

# Class Nine - Othello (Acts 3-5)

## Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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### 1 Recapping and Furthering the Problem of Other Minds

- **Language and Deception:** Human beings are in a unique position with regard to one another in virtue of our capacity to speak a language. Animals express things—for instance, they cry out in pain when they are hurt. They don't have the capacity of *deliberate expression*. They do not choose to express what they wish to express. Unlike any other animal on Earth, we are capable of *withholding* expression, or, more, saying what isn't true, appearing to express a thought that one does not have.
  - **Two Way Capacity:** Aristotle said that rational capacities are “two way” capacities. Because they are capacities that one has in virtue of understanding, one can either exercise them *for* their principle aim or *against* it.
    - \* **Aristotle's Example:** A doctor with knowledge of medicine can use their knowledge for its principle aim—healing people—or against it—making them worse. One can use one's capacity of deliberate expression for its principle aim—informing people what one thinks or feels—or against it—either withholding information or misinforming people.
- **A Skeptical Exchange Between Othello and Iago:** We have the following exchange in 3.3.164-166:

**Othello:** “By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts!”  
**Iago:** “You cannot, if my heart were in your hand.”

Here, Iago is expressing that there is literally *nothing* Othello can do to know his thoughts. It's quite an irony here, because the thoughts that Othello is requesting, on the presumption that Iago is honest, is his thoughts about a potential affair between Desdemona. Iago's withholding of his thoughts on this matter is *itself* a deception. Nevertheless what he says here rings completely true.
- **The Possibility of Skepticism that Comes with Our Capacity for Expression:** One can *say* what one *thinks*, outwardly expressing what is inner, and in this way, reveal one's mind. One might also, however, *withhold* one's thoughts, keeping what's inner unknown.
- **Iago's Final Silence:** Othello demands that Iago explain why he did what he did, and Iago, in a final act of treachery, refuses to say anything at all: “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. // From this time forth”
  - Even while completely restrained, Iago finds a way to torment Othello even further. By keeping his thoughts and motivations completely concealed, leaving Othello in a state of utter ignorance the reasons that led him to end up in the tragic state that he did. This is, in some sense, the cherry on top of the cake of epistemological chaos that Iago bakes.

### 2 Epistemological Themes in the Downfall of Othello

- **Irrational Epistemological Stopping-Points:** Othello treats the fact that he sees Cassio with Desdemona's handkerchief as irrefutable proof that she must be sleeping with Cassio and

henceforth turns off his mind to any potential counter-evidence. One can plausibly see this as Othello's arriving at what he takes to be an

- **The Allure of Foundationalism:** Recall the problem I presented in the class on deep-fakes. This was actually a specific version of a traditional epistemological problem known as the "Agrippan Trilemma" (named after the ancient Greek philosopher Agrippa):

- \* **Coherentism:** Relations of justification between beliefs always ultimately go in a circle. Whatever justification they might be said to have is grounded in the fact that they *cohere*. For instance, belief A justifies belief B, which justifies belief C, which justifies belief A.

- \* **Infinitism:** Relations of justification between beliefs go on without end. So, A justifies B, B justifies C, C justifies D, and so on.

- \* **Foundationalism:** Relations of justification come to a stopping point with *foundational* beliefs, that are either self-verifying or directly verified by something other than belief that guarantees their truth (for instance, immediate experience).

Of these three possibilities, foundationalism can easily seem like the best option, and it is that Descartes goes in for in the *Meditations*, stopping at beliefs such as the "I think" that are "clear by the natural light." But it's not without potential problems.

- **Faulty Foundations and Epistemological Dogmatism:** One worry about foundationalism is that what we *take* to be foundational might not *actually* be foundational, and thus we might base the whole justificatory structure on something that is actually incorrect!

- \* We already considered this possibility with respect to videos that might be deep-faked. We might likewise consider it with various things that Descartes takes to be "clear by the natural light."

Foundationalism thus leads to the possibility of *dogmatism* where we have beliefs on which we base all our other beliefs which, by the very structure of our epistemological view, we take to be *immune to criticism*, but which might actually be wrong.

- **Testimonial Injustice:** Social epistemologists such as Miranda Fricker have developed the idea of *testimonial injustice*, where the testimonial authority of a person in a position of social power is given disproportionate epistemic weight relative to another person who does not have that social standing.

- We clearly see an instance of this phenomenon in Othello, with Othello giving completely weight to Iago's authority and giving no weight at all to Desdemona's testimonial authority.

- \* Presumably, gender is determining the differential in social power here.

- \* Interestingly, Othello himself is also likely subject to testimonial injustice, facing racism.

- Not only is this unjust—i.e. not only are you doing an injustice to the person whose testimonial authority you're minimizing—but it's also epistemically bad for you as well.

- **Epistemic Isolation:** One notable thing about Othello is that he *doesn't really talk to anyone* (with the exception of Iago), and it seems that if only he actually talked to both Cassio and Desdemona, he'd be able to figure out exactly what was going on.

- **Question:** Compare this to Descartes's own methodology, which intentionally proceeds from a standpoint of epistemic isolation. Of course, it's not completely analogous, but might we have reason to think that the very idea of coming to the beliefs that one has in isolation—from within one's own sphere of subjectivity—is itself problematic?

- **The Standards for Justification Corresponding with Stakes:** What is the threshold of justification required for outright belief? Many epistemologists have argued that the answer to this question is context sensitive in that it can vary depending on how high the stakes are for holding the belief in question. Where holding the belief will lead you to murder, it seems like the stakes are sufficiently high to warrant a very high threshold of justification.