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Richard Raatzsch: The Apologetics of Evil

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Introduction

1. If there is any reason why Iago is called “Iago” (and not “Othello,” “Cassio,” or whatever else), it could be because of the resemblance between the word “Iago” and the word “ego.” For just as the word “ego” is connected with the concept of egoism, contemplation of Iago’s actions, too, leads to a concept—the concept of Iago—which resembles the concept of egoism.

For many people, calling someone an egoist is a way of criticizing him morally. However, some of those who think and speak that way also agree that egoism is a more or less natural stance of humans who, as living individuals, just have to take care of their own well-being or at least of their survival. If, however, this is true, how can one criticize someone morally for being an egoist, except by using the word in a different, although related sense—and so by being the victim of some kind of confusion? However, some people, mostly philosophers, would be inclined to say that there is not only nothing morally wrong about being an egoist, but that, properly understood, egoism is the real basis of morality. If egoism is indeed our natural stance toward one another, which other natural

basis could morality possibly have? And if morality did not have a natural basis, how could it ever have come into being, or, even if it did somehow arise, how could it ever persist? Is morality, in the end, nothing but a chimera? This is the place where one might feel tempted to bring in Iago. Even if the egoist, the argument goes, may be in general more or less morally acceptable, an Iago is *definitely* not. If there is any *unconditional* evil in the world, then “Iago” is its name.

Or so it seems.

2. This study consists of two parts: first a discussion of the concept of Iago, then an apologia for Iago. Questions about the proper order in which the discussion should proceed are often of substantive importance in philosophical reflection. In our case, however, this order is not as obvious as it might seem to be. The reason for this is that the distinction on which it is based is itself less self-evident than is generally assumed. To proceed as I propose to do has the distinct advantage of making it clear that the “apologia” which I will present in the second part of this essay refers not to Iago as a person or an individual literary character, but to a certain concept that we derive from studying him and his actions, and that we may also call by his name.

It could be argued that Iago cannot actually correspond to his concept on the ground that “Iago” is a proper name, and a proper name is not a concept. In general this is true, but in Iago’s case things are somewhat more complicated.

“Iago” is the name of a character in Shakespeare’s play *Othello*. “Othello” is also a proper name, the name of a character in a Shakespearean play of the same name. The

word “Othello” is thus the name both of a character and of a play.

That one and the same name is the proper name of more than one individual is nothing unusual. A brief glance at the telephone directory of any sizable town shows countless proper names referring to more than one person. That two individuals have the same name is often no more than a coincidence. It could easily have been different. In this sense the fact that Shakespeare’s play *Othello* is called *Othello* is also a coincidence. *Othello* could just as well have been called *Iago*. Iago and Othello could have answered to each other’s name, at least within certain limits. But then everything is valid only within certain limits or on certain occasions.

Perhaps the play *should* have been called *Iago* rather than *Othello*. After all, it is probably Iago who leaves the sharpest, strongest, most lasting impression of all the characters. (In this respect Iago is in no way inferior to Othello.) But if the play were called *Iago* for that reason, it would no longer be a coincidence. From this perspective, of course, it is no coincidence either that it is in fact called *Othello*. To test these assertions, let us assume that we found the text among Shakespeare’s unpublished works, without a title. In that case, would it not have been only natural to call it *Othello* or possibly *Iago* or, at a pinch, *Desdemona*, but certainly not *Roderigo*, even though the last two are characters in the play? And now compare this to a case in which we ask what name should *naturally* be given to an infant who has as yet no name. Here, with the exception of quite special cases, we do not even know what that is supposed to mean.

This is related to a distinction I have just made in passing, which was blurred when I spoke of the word

“Othello” as being both the name of a character in a play and the name of the play itself. The difference is that between “Othello” as the name of Othello and *Othello* as the title of the play (in which Othello appears). With reference to certain persons, “Othello,” “Cassio,” and “Iago” are not titles, while “General,” “Lieutenant,” and “Ancient” (i.e., “Ensign”) definitely are. But these three words, again, are not titles in the same sense in which *Othello* is the title of a play by Shakespeare. There are many generals, even more lieutenants, and countless ensigns, but only one play *Othello*. This could be safely asserted even if de facto there were several plays with that title. For the meaning is clear: of Shakespeare’s *Othello* there is only one specimen, and if there were more (by Shakespeare) either they would be variants of each other or the case would resemble that of two individuals with the same proper name: it would be pure coincidence. In this sense of “coincidence,” however, it is *no* coincidence if two men are lieutenants. The urge to find out why two or more plays bear the same title, even though they definitely do not look like variants of each other, reveals the significance of any case that does involve variants: for when we try to discover the reason for the homonymy, we are looking for a link between the named entities. In so doing we are looking for a point of view that would allow us to consider them as variants of each other. That again refers back to the fact that a play is rarely called what it is called by pure coincidence.

Talking of point of view, there is a sense in which people, too, are generally called what they are called not by coincidence, but for one of a variety of reasons. If we describe it as a coincidence that “James Jones” is called what he is called, we mean that, given the kind of person

James Jones is, he would not necessarily have to be called “James Jones.” Contrary to the impression I may have created, this is not down to James Jones alone. It is also due to the total lack of clarity as to what James Jones would have to be like if we were to say that he has the name that exactly fits him. *Nomen est omen* is a useful saying precisely because it is not universally valid; this means that when it *does* apply, this is a *significant* feature of the situation. Nevertheless, in countless cases we know virtually nothing about a person if we know only his name. Usually the connection between who a person is and what he is called is only an external one. If it were different, how could *some* names move us in a peculiar way? In contrast, the connection between a title and a play is not merely an external one.

The fact that Othello bears his name by coincidence, while Shakespeare’s play is not called *Othello* coincidentally, does not leave Othello himself untouched. Rather, it endows him with a special status. Othello is not simply an individual like any other. The play is not a factual report like a weather report or the police report of a crime. No play is, not even a historical one. There is a sense in which Othello is exemplary. However, the prime reason for this is not that the play in which he appears is called *Othello*. Rather, it is primarily because he lives in a play, and then perhaps a little because of the name of this play. Given that Othello’s life in this play, in comparison to that of the other characters, looks as it does, and given many other things, it is not surprising that the play is named after him. The starting point, however, is still his paradigmatic status, his exemplariness. To say that something is exemplary or a paradigm, does not, of course, necessarily imply a positive moral judgment on it. One can

speak of a “paradigm case” or a “good exemplar” of stock market fraud, road rage, or child abuse without suggesting that any of these are anything but evil. The same as with regard to Iago applies to some degree to all the other characters, who are also part of the play. However, their exemplariness is placed in the service of Othello more than his is in theirs.

With one exception, of course: Iago. As I have said before, he is the most memorable and exciting character in the play. In line with the intended effect of the play, his status as a paradigm is perhaps even more pronounced than Othello’s. And if the less exemplary figure is set side by side with the most paradigmatic, Othello serves Iago, rather than the reverse. In this respect Iago would be the general.

What matters is the exemplariness; for it is the exemplariness of the individual called “Iago” that aligns his name with a concept. To that extent “Iago” may be said to be not simply the name of a person, but the name of a person who embodies a concept. “Iago” is a proper name and at the same time the name of a concept. It is the name of the character in the play, but because the character exists only in the play, he personifies something general, that is, a concept. That is why we can first discuss the concept of Iago, before we move on to the apologia of Iago; this assumes, of course, that one can give the apologia of something general, such as a concept.

3. These observations, then, follow a deliberate pattern: first comes the concept and then an apologia. One exception to this order is section 7, which contains a brief summary of the whole study. Since it is a summary, it could have come just as well at the end as at the beginning. Why

it is where it is should become clear at that particular point.

Contrary to appearances, the sequence concept-then-apologia is by no means obvious. Naturally, at first sight it looks as if there could be no other way of proceeding than by saying what the apologia is for, before attempting the apologia itself. But a little reflection will soon make us unsure that this order is always appropriate. There are times when we really do not know *what* (or *who*) it is that we are talking about even if we know *how* we are appraising it (or him or her); just as at other times, once we have understood the nature of some things (or some persons), we hardly understand what we thought we were doing when we tried to justify or to defend them. Iago himself is a striking example of this.

Naturally, in order to be able to defend or to justify something—both the difference and the connection between the two activities will be discussed in more detail below—we need first to know what that something is. But the word “first” as used here does not mean that the thing in question is necessarily independent of our evaluation of it. Nor does it mean that understanding the thing must be logically prior to evaluating it. If I want to undertake a pilgrimage to Rome, I must first make a start. But this does not make my start independent of my pilgrimage; rather, the start is part of the pilgrimage, which in its turn consists of the start and my further actions. Even if the relationship between facts and values is not of the same kind as that between the start and the pilgrimage, still the concept-then-apologia sequence will be warranted only to the extent that the subject matter itself is independent of, or logically prior to, its value. But to what extent is it that?

To determine that extent would be to mediate between the clear and obvious statement that the concept comes first—that is, before the apologia—and the reservations that might result from reflecting on specific cases. This entails neither that we ought simply to regard that statement as a model of how things are, nor that we ought simply to share those reservations. Rather, both together should lead us to wonder whether in some domains a definition that does not contain some sort of valuation is no definition at all. One further consideration also points in this direction: it is not clear how far it is possible really to understand the play without developing some fairly clear-cut moral feelings about Iago, although it also cannot be said that having these feelings alone proves that one has understood the play fully. The evocation of certain feelings need not be what everything in the drama depends on or aims at. This does not, however, in itself mean that those feelings lack all importance.

In any case, the vacillation to which we easily succumb when faced with the question about the (supposed) independence or the (missing) primacy of a thing in relation to its value is reflected in my presentation by the continuous numbering of the individual sections, which signals the unity of the argument, and the division into chapters, which partly contradicts it.

4. In what follows, then, Iago matters only insofar as he instantiates and defines a concept (his own). Given what Iago is like, the question of ethics immediately arises. Since an apologia is a value-oriented enterprise, the term “Apologetics” almost immediately suggests itself as a title of our inquiry. But ethics and drama are different things, at least if we think of something like *Othello* when we

hear the word “drama.” How, then, could a *drama*, of all things, best represent the concept of Iago by supplying a model for him?

The difference between drama and ethics implies the independence of one from the other. This, however, tells us nothing about the exact nature and meaning of the difference and consequently of the independence. An engine and a crankshaft are different things, albeit not different things of the same kind. But ethics and drama are certainly not two different things in the same way as an engine and a crankshaft are. Nor are they two different things in the same sense as beetroot and music. Rather, drama and ethics are connected in essence, without either being part of the other. This relationship expresses itself in the various ways in which we react to plays. For instance, in order to test whether someone has understood a play we often ask him to articulate its “moral.” It does not necessarily matter that the moral can be seen differently by different spectators, even if they are members of the same “moral community.” The fact that the same thing can be seen differently does not mean that it can be seen in any way one wishes—or that if it can be seen in any way one wishes, any view of it must be a moral one. (Incidentally, this is one reason why I am not claiming to provide *the* interpretation of *Othello* here. This is true regardless of the fact that “moral” means different things to different people. For us it is enough that the uses of this term, despite their diversity, show *some* coherence.) On the other hand, ethical systems seem to have no more content than can be indicated by a description of the difference it would make if they were to be transferred to real life. And why should it not be possible to act these out? Which obviously brings us back to the drama itself.

Ethics and drama, then, appear to be simply two sides of the same coin, with the play as an ethical counterpart, created for adults, of what was exemplified in formal terms by the mother who showed her child some greeting cards, saying, “Now you know what bad taste is.”¹ But of course it is not as simple as that. Or rather, the idea that it is as simple as that is met by an obstacle.

“You were witnesses. What did you see?”

A: “I saw the accused stabbing the victim with a knife.”

B: “I saw evil.”

We would not accept B’s statement lightly and without further discussion. But if the moral is not visible, how could a drama be an object lesson in ethics? After all, we would not say, or at least not without further thought, that being presented onstage is a mere external appendage to the events in question and does not touch their essence.

If this question can be answered at all satisfactorily, then certainly not here. However, that is a serious deficiency only if we allow the differences between drama and ethics to make us lose sight of the connection between them; in other words, if we fall victim to prejudice. But if the stress is placed on the connection, as it is here, the neglect of the difference will not be a grave problem, particularly if attention is drawn to it, as it is now.

¹The example is taken from Oswald Hanfling, “Learning about Right and Wrong: Ethics and Language,” *Philosophy* 78 (2003): 25–41. See also Elizabeth Wolgast, “Moral Paradigms,” *Philosophy* 70 (1995): 143–55.