

Class Ten - Scheman's "Othello's Doubt/Desdemona's Death"

Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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1 The Analogy Between Othello and Descartes

- **The Bridge Between Descartes and Othello:** One might think that Descartes's doubt was very different from Othello's: Descartes's doubt concerned *the world* whereas Othello's doubts concerned *the minds of other people*. This is, indeed, how I've been talking about things. Scheman argues, however, that there might be a closer connection between the two doubts than there might seem at first glance.
- **Desdemona's Construction of Othello's World:** Desdemona "weaves from [Othello's] own words, actions, and feelings a world of magical delight. And he comes to feel that his continued existence rests on the continued reality of this magical world—that is, on Desdemona's continued, faithful weaving of it," (369-370).
 - **An Interesting Observation:** Othello speaks of Desdemona's love as a *place*, "Where either I must live, or bear no life."
- **The Cartesian Project:** Withhold from all of my beliefs, step back from the world and inquire into its reality from a standpoint outside of it. As Scheman describes it, "He withdraws from the world—even, ultimately
- **What Iago Offers:** "Iago offers Othello a place to stand, off to the side, hidden, eavesdropping, from which he can put Desdemona, their love, and the world they wove to the test. Stepping back, outside the world, he interrogates her and it, assembling evidence, demanding proofs, imagining, as he moves further into madness, that the movement is toward the greater clarity of dispassionate objectivity," 370.
- **Iago and the Evil Demon:** We've already been making comparisons between Iago and Descartes's evil demon, but Scheman really brings out this analogy; they are both the figure that brings about the subject's detachment from the world (whether this is the world, as we normally think of it, or the world as co-constructed with oneself and a lover).
- **The Fundamental Difference:** When Descartes's loses the world he has God to turn to "as his true and nondeceiving parent." Scheman takes seriously this idea of "God the Father" to contrast the situation of Descartes with that of Othello who is "radically unparented, a foreigner who is accepted and admired as a soldier but who is barred by racism from real connection to the world he moves in—except for the miracle of Desdemona's love," (372).
- **Question:** What do we make of this comparison that Scheman draws between Othello and Descartes?
- **Question:** What do we make of Scheman's general approach to Descartes, approaching him more as though he were a literal character, as it were, than the way in which we've been treating him?

2 Themes in Othello and Modern Philosophy

- **The Urge for Autonomy and Control:** The diagnosis of both Descartes and Othello that Scheman offers, is the urge for *autonomy* and *control*. That is, they both aspire to a *lack of dependence on* and *control over* both over nature and women:

- **The Unacceptability of Trust:** This gets back to the theme of *trust* that we've been talking about. To place one's trust in someone or something is, in a certain respect to give up one's autonomy with respect to that thing—to put power in that thing and be reliant upon it, vulnerable with respect to it. We see that this is unacceptable both to Descartes and Othello.
- **The Murder (Depersonalization) of Nature:** The idea that nature is *murdered* in the modern era of philosophy is a common one. Put less metaphorically, the thought is that nature is *depersonalized* in the attempt to extricate oneself from it in order to secure some sort of solid epistemological foundation from outside of it.
 - **Contrast with Aristotle:** Contrast this with the conception of nature that we have in Aristotle. In Aristotle, we're clearly *part* of nature—we're essentially rational animals. Like all animals we're integrated with the environment in which we live, dependent on this environment to be what we are, and as essentially *social* animals, we're dependent on one another in order to be what we are.
 - **The Conception of "Vision," Ancient and Modern:** In Ancient philosophy, vision is conceived of as a kind of *transaction* where both parties—the seer and seen—are playing an essential contributory role to the achievement of the act. It is modeled on communication. In Modern philosophy, it is utterly depersonalized, no longer having the character of a transaction. In Descartes' this comes out in two ways—first, in the purely *passive* reception of sensory images in sensory vision, and, second, in the purely *active* intellection of ideas in mental vision.
- **Scheman's Suggestion:** There is something seriously philosophically problematic in the rejection of dependence that we find in Othello and Descartes. In some way, we lose the very notion of the reality of the world:

"[T]he world she wove by loving him was *real*, far more real than the one Iago offered, though (because) not in his control," (376).
- **Question:** What do we make of this diagnosis of the perspective from which Modern philosophy is conducted? Do we think this sort of attitude that Scheman diagnosis is prevalent today in people's attitudes towards science? If so, is this a problem, or does it constitute progress? Could we go back to the non-depersonalized Ancient conception of nature, given what we know now?