
“Much Virtue in If”: Ethics and Uncertainty in *Hamlet and As You Like It*

David Summers, *Capital University*

In recent years we have seen a renewed interest in Shakespeare as an intellect, a mind at work on problems we could properly consider “philosophical.” Not only have we seen literary critics writing about philosophy—David Bevington’s *Shakespeare’s Ideas*, Jonathan Bates’s *The Soul of the Age* and A.D. Nuttall’s *Shakespeare the Thinker*, just to name three books of the genre—but also we have seen philosophers engaging in literary analysis, in works such as Colin McGinn’s *Shakespeare’s Philosophy*. The subtitle of McGinn’s book is “Discovering the Meaning behind the Plays,” which can only lead us to heave a sigh of relief and say “Thank god somebody has finally got around to doing that.” It is not clear which requires more of the *arête* we name Courage: for those of us trained in poetry to dabble in philosophy, or for philosophers to engage in literary criticism. What is clear to me is that it is essential that both parties do attempt to cross these disciplinary divides if we are to attain the transdisciplinary thinking that has always led to the richest insights in both philosophy and criticism. What follows here is an attempt to think about Shakespeare as an ethicist by looking at the role of uncertainty in the moral agency issues wrestled with in *Hamlet*, and the place a corollary notion—what I refer to as “ifness,” plays in the references to Virtue in *As You Like It*. I capitalize Virtue here because my underlying assertion is that Shakespeare’s overriding ethical assumptions seem to me to be more akin to the aretaic tradition of Aristotle, what we now commonly call Virtue Ethics, than to the deontic ethical paradigm that predominated in humanist thinking.

1. Grounds More Relative

Most of us would agree that *Hamlet* is a complex case study in moral agency and ethical reflection, contextualized in a challenging and peculiar situation. Where we disagree, generally, is on the question of whether or not Hamlet’s delay is proper philosophical deliberation or merely dithering predicated by a variety of psychological accounts, dressed up in scruples. I take the former view, with the caveat that of

course even serious moral thinker’s may *also* have serious psychological issues—perhaps most do—and I believe if we assume that, the play reveals itself as a truly fascinating critique of the dominant Humanist approaches to practical ethics. I take that dominant Humanist approach to be largely deontic in nature, using as a source for their rules and obligations a heady blend of holy writ and classical writing. Erasmus spent his entire life collecting adages, and not just for rhetorical purposes but because they delivered the promise of ancient wisdom about how we ought to live our lives. His *Adages* was not exclusively an aid to eloquent rhetoric; it was a compendium of practical ethics.

Adages or commonplaces, however, have to be deployed in particular instances and by particular characters, reminding us that ethics can never be practically considered without concurrently considering epistemology. To know which commonplace one ought to select requires that we know what the truth of the present situation is. The work of a jury in determining guilt or innocence is a matter of shifting through evidence that allows its members to establish a satisfactory degree of certainty about the facts. Lack of certainty about the facts is not only the driving force of plot in detective fiction, it is one of the overarching philosophical concerns of *Hamlet* as a play. Horatio begins the play claiming he will believe nothing without the true avowal of his own eyes, but ends the play urging his friend Hamlet to trust his deepest intuitions. While many dismiss Hamlet’s own struggles with determining what exactly the apparition he has seen might actually be, the play is so permeated with the epistemological problem of separating “seeming” from “being” that I tend to take Hamlet’s struggle in Act 2 seriously, as when Hamlet muses:

The spirit that I have seen
May be a de’il, and the de’il hath power
To assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me! I’ll have grounds
more relative than this (2.2.533-539).¹

Hamlet is genuinely caught in an epistemological as well as ethical quandary, and the epistemology has to be ironed out before good ethical choices can happen. Alasdair MacIntyre wrote about epistemological crises forty years ago, and found in Hamlet the perfect literary example

(MacIntyre, “Epistem” 454). Hamlet’s worldview, predicated largely on a set of assumptions about his parents’ relationship, encounters in Gertrude’s “o’er-hasty marriage” one of those disjunctures that bring about an epistemic revolution of Kuhnian proportion—on a Danish level (2.2.57). He can no longer “save the appearances,” as it were, and needs to formulate a new family narrative and a new philosophical paradigm. All these uncertainties serve to highlight how closely *knowing the truth* and *doing what is right* are linked. Before embarking on the morally and spiritually dangerous course of executing another human being, Hamlet wants to make sure he has his facts straight. What could be more reasonable, or more virtuous?

Adages as a guide to ethical decision-making are deployed in parallel scenes in *Hamlet*, in which fathers and sons discuss what those sons ought to do. In 1.3, Polonius provides his famous catalog of adages to Laertes, preceded with this admonition “these few precepts in thy memory / Look thou character” (1.3.57-58). Critics have largely been hard on old Polonius, dismissing him as either merely cynical or merely foolish—and he certainly is both those things at times—but I think that pat profile obscures something crucial about this speech: what Polonius gives is good, humanist advice drawn from Isocrates, and he is, like many another Elizabethan opportunist, convinced that the humanist educational paradigm is good for individuals and for the state. As Alan Fisher once said of Polonius, he is “Shakespeare’s Last Humanist,” and whatever elements of satire and folly he may at times represent, he is also “representative of a whole manner of thinking of which the play is aware and which it examines critically” (37). Polonius is not only “a sadly ordinary person caught up in events too large for his mediocrity,” he is also “a recognizable version of the kind of man that a humanist training was supposed to produce” (37). It is important to note that the word *character*, as Polonius uses it here, evokes both notions of moral character, and the act of writing these well-phrased bits of wisdom down, as if the mind were a commonplace book. And indeed, the commonplace book itself appears in 1.5 when another father, Old Hamlet, lectures his son on what he must now do. But the effect of this second interview on the humanist deontics that Polonius cherishes is devastating:

Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
Unmixed with baser matter.... (1.5.98-104)

The epistemic paradigm shift has become an ethical paradigm shift, marked first by erasure rather than the constructive *charactering* of the commonplace book.

However, the takeaway from these parallel scenes is not the complete rejection of rules, or adages, as guide to ethical decision-making, and the gap between erasure and the tentative construction of a new ethic is brief indeed. Hamlet immediately starts refilling the commonplace book he has just wiped clean with new insights phrased as adage: “Meet it is I set it down / That one may smile and smile and be a villain—/ At least I’m sure it may be so in Denmark” (1.5.107-109). But this is also a kind of *anti*-commonplace—it articulates uncertainty, the “seem-ness” of life, and even to that adds conditionals—at least this *might* be the case...and maybe only here in Denmark. The impression left with the reader is one of the inadequacy, not the irrelevance, of rules and commonplaces. “Neither a borrower not a lender be” may serve perfectly well, most of the time, in common circumstances. But where in Polonius’s tome of proverbs does one turn for Hamlet’s case? “Father poisoned by his younger brother, possibly with the aid of my incestuous and adulterate mother”—what does one do? The problem with commonplaces is not that they are false, but that they are common, and we know from his first speech in the play how Hamlet feels about the “common.”

So what does Shakespeare provide in place of the venerable humanist deontics? If we piece together what happened to, and within, Hamlet over the remainder of the play, three salient features central to a Virtue Ethics model of moral decision-making take shape. One is the importance of what Martha Nussbaum calls narrative imagination (Nussbaum 85-103), a capacity of mind that MacIntyre places at the center of his ethical paradigm in *After Virtue*. Not surprisingly, for Shakespeare narrative largely equates to theatre: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.539-540). What is really meant is both that the story of the murder of Gonzaga will work

upon the king, and Hamlet himself will find his moral way by seeing himself as an actor in an unfolding story. Claudius's response to *The Mousetrap* is undoubtedly a blend of extreme emotions, including the terror of discovering a deadly opponent in the nephew he has heretofore disregarded perhaps as a non-entity, but it must also include the sense of shame and guilt Hamlet intends him to feel, and to reveal. Shakespeare has already taken pains to show us in 3.1 that Claudius's guilt lies just below the surface, and his immediate action following *The Mousetrap* is not to begin his schemes to do away with a dangerous Hamlet, but to go to the Chapel to pray. Dealing with Hamlet comes after repentance proves to be beyond his grasp. Shakespeare provides his audience reassurance that his own life's work as a dramatist does precisely as Hamlet foretold—the “purpose of playing” is indeed to “show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image” (3.2.20; 22-23).

A second feature is the raising value of what we might call intuition—by the end of the play, when Hamlet expresses his misgivings about the coming fencing match, even that arch-empiricist Horatio is moved to say, “If your mind dislike anything, obey it” (5.2.195). Perhaps intuition, here, is merely rational judgment operating at a speed fast enough to keep up with immediate narrative demands. The narrative context of a moral decision becomes paramount, and the key mental process according to Aristotle is *phronesis*—the practical wisdom needed to size up a narrative situation and intuitively determine what the virtuous course of action would be, and to do that “on the fly” (312). After four hours on stage agonizing on *if*, *when* and *how* to exact revenge, Hamlet finally does so in a matter of moments—because that is where his *phronesis* leads him: certainty, opportunity and necessity have all come to one inescapable action at one irredeemable moment. *Phronesis* is a mental function that relies on pulling together a mature understanding of what the virtues are with a capacity to analyze the truth of a moment in time in context so swiftly as to be, for all intents and purposes, instinctive.

The third feature is a new focus on character over action, in which the pursuit of the same action—revenge for a father's violent death—when played out by the careful, deliberate Hamlet stands in stark contrast to both the impetuous Fortinbras and the surprising vicious Laertes, who says he would willingly “cut his throat i' th' church” to achieve this end (4.7.124). The audience response—over four hundred years—largely

affirming Hamlet’s ultimate revenge on Claudius, while feeling as uneasy about Laertes as that young man does about himself, points toward a new focus on character over the action itself. Hamlet seems to have earned our confidence as a virtuous character, and we are bolstered in that opinion by the reliable Horatio. This is not a matter, as some Virtue Ethicist would maintain, that if a virtuous character does a thing, it is virtuous—a notion sometimes associated with the so-called “unity of the virtues.”² Laertes strikes most of us as a likeable, if feckless, young man drawn into vice by a deceptive Claudius. But does Laertes possess any obvious positive virtues? Perhaps not. It should be also pointed out that Hamlet has moments when virtue fails him, most notably at the moment he kills Polonius in a fashion that would have been shameful even if it *had* been Claudius behind the arras, and in the rhetorical evasions he makes about that act when “apologizing” to Laertes prior to the duel he is certainly less than truthful. But clearly, when Hamlet dissembles madness, we are meant to see the uncomfortable parallel between that and Claudius as a hypocrite who smiles and smiles while being a villain, but we are also meant to discriminate between the two actions as well. Here is virtuous character playacting; there is a villainous hypocrite. They are simultaneously a razor’s edge and a universe apart.

So taken together, these elements of the ethical decision-making at the end of *Hamlet* suggest to me that Shakespeare finds wanting the commonplace-driven deontics that typified humanist thinking at the end of the sixteenth century, and is advancing in its place a narrative and character informed paradigm closely aligned with what we have come to call in our time Virtue Ethics. The natural sympathy between the power of drama with its focus on character and narrative and the role of narrative at the heart of the Virtue Ethic model may be all that is at work here, but the explicit attention played to the limits of commonplace and proverbial moral insight suggest to me that *Hamlet* marks an epochal turning point in ethical thought, and that what Shakespeare is offering in its place is something like a recovered Aristotelian ethic.

While getting the facts straight is essential to virtuous action when action is necessary, in *Hamlet*, when characters are overly certain without proper and sufficient grounds, very bad things happen. When we consider what the essence of Polonius’s foolishness is, for example, it seems to reside largely in his need to be right *from the beginning*.

Obsessed with the certainty of his own judgment, he has lost the intellectual honesty that allows one to admit an error and change one's mind, a trait essential to the true Humanism of Erasmus. He settles on unrequited love as the core of Hamlet's distemper, too soon and with too little evidence. Then, he doggedly persists in his error even when presented with contrary evidence convincing enough for Claudius to conclude, rightly, "Love! His affections do not that way tend" (3.1.161). Had Hamlet latched onto his conviction that the Ghost was "honest" with a Polonial certainty, we would have a much shorter play before us. But far less satisfying, since it is Hamlet's caution, his intellectual capacity to see multiple possibilities, in short, his uncertainty, that makes the violence of his final actions morally acceptable to the audience. One of the paradoxes of Hamlet is that while his virtue insists on certainty before he acts, his virtue also resides in his recognition of the limits of his own knowledge and judgment.

2. Much Virtue in If

The problematic nature of certainty and its discontents takes a significant turn in *As You Like It*. While in *Hamlet* doubt and uncertainty are authentic epistemological issues, asking us to consider how crucial right knowing is to right action, even while representing the dangers of over-certainty in the figures of Polonius and Laertes, the very different world of *As You Like It* suggests to us that a degree of postured uncertainty may produce through inaction as much ethical good as certainty is able to produce in properly ground action. Perhaps it is true that most of the wrong done in life is the result of people doing things they are absolutely certain is the right thing to do.

One of the challenges intrinsic to Virtue Ethics is the problem of a shifting inventory of what the virtues are, as they differ across cultures and through time. While the *Nichomachean Ethics* provide a starting point for the neo-Aristotelian, clearly other traits are viewed as virtues in the Judeo-Christian worldview—such as Meekness—that would have seemed anything but virtuous to one of Aristotle's compatriots. In *As You Like It*, the predominant non-Aristotelian virtue is Gentleness. Juliet Dusinberre has pointed out how pervasive this word and concept are in *As You Like It* (31), as one might expect in what Nuttall called "the

greatest pastoral in the English language” (235). Between the Christian gospels and the pastoral tradition, “gentle shepherd” has virtually become a tautology. What is crucial to note is that Gentleness here, as often as not, is a character trait rather than an accident of social status. The parallel contrasts between Duke Senior and his brother Duke Frederick, and the brothers Oliver and Orlando, signal that “gentleness” is a moral virtue that one aristocrat may possess while another does not. In *As You Like It*, Dusinger points out, the opposite of gentleness is not social baseness as it is in *Henry V*, but savagery (31). The play is permeated with instances of the contrast between the savagery of court life and the inherent gentleness of the pastoral ethos, largely epitomized in the aged shepherd Corin.

The centrality of the virtue “gentleness” in Arden illuminates one of the great comic scenes in the play: Touchstone’s *tour de force* elaboration on the various degrees of insults and “giving of the lie” in the deontic ethos that rules courtly behavior. When pressed to prove his “courtly” credentials in Act 5, Touchstone recites a litany of aggressive, indeed *vicious* (in the sense of vice-like) behaviors he has to his credit like ruining the careers of three tailors and involving himself in four quarrels. In his account—granted, undoubtedly apocryphal—of the quarrel over his appraisal of the beard of a fellow-courtier, Touchstone outlines a deontic system of rules byzantine in their intricacy and set down “by the book”: Here is his summary of types of offense: “The first, the retort courteous; the second, the quip modest; the third, the reply churlish; the fourth, the reproof valiant; the fifth, the counter-check quarrelsome; the sixth, the lie with circumstance; the seventh, the lie direct” (5.4.91-95). (He has already provided clarifying illustrations of these degrees of infraction.) At this point, he goes on to outline what might at first appear merely a footnote of legalese to this highly structured set of rules and obligation, but which is actually—in my view—a profound shift of perspective away from rules and toward virtues and character:

All these you may avoid but the lie direct, and you may avoid that too with an “if.” I knew when seven justices could not take up a quarrel, but when the parties were met themselves, one of them thought but of an “if”: as “if you said so, then I said so”; and they shook hands and swore brothers. Your ‘if’ is the only peacemaker; much virtue in “if.” (5.4.95-101)

Peacemaker is certainly not among the virtues examined in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, but it is in the Gospels, where we are told Peacemakers “shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5.9). In the Forest of Arden, the *Gentleness* that Dunsinville finds so pervasive is characterized by the intrinsic impulse to consider others as much as oneself, and the desire to live peaceably with all. Even Orlando, with his interest in wrestling and his fight with Oliver, has much to learn about Peacemaking—although I think we are meant to take him as inherently *gentle*. It is a virtue discovered and eventually attained by Oliver and even Duke Frederick.

It stands in sharp contrast to the putative attribute called Honor, taken in the courtly world as a virtue superior to almost all others—that strong sense of self-pride that leads one to fight duels over the cut of one’s beard, and which Falstaff so thoroughly anatomizes in *I Henry IV*: “Who hath [Honor]? He that died o’ Wednesday” (5.1.135-136). One or both of the belligerents in Touchstone’s anecdote found within himself a preference for Peace over Honor, and articulated that in the word *if*. Much of the comedic satire in Touchstone’s exposition here is predicated on the subject of this particular quarrel: I don’t like the cut of your beard. These are the matters that Honor causes great men to fall out about? When that silliness is added to the humor intrinsic to these finely delineated levels of snarkiness, it is easy to conclude this is a questioning of conventional social rules as much as Hamlet’s blank tablets question humanistic commonplaces. In Hamlet’s most philosophically dubious moment, even he concludes:

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour’s at the stake.” (4.4.52-55)

One would like to think Hamlet is himself scornful of this idea, but it is certain that it has no place in the pastoral of *As You Like It*.

But to be fair we need to recall that while the cut of man’s beard may be a frivolous instance, the accusation of lying is not, and certainly truth-telling and its attendant virtue, Honesty, is not a frivolous matter, even in Arden. Nevertheless, Shakespeare’s thinking about truth-telling includes a great many examples suggesting that Shakespeare takes a supple and nuanced stance on lying, if it is in aid of peace, harmony and

forgiveness. *King Lear* is a play where truth-telling and plain-speaking take center stage, but telling the truth is not always virtuous, and lying in a redemptive cause may not be a vice. When Kent looks about him, and says:

Sir, 'tis my occupation to be plain:
I have seen better faces in my time
Than stands on any shoulder that I see
Before me at this instant,” (2.2.90-93)

he may well be telling the truth, but this not a moment of notable virtue—certainly not of gentleness or peacemaking. And when Lear admits to Cordelia that, while her sisters have no cause to hate him, she has cause to hate him, and she replies with “no cause, no cause” (4.7.75), this archetypal truth-teller may be telling the biggest whopper in the Shakespearean canon. But in this context, she is virtuous in saying it: it is gentle, kind and restores their relationship, a version of Plato’s “noble lie” writ small. Sissela Bok, whose *Lying* articulates a very strict deontic position on the act of truth-telling, would undoubtedly disapprove, which serves to highlight how this moment evinces Shakespearean shift from deontic rules to the virtues. What Sonnet 138—“When my loves swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her though I know she lies...”—says whimsically about the role that suppressing truth plays in aid of redeeming relationships—*Lear* also says in profound seriousness.

When we recall how central sharply defined *knowing* is to the *phronesis* in *Hamlet*, this retreat of Touchstone’s to conditionality, contingency, doubt—whatever we find encoded in IFNESS—is a curiosity. Of course, we quickly recognize that whatever ifness is in this instance, it is not genuine doubt. It is, rather, a posture—an assumption of open-mindedness as opposed to dogmatism. It is an expression of willingness to suspend even truth and personal conviction (under certain circumstances) in favor of peacemaking and gentleness. There may be circumstances in which the virtuous person would go to the block or to the stake for their conviction of what truth is—maybe even, in yet rarer circumstances, kill for it. But it need not be about the cut of beards. Since Touchstone’s example—liking or not the look of a man’s beard—entails an aesthetic conviction rather than some verifiable fact to which “giving the lie” might be rationally confirmed or disproved, I would even suggest Shakespeare is inviting his audience to consider what virtue might be

found in “principled tolerance” on matters of religious belief and modes of worship. If the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could have invoked ifness with regard to their questions of religious conviction, it would have proved that If was indeed the only peacemaker.

A somewhat different sort of contingency is represented in Act 2 Scene 7 when Jacques expresses a desire to take up motley moralizing and become the Peter Singer, or perhaps the Amos, of Arden:

Give me leave

To speak my mind, and I will through and through

Cleanse the foul body of th’ infected world,

If they will patiently receive my medicine. (2.7.58-61)

The Duke thinks Jacques’s libertine past combined with this direct exhortation to virtue would be worse than ineffective—it would be itself a sin. But Jacques argues that satire, the mode of discourse owned by Touchstone, would be effective even from him because of the contingency inherent in the form—a wise man will take the general chidings of a licensed fool or satirist to heart without revealing that he has been touched by them. As they are broadcast to all the watching world, their chastisements can hit their marks, without the audience knowing who they were truly aimed at. Here uncertainty or indeterminacy aids in moral self-reflection in that one can say to oneself, “Well, clearly the satirist did not have me in mind, and yet—well—he makes a point worth thinking about.” Such postured self-deception may, in the long run, even make moral reflection possible in a mind unprepared for more forthright self-knowledge. Hamlet uses this gambit with regard to the *Mousetrap* when he says, “Your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not” (3.2.234-235).

The *telos* of living as a virtuous rather than a vicious person, according to Aristotle, is “happiness,” which is a woefully inadequate translation of *eudaimonia* (307). It is “flourishing,” as well as contentment, and the fruition of becoming just as a person should be. It is almost itself a tautology—the end of being virtuous is to be thought to *have been* virtuous by other wise people—which is why both Sophocles and Herodotus articulate the principle that you cannot say whether a person was happy or not until after he or she has died. As difficult to pin down what *eudaimonia* is in *As You Like It*, Duke Senior seems to have found this fruition—his end is surely meant be seen as fortunate, and

along the way he is able to live in a relentlessly virtuous way. He even has mastered the amorphous quality of ifness, as we see in his first great speech about the uses of adversity. Nature stands in contrast to the court in the speech, yes, but more important is the Duke's capacity to find good in everything, even the biting cold of the wind. Amiens sums up the *telos* of *eudaimonia* when he says, “Happy is your grace / That can translate the stubbornness of fortune / Into so quiet and so sweet a style” (2.1.18-20). Nuttall and many others have discussed the internal paradoxes of this speech by the Duke, and if it is mere rhetorical self-deception, then it would reflect small virtue in the Duke. But if there is something more genuine in his capacity to embrace the contingencies of life and find a way to flourish in Arden, even if that requires some suspension of a natural bitterness he could justifiably feel toward his usurping brother, we have to put him among the truly virtuous, in whom ifness brings about a profound gentleness toward other human beings. In the end, we find that there is indeed much virtue in if.

Notes

1. All quotations are from the Arden Shakespeare 3rd Series. Citations of *Hamlet* are from Q2 edition by Thompson and Taylor.
2. For an overview of reservations regarding the Virtue Ethics enterprise, see Robert Loudon, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," in *Virtue Ethics* ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (201-216). For responses to criticism particularly regarding the unity of the virtues issues, see MacIntyre, "The Virtues, Unity of Life and Concept of a Tradition," in *After Virtue* (204-225) and Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (153-157).

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