



Book Review

The Apologetics of Evil. The Case of Iago, by Richard Raatzsch

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Disputatio Vol. 4, No. 33

November 2012

DOI: 10.2478/disp-2012-0016

ISSN: 0873-626X

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The Apologetics of Evil. The Case of Iago, by Richard Raatzsch.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

BIBLID [0873-626X (2012) 33; pp. 531-539]

1. Iago is unconditionally evil¹ and, yet, he can be defended.² This is Richard Raatzsch's main claim in *The Apologetics of Evil. The Case of Iago*. Some people may grant that evil can be justified in certain circumstances, but it is hard to see how the kind of evil that qualifies as 'unconditional' could ever be defended. There is, however, a certain distinction that Raatzsch draws to palliate this perplexity, namely: that Iago can be defended, even though his actions cannot be justified. The line of argument for this and the previous claim develops in a rather unusual and attractive style where analogies abound and allow Raatzsch to introduce a number of subtle conceptual distinctions as well as to motivate his most relevant theses. Associated with this comes another stylistic aspect of the book, namely: that one may feel tempted to take literally a certain statement of his views only to learn a few pages later that it should be rephrased or qualified. On the one hand, this makes the reading of the book the more intriguing, but, on the other, it becomes a real challenge to specify the content of its fundamental claims in a way that might at once be reasonably clear and sufficiently nuanced. To meet this challenge is, needless to say, the main purpose of this review, even though it will be complemented with some critical remarks about two central claims in the essay, namely: (a) that Iago's motive for his actions taken as a whole is missing, and (b) that Iago is one of those people who keep their hearts attending on themselves. I will object to (a) and propose an alternative account of the indeterminacy of Iago's motive, while, regarding

¹ "If there is any *unconditional* evil in the world, then 'Iago' is its name." (Raatzsch 2009: 2)

² "My own interpretation contends that Iago is a character whose actions cannot be justified but can be defended... *Aside, sotto voce*: Iago is a character whose actions cannot be justified; but *aloud, to the audience*: they can nevertheless be defended." (Raatzsch 2009: 12)

(b), I will resolve an ambiguity and specify some implications of this disambiguation for claim (a) as well as for the notion of unconditional evil. Both the sketch and the discussion are meant to act as appetizers for the delicate pleasures that an actual contact with *The Apologetics of Evil* will certainly deliver.

2. Raatzsch argues, to begin with, that 'Iago' does not name a person or even an individual literary character,³ but should be interpreted as the name of a concept, that is, *the concept of 'an Iago'*, whose content is ultimately to be determined by what is said and shown in the series of scenes that constitute the play:

'Iago' is a proper name and at the same time the name of a concept. It is a name of the character in the play, 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. (Raatzsch 2009: 6)

The main argument for this claim seems to be the conviction thoroughly defended in the essay that Iago's motive for his actions is missing, namely, that no motive is mentioned or suggested in the play that could plausibly account for Iago's actions taken as a whole:

What is missing is Iago's motive, the force that drives all his actions, unites them into a whole, and supplies them a content. (Raatzsch 2009: 14. See 2009: 15)

The absence of a motive suggests, according to Raatzsch, that we are not actually facing an individual literary character with a life of its own, that is, with a set of purposes or motives that may actually account for the course of his actions. Iago must then be approached differently; in particular, Raatzsch proposes to interpret it as *a concept*. Moreover, he seems to be convinced that the content of a concept must be apprehended in view of a series of scenes or paradig-

³ "This study consists of two parts: first a discussion of the concept of Iago, then an apologia for Iago.... 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 his name." (Raatzsch 2009: 2)

matic cases and, as a result, he presents the play itself as a *panopticon* rather than as the unraveling of a plot:

... The more willing we are to accept the fact that in our story such a motive is poorly developed, the easier it will be for us to understand the traditional form of this story as a disguise for something else: the play really presents a panopticon. (Raatzsch 2009: 33)

The lack of a unifying motive is a pivotal thesis in Raatzsch's reconstruction of *Othello* not only because it invites an interpretation of Iago as the display of a concept, but also because this missing element is vindicated as essential to the *content* itself to be apprehended:

What, however, is the *same thing* that manifests itself in all of Iago's actions? In other words, what concept of him is indicated by this dramatic panopticon? Here I return to the reflection that the vagueness of Iago's motive should be regarded not as a weakness of the play, but as the very point of it.

If the play presents Iago as the very paradigm of something, then this paradigm includes the relative unimportance of a motive. If, however, the motive disappears in the background, what remains, apart from Iago's method of operating?" (Raatzsch 2009: 48-49. See 2009: 30)

So, much in Raatzsch's line of reasoning hinges on the claim that Iago's motive is missing, but how does the author motivate this claim? He explicitly claims that only three of the motives mentioned in the play must be taken seriously and, yet, he argues that "none of these three motives really explains -or unifies- his action(s) as a whole" (Raatzsch 2009: 16). One such motives is, indeed, that Iago "hates Othello for passing him over in promoting Cassio" (Raatzsch 2009: 16), but Raatzsch dismisses it as somewhat *out of proportion* and, therefore, as dispossessed of any explanatory power:

Even if we granted that Iago hates Othello for passing him over, his hatred would clearly go far beyond what we usually mean by that word; and that would undermine its explanatory power. (Raatzsch 2009: 19)

This lack of proportion does not point to the fact that such a motive may fall short of *justifying* Iago's actions, but rather to the more basic conviction that we can hardly *make sense* of his behavior out of that motive, that is, we cannot understand how someone could be *induced*

to perform those evil actions on such basis. It may occur, however, that Iago is not just someone, but a character with a peculiar personality, such that, given some specific features of it, those motives can actually *explain* his actions and, as a result, the motives mentioned in the play may turn out to be proportional to Iago's actions relative to his particular personality. This is, in fact, a point that Raatzsch may be forced to grant, given his own account of Iago's personality and, more specifically, Iago's alleged incapacity for self-denial:

In a strict sense one could achieve self-denial through one's own efforts only by leaning on or mobilizing something within oneself, thereby actually affirming oneself at the same time one is denying oneself... To the extent to which self-denial is a real possibility, Iago is not an agent who would be capable of carrying it out because he lacks an appropriate inner richness. (Raatzsch 2009: 99. See 2009: 100)

So, it seems that the dismissal of the three motives mentioned in the play as disproportional and, therefore, as dispossessed of any explanatory power, may be ungrounded once the peculiarities of Iago's personality are taken into consideration. But what are such features or, in Raatzsch's own terms, what is the content of the concept that Iago personifies?

3. Raatzsch regards Iago as embodying unconditional evil, as we have seen. It takes a significant amount of discussion, however, to reach this upshot, since some alternative interpretations must firstly be dismissed, namely: the claim that Iago is an egoist or a perverse person or a passionate hater or even a conspirator. Unsurprisingly, all these dismissals are ultimately grounded on the conviction that a proportional motive is missing. This conviction seems to favor instead a view of an Iago as a *pure schemer*, that is, as a schemer with no real sense of purpose or, in other words, as someone who doesn't so much care for the goal the scheme was supposedly designed for, but for the activity itself of scheming.⁴ Raatzsch emphasizes, however, that Iago

⁴ "The concept of pure scheming... brings us close to the concept of Iago... Iago does not merely tend to use schemes in order to achieve his objectives. Rather, whether he achieves one objective rather than another is of only marginal interest to him. Scheming, for him, is a passion, rather than a means to an end, and a passion that constitutes his entire being." (Raatzsch 2009: 68-9)

is not *simply* a pure schemer, but one of those people who are engaged in pure scheming due to a *quintessential boundary* that keeps them apart from anyone else:

Whip me such honest knaves; others there are,
 Who, trimm'd in forms, and visages of duty,
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
 And throwing but shows of service on their lords,
 Do well thrive by 'em, and when they have liv'd in their
 coats,
 Do themselves homage, those fellows have some soul,
 And such a one do I profess myself... (Shakespeare 1958: 1.1.49-55)

Raatzsch associates this quintessential boundary with Iago's capacity to keep his heart attending on himself. There is, indeed, a trivial sense in which this claim is clearly false, for Iago is indeed interested in other people's attitudes and motives as part and parcel of his own activity as a pure schemer. More specifically, it cannot plausibly be denied that Iago has some particular desires whose respective intentional objects involve other people's attitudes and fate. After all, Iago was eager to become Othello's lieutenant and also wants Othello's life to be ruined. And, of course, these two desires can appropriately be ascribed to Iago even though the incapacity to fulfill the former may fail to account for the emergence of the latter. So, it seems that we must attribute to Iago a significant amount of desires that *p*, where the content of *p* does involve other people's desires and attitudes. There must then be a different sense in which we can reasonably claim that Iago is one of those people who keep their hearts attending on themselves and here is where the idea of a quintessential boundary may come into the picture.

What such a boundary may consist of can more efficiently be identified by picking up on some attitudes that are present in all characters in the play, except Iago, namely, a certain bond with other human beings in virtue of which other people's attitudes toward oneself decisively contribute to fixing one's identity and, consequently, the value of one's life:

At least for Cassio -and in a certain sense for those who see him, all things considered, as a noble character- the moral substance of a person consists (among other things) of his good reputation. Since this substance

is what constitutes him as a human being rather than an animal, it is he who will be destroyed if his reputation is destroyed. (Raatzsch 2009: 53)

By contrast, Iago is someone to whom a good name means nothing and conceives of himself as 'the measure of all things':

By standing out against all other things in this way, Iago sets them an absolute boundary and in so doing defines them. For himself, Iago is the measure of all things... Whatever Iago believes to be the standard, however, is supposed to be the standard because he believes it to be. But such a thing is no human standard.

This is directly conveyed by the fact that the concept of a good name means nothing to Iago, even though he 'knows'... what it means to *us*." (Raatzsch 2009: 74)

Hence, the bond that Iago is claimed to lack does not so much emerge as a pathology but as a moral flaw, that is, as a certain insensitivity toward the claims that the others may legitimately make on him:

He [Iago] does not recognize any demand of the kind, even though, as was explained above, he knows how to talk about a good reputation. He uses morality for the purposes of manipulation -and by so doing, he actually discards it.

... while the ordinary egoist at least has some room for others in his head, albeit not in his heart, Iago has no such room anywhere. If, then, he is an amoralist, he is the *absolute* amoralist." (Raatzsch 2009: 98-9)

We may thus see Iago is somewhat alien to the realm of the ethical⁵ and, from this perspective, Raatzsch may rightly conclude that Iago represents the concept of the absolute amoralist or unconditional evil. There is, however, a relevant implication of this line of reasoning that Raatzsch certainly mentions but fails to explore, namely: that being placed within the realm of the ethical comes up as natural to us, that

⁵ I regard Raatzsch's use of the word 'ethical' as closely related to Bernard Williams' notion of the ethical: "However vague it may initially be, we have a conception of the ethical that understandably relates to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires, and, generally, the lives of other people, and it is helpful to preserve this conception in what we are prepared to call an ethical consideration." (Williams 1985: 12). See Williams (2002: 24) for an issue crucially related to this.

is, as not being in need of either explanation or justification. What must be accounted for (or justified, if at all possible) is not the existence of an ethical bond, but its absence. Traditional philosophical attempts to ground morality in front of the amoralist may then emerge as deeply misconceived, since what calls for an explanation (and could hardly be justified) is the fact that someone may place themselves outside the boundaries of the ethical, and not the other way round.

This line of reasoning sheds some further light on Raatzsch's pivotal claim that Iago has no motive. As he concludes at some stage, "... it seems that we can only speculate about Iago's motives" (Raatzsch 2009: 19). Yet, my previous remarks intimate that we are forced to speculate about Iago's motive not only in the trivial sense that we cannot go beyond mere speculation, but also in the deeper sense that we cannot refrain from speculating, that is, that we feel the need to specify a motive even though we know that any attribution of a particular motive will ultimately be unwarranted. And this suggests that the point of the play may not so much be the absence of a motive for Iago's actions, but to highlight the need of an explanation when facing a kind of behavior that blatantly disregards the demands of the ethical domain.

To motivate this suggestion a bit further, let me briefly examine a certain perplexity that Raatzsch does not contemplate, namely: how is it that Iago places himself outside the ethical world and, yet, he covets some goods that are constitutively ethical, like being appointed lieutenant or being trusted, which is a necessary condition for his scheming? Can ethically laden goods not only be perceived but desired by someone who is fully alien to the ethical domain? Doesn't this perplexity invite the thought that Iago must have been at some stage within the ethical world and, then, withdrawn from it and thus disfigured? These questions suggest that Iago may not have placed himself totally outside ethical domain and, in this respect, we may avoid claiming that he is the absolute amoralist. We may still argue, however, he is *unconditional evil* insofar as this sort of evil may be construed as pointing to someone, who being alien to the moral domain but not fully, can't help manipulating our moral attitudes and also coveting some ethically laden goods. A recurrent feature of this position is that it calls for both *an explanation* and *a response* on the side of those within the ethical domain. I have so far been considering some aspects of what this explanation may look like and I will return

to them later, but let me now focus on the kind of response that an Iago may demand from us. Raatzsch's apologia of Iago may be regarded as an aspect of this response.

4. Raatzsch takes it for granted that Iago's actions cannot be justified and this provides an indirect justification for those who keep themselves within the ethical side of the quintessential boundary. And, yet, Raatzsch argues that Iago can be *defended*. So, it seems that the defense of a person and the justification of her actions can part company at some point. Raatzsch argues that this bifurcation only makes sense when a certain kind of *necessity* is involved. What kind of necessity is this supposed to be? In Raatzsch's view, such a necessity must be confined to the dynamics of Iago's personality as it is now, leaving aside any past experiences that may actually have produced it. In this respect, Raatzsch pictures Iago's personality as being shaped by *only* two traits, namely: (a) Iago is one of those people who keep their hearts attending on themselves and (b) he is an excellent observer (Raatzsch 2009: 74, 92, 99). Given the ethical interpretation of (a) I argued for in the previous section, it is clear that Iago *is bound to* disregard any ethical demands that his fellow creatures may make on him, for there are no resources within his motivational framework to take such demands into consideration except from a purely manipulative perspective (Raatzsch 2009: 99-100). So, it seems that Raatzsch may legitimately conclude that Iago's personality is subject to a kind of necessity in virtue of which Iago can be defended, even though his actions are unjustified. And, yet, there seems to be a tension between the claim that a unifying motive of Iago's actions is missing and Raatzsch's defense of Iago. For, as I pointed out in section 2, the three motives mentioned in the play are certainly out of proportion for someone who places himself in the ethical domain, but hardly so for an Iago, that is, for someone with no resources in their psychology for self-restraint in light of some legitimate ethical demands.

Raatzsch closes his book with a suggestive reflection on how to respond to Iago beyond a philosophical defense of it. The kind of response that he finally welcomes is Emilia's:

Emilia is certainly no great figure in whom pure and strong moral forces struggle with each other. She is possibly somewhat childish, and certainly immature. But at the same time she is genuinely human. That is what earns our respect. The meaning of this respect becomes clear precisely through her simple temperament: she does not measure her

strength against Iago's, as Falstaff or Hamlet might have done, but simply confronts him with her pure fellow humanity. (Raatzsch 2009: 106)

There is the question, however, as to whether Emilia's response is actually consistent with Raatzsch's apologia of Iago. For how could Emilia actually defend Iago? Shouldn't such a defense take place within a philosophical perspective that has explicitly been characterized by Raatzsch as alien to her? To put it another way, who can write the closing paragraph of the book where Emilia's response is presented as the human standard and, at the same time, Iago is defended? Raatzsch's line of reasoning seems to imply that such words could only be written from a detached, philosophical perspective and, consequently, that they could not be uttered from a perspective like Emilia's where our humanity is claimed to be not only identified, but embodied. This tension may depend, however, on a certain conception of the role of philosophical reflection in our lives that may not be ultimately consistent with Raatzsch's idea of a panopticon as the means by which the concept of an Iago is to be grasped. For, on such an account, the hissing that traditionally accompanies the appearance of Iago on the stage seems to be constitutive of our ability to apprehend what is going on in that particular scene and to project it onto some other situations. And I may easily imagine an Emilia hissing, whereas Raatzsch seems to dismiss such behavior as improper for a philosopher, despite his own condition as the author of a passionate and exciting philosophical study of Iago's case and its implications for our lives.⁶

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⁶ Earlier versions of this review have benefited from discussion with Christopher Bennett and Claudia Comte. Research for this notice has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (CSD2009-00056, FFI2010-16049)