a lust of the blood, a permission of the will; he asserts the superiority of the will and intelligence, and their power to efface emotions so that desired ends may be achieved; he idealises the self-sufficient man—the one who knows how to love himself...¹¹

This is the bad Iago, the one who is blameworthy and the one to blame. This is the immoral Iago, and the one we can sometimes admire as we are prone to admire all those (so long as they are not too close) who:

... know all qualities, with a learned spirit,
Of human dealing. (III.iii.259-260)

But can, and with a certain bravery:

... distinguish betwixt a benefit and an injury. (I.iii.113)

For this is a man who knows:

... how to love himself. (I.iii.115)

It is this capacity for self-love, which lies behind our preparedness, if we have it, to acknowledge Iago as yet one of our moral fellows, as still capable of recognising those values that his ruthless pursuit of his own ends violates. For love involves an awareness of the precious reality of its object, and even if the object is one's self, still one is a human being, and a real and precious one at that. Christ's injunction that one "*love thy neighbour as thyself*" is a hard saying, but it points to an essential condition of any kind of moral effort. If we do not love ourselves then we have lost that sense of our precious reality on which depends the possibility of our degradation. And when nothing we do can degrade us, nothing limits what we may do to others and to ourselves. Now everything is permitted.

The dedicated self-love of the immoralist keeps them within the range of moral fellowship, even if that fellowship expresses itself mainly through blame and punishment, and it is this fellowship that helps us understand

¹¹ Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 124.

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what otherwise is mysterious in Emilia's role, which is no small recommendation, for Emilia's relationship to Iago leaves most critics in the dark. So while it is clear from the start that she has little time for men and husbands:

Tis not a year or two shows us a man
They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;
They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,
They belch us. (III.iv.102-105)

Yet she respects, even loves, Iago. So much so that she gives him Desdemona's handkerchief that he has apparently long requested her to "filch", not for a moment suspecting that he would use it as:

...some eternal villain,
Some busy and insinuating rogue,
Some cogging, cozening slave (IV.ii.131-133)

He is her husband, he is a man. He may not be, as she and Roderigo know, as pure and honest as others think, but if he is no saint, he is no monster either. He is, for Emilia, of the morally "middling" kind, just as she is, and knows she is; something that comes out in her advice to Desdemona:

... And have we not affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well; else let them know
The ills we do their ills instruct us so. (IV.iii.99-102)

When Othello, after killing Desdemona, tells her Iago told him she "was false" with Cassio – yet another "motive" and just as unconvincing as any of the others - Emilia at first refuses to believe. She pleads with Iago to deny the charge for – and this is the mark of her love – she *knows* it can't be true.

He says thou told'st him that his wife was false.
I know thou didst not; thou'rt not such a villain.
Speak, for my heart is full. (V.ii.174-176)

And when he speaks, and says what she knew could not be true, all bonds are gone, all connection broken:

Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home. (V.ii.196)

As indeed she will not, and not (or not only) because of Iago's sword in her heart, but because her Iago no longer exists, so that there is nowhere to go, no home to go to.

With a villain, a criminal, a self-loving egoist, one can live, for after all one is oneself a member, if not perhaps so whole-heartedly, of the same community, but where now the community with Iago? Indeed, *who is he?* For where is the goal, the point, the purpose of his malignant slander? One begins by thinking one can understand the pursuit of Roderigo and his money, the hostility to Cassio over the Lieutenancy, and one might even understand the horror of what has eventuated if there were something in it for Iago, even if only to gloat. But he does not gloat. And his pathetic "escape" attempt seems utterly empty, more ritual than purpose. And so the final chilling words; the words of the third Iago, the Iago of asides and soliloquies, now speaking once and finally to his fellows; and only *not* to speak, only to deny the possibility of communication, of fellowship, of community:

Demand me nothing. What you know, you know
From this time forth I never will speak word. (V.ii.213-214)

Before we ask who, or what, is this third Iago, notice that he is the real Iago in this sense at least: without him the story, the play, is not only shallower, it is incoherent. Iago's story is not that of "Honest Iago"- such does not exist. But nor is it that of the cool, controlled, self-loving immoralist of the second face. While, to Roderigo, he may celebrate the virtues of self-contained egoism and claim them as his own:

But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our
carnal stings, our unbitted lusts (I.iii.329-330)

He does not act like such a being. His actions are not those of a controlled, cool, selfish intelligence, but are driven, and in their wild improvisation lead him further and further away from anything that could be recognized as personal triumph; lead him indeed - as a moments reflection might have shown - to his inevitable destruction.

The immoralist wants something of the world, and wants it for himself, be it fame, fortune, power. He wishes to be feared or admired if only because that makes him certain that he is fearsome and admirable. The logic is perhaps corrupt (things should run the other way: so I am admirable, or fearsome, therefore I am admired or feared) but it is only the corruption of the dedicated self-lover; which is to say of everyone of us as we succumb to temptation. But Iago does not succumb to temptation, if

anything he succumbs to rage so destructive that in the end it turns, like the scorpion's tail, on itself. It is just this doomed self-destructiveness that, in the face of all the other destruction it creates, may inspire us to pity.

Consider, then, the third, the real, face of Iago. By himself, when he is alone, when he soliloquizes and mutters his asides, and only then, he emerges, his inner life laid bare for us as we sit fascinated and horrified in our seats. He boils with passion, he is, as Ketteridge said, a "raging torment" who cannot let his attention rest on any object, on any person, on any virtue or any vice, without it triggering an awesome and unbounded hostility aimed not so much at harming or hurting its object as at its essential annihilation, its ultimate corruption and degradation. For Iago wishes not merely to subvert, but to utterly obliterate the primary locus of each of his victim's self-identification. If we are, in the most crucial of senses, who we take ourselves to be, then Iago's aim is not so much homicidal as *soulicidal*.

As we overhear, Othello, who truly is an honest man, must be brought down by that honesty:

The Moor is of a free and honest nature
That thinks men honest that but seem so;
And will be as tenderly led by th' nose
As asses are. (I.iii.339-342)

And then there is the virtuous Desdemona:

She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So I will turn her virtue into pitch;
And out of her goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all. (II.iii.342-345)

As for Cassio, that "proper man" for whom reputation and status are "the immortal part" of himself, the remains "bestial" (II.iii.253-254), he must be "ensnare[d] as a great fly" (II.i.167-168), "strip[ped]... out of ...[his] lieutenantry" (II.i.170-171), framed as Desdemona's adulterer, and humiliated as a drunk:

... as full of quarrel and offence
As my young mistress' dog. (II.iii.46-47)

If this Iago, the Iago who leads nowhere but to disaster, is, as he says, "nothing if not critical" (II.i.119), then he is not critical of his victims in the name of a higher truth; but critical of their truth, of their reality itself.

Othello's great-souled honesty must self-destruct, like matter with antimatter, in dishonesty; Desdemona's virtue in vice; Cassio's honour in humiliation. Iago, it seems, wants nothing *in* the world for these three, not even something bad or wicked; he does not want them to have a world at all. He does not want them to be there for themselves, just as he, unlike the immoralist, is not there for himself.

And so it is that Cassio, for whom he purports to feel nothing but the most profound contempt, engenders in this tortured man an involuntary and inchoate self-disgust. For Cassio most assuredly does value himself, even if only or mainly through his public image or "reputation". He has, as Iago cannot prevent himself from acknowledging:

... a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly. (V.i.19-20)

5. Understanding Iago's Evil

What is it that makes Iago ugly, even to himself? So "ugly" that by the end of the mad and frenetic progress of his "villainy" his own torture and death arrives as if inevitable; as if this was his ultimate, if unknown, ambition? The answer is not easy to find or to formulate, but Iago gives us a crucial clue in his strange and terrifying remark, with its echo of Hamlet's equally uncanny line:

... I am not what I am. (I.i.65)

This line might seem to mark Iago's deceptive appearances to the world; so while he presents to Othello, Desdemona and Cassio as "Honest Iago", and while to Emilia and Roderigo as the grasping self-loving Iago, these are mere appearances behind which he hides his true self, the better to achieve his nefarious purposes. But now the problem: for his purposes seem entirely opaque, and not merely to us, *but to himself*. Iago rages at the world, and is set on annihilating the very souls of his victims, but that rage is mysterious to him in the sense that he cannot find out what it is he is doing with it. Yes, he destroys, and he must destroy, but for what purpose, and to what end? He motive hunts with as little success as do most of his commentators. He is set on destruction and annihilation, that is true, and he knows that is what he is set on, but as for what he is *aiming at* in his destructive progress, he does not know. And if he does not know that, then he is not hiding himself away the better achieve his goals.

Here Iago pushes past the confidence man, the liar or the trickster. He pushes past any mere masking, and pushes, as does Hamlet's remark,

towards questions of existence or being itself. I suggest that the right phrasing for the line "I am not what I am", is "I am not/what I am", where the final three words come after the pause, charged with the shock of recognition at one's non-being, one's non-existence. The root of Iago's evil lies somehow in one terrible fact: Iago fears (and fears he knows) that *he does not exist*. I do not mean that he is not a human being, I mean that he has lost a sense of himself as real and of the world as it was once available to him, as real, and so has lost any point on which his will might find itself in purposeful activity, however awful that activity might be. Now the world can give him nothing, not even the pleasure of a desire satisfied. His wild improvisations are a kind of facsimile agency – lacking identity he lacks purpose, but activity itself can, and here has, become a kind of search for purpose, and so a kind of despairing, though never satisfied, assurance that, despite everything, one is still real, one has not been annihilated.

And surely this is the right way to understand Iago's problem, and so, in the end, the source and nature of his evil. For the play begins with Othello landing two massive blows to Iago's self-image. The "Honest Ensign" has been supplanted by the effeminate gentleman-soldier Cassio as right hand man to the great general, and so he, Iago, is not, as he has understood himself, as he identified himself, and for a long time, Patroclus to Othello's Achilles – as the promotion proves, that must be Cassio – and nor is he Othello's closest and most valued friend and intimate – as the secret elopement proves, that must be the child-woman Desdemona. But if he is not these things, and these are the things that he *is*, then he must be, and so he is, *nothing*. This is the lesson of Othello's behavior as Iago cannot help reading it, and it is given poignant, if oblique expression, in a later exchange between the two, and in a way that foreshadows the self-destructiveness that haunts Iago's actions from his abuse of Brabantio to the end.

Iago: Men should be what they seem;
Or those that be not, would they might seem none!
Othello: Certain, men should be what they seem.
(III.iii.126-127)

It also finds expression in the play's endless and intensive exploitation of seeing through the repetition – often ironic – of the words "honest", "eyes", "see", "think", "observe".

Those foundational identifications which made Iago real to himself, which let him answer the question, "Who am I?", have simply disappeared, and have done so at the hands, indeed the seemingly

unthinking, uncaring, unnoticing, hands, of precisely that figure, Othello, around whom his sense of himself and his value to the world have been centered, and securely so, for many years. Indeed one may go further here for it seems clear that Iago has *loved* Othello - and it is just because Othello is the elemental love-object in Iago's life that his identifications are so crucial to Iago's sense of himself, and their seeming controversion so devastating. One may, and typically can, withstand controverting identifications from others one does not feel especially close to; but when the relationship is conceived as one of love, then there is no mediatory distance between the judgements of the beloved and the lovers judgement of themselves. What crime, under such circumstances, could be more terrible?

For Iago, Othello has shown him he does not exist. And not existing one cannot have a name, for a name is only good, is only a name, if it reaches out to its bearer. To annihilate a man is to take from him his good name; something Iago brings to our (and Othello's) attention he sets the trap that will lead Othello to his own self-destruction:

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something,
Nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed. (III.iii.155-161)

It might seem that in so far as Iago's fury is directed at Othello, it is not motiveless, but genuinely purposive. After all, it works by setting itself against Othello and his world, his virtue, character, authority, dignity and relationships. As Othello has shown Iago he does not exist, then Iago will make sure, or make it true, that Othello does not exist. But this is to solidify Iago's actions, and so his identity, in a way unfaithful to the text, and to deny the manic improvisatory quality that haunts both his actions and his floundering search for a reason, any reason, under which he might make sense of what he is doing.

If Iago were in control of himself, and were dedicated to a vengeance driven assault on Othello, we would expect him to act in the kinds of way Caesar and Achilles acted: that is to say, to aim in an heroic fashion to prove and (re)assert his reality and power, and so prove to the Othello his real existence. But as Othello's final words show, Iago has proved nothing

to him, and most definitely not his reality or existence; he has, rather, left him utterly bewildered; and so the cry to Lodovico:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he has thus ensnar'd my soul and body? (V.ii.301-302)

Iago's terrible reply refuses any claim to achieved superiority. It is affectless and empty. What Othello knows, he knows, and that is the end of it.

Demand me nothing. What you know, you know
From this time forth I never will speak word. (V.ii.303-304)

And so Iago faces in silence the torture and death Lodovico orders, but which, in a deeper sense, his soul has already suffered, and in its suffering brought to others. The logic of it all, its accidentalness, its inevitability, its destructiveness and self-destructiveness, its all encompassing horror, mirrors that of King Oedipus in Thebes, and, for the same reason, inspires a pity beyond punishment or blame. The tragedy of evil, both done and suffered, and at its heart, lies a traumatizing loss of self and, in blind reaction, a rage inspired attempt to hide or deny that intolerable loss through activity that – as there is no centre, no precious reality from which actions might emerge and to which they might return satisfaction – turns itself into a macabre dance of other-destruction which has the inevitable and hidden goal of achieved – undeniable – self-destruction.

6. Conclusion

If, in genuine tragedy, the inevitability of destruction and self-destruction, means that no one subject to it can take anything away from it, it does not mean that the audience cannot take away lessons of their own. And there is a crucial lesson to be taken away from *Othello*. The evil that consumes Iago and his victims shows us that there is more to humanity, more to its capacity for terrible moral transgression, than the *weak* or *wicked will*. As well as problems of the will, our ethical reactions to Iago (and to Oedipus) show us that we recognize too that certain actions and aims reflect problems of *identity* and *existence*. Thus, while the paradigmatic formulation of that question practical reason sets itself to answer is “*What shall I do?*” and while much ethical thought has addressed that question by setting goals or imposing side-constraints on choice and action, there is surely a prior concern. For the question presupposes that the questions of *who I am*, and, even before this, *that I am*, have been asked and answered,

and in a way comfortable with desire and action. But while often, even usually, we can assume these questions answered, and in that way, there can be no guarantee that such is the case, and no guarantee that circumstances might not arise in which such previous answers are radically problematized. There can be no guarantee because answers to these questions depend in crucial part on how others treat, and how we take others to treat, us. This is something Othello ignores when he says:

...I must be found.

My parts, my title, and my perfect soul

Shall manifest me rightly. (I.ii.30-32)

And it is something Iago sets him right about, just as Othello, if unwittingly, has already set Iago right about it. Our identity and our existence is not a monadic property we bear like the color of our eyes, but depends on the identifications others make of us, and which we expect and rely on them to make of us. When such identifications are radically controverted a person is in serious trouble. The fear, even recognition, that one is not who one took oneself to be, does not mean that one must be someone or something *else*, it can mean that one is *nothing at all*. And if it is the latter, then it provides the basis for that existential pathology I have identified not as capturing all meanings which "evil" may bear, but with what is its distinctive sense and use. It does so because fear of non-existence expresses itself naturally in an all encompassing destructive rage at the world, and in particular, at that or those parts of the world that are taken as responsible for the ontological negation. The uniqueness of this rage lies in its unintelligibility from the point of view of the agent's will, for it is the rage of the non-existent, and so a rage which cannot achieve anything for the agent. When rage operates on the basis of secure identity it manifests itself in the realm of the will and has as its goal revenge or the reassertion of power and authority, as with Caesar and Achilles, but when it reflects loss of identity, a failure of existence, it does not so much aim at anything, as both hide and express the horror of non-being, of soullessness, and in a way without limits or end. Or rather, in a way whose limits and ends are, because they cannot escape it, the limits and ends of non-existence itself. It is for this reason that the end of evil agency does not lie finally in the destruction or annihilation of others, though there may be plenty of that, but in the real, the final, end of the agent themselves. That is to say, in the end of the terror of non-being through the physical annihilation, the death, of the suffering agent. As Iago responds to Emilia's unwitting description of him:

Fie, there is no such man! It is impossible. (IV.ii.134)