

Shakespeare, Godwin, Kafka, and the Political Problem of Other Minds

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Abstract: Colin McGinn maintains that *Othello* is about the problem of other minds. But Othello's version of the problem – the inaccessibility of particular others in particular respects, not of other minds *per se* – might seem to lack the generality needed to count as philosophical. Drawing on examples from *Othello*, *Caleb Williams*, and *Amerika*, I argue that Othello's problem, while distinct from the traditional problem of other minds, is indeed a genuine philosophical problem, but one produced and sustained by alterable features of human society (specifically, race, gender, and class distinctions) rather than by unalterable features of cognition as such.

In his book *Shakespeare's Philosophy*, Colin McGinn maintains that the central theme of *Othello* is the problem of other minds. McGinn writes:

Epistemological problems arise from the basic facts of human cognition. They are not just farfetched theoretical doubts dreamed up by pedantically scrupulous philosophers. ... Rather, skepticism reflects deep *structural* facts about our faculties for knowing In short, the facts we seek to know about transcend our means of access to them. ... This kind of problem is nowhere more pronounced than in the case of our supposed knowledge of other people's minds, the epistemological focus of *Othello*. It is disarmingly easy – almost second nature – to wonder how we can really know what is going on in someone else's mind. People's thoughts are not written on their forehead for us to read, nor are their motives always apparent. I can observe your outer behavior – what you say and do – but I have to make an inference as to what is true of your mind. You tell me that your intentions are honorable, but I have to take this on trust, since I can't observe your real intentions. Again, I have to make a transition from one kind of thing – a person's outward behavior – to another kind of thing entirely – his inward states of mind. And this inference is fraught with difficulty: the inference is not just notoriously fallible, but it seems to be structurally flawed, since states of mind are "private" while outer behavior is "public." The mind is "hidden" from everyone except its possessor. ... When I gaze at another person, however fixedly, I must be struck by the obvious fact that I am at an epistemological disadvantage compared to him: I have only his behavior to go on in figuring out his mental states, but he doesn't have to follow this indirect route – he has "immediate access" to his states of consciousness. Iago knows quite well what is on his mind, but Othello can only guess – and consistently guesses wrongly.¹

We need not agree with McGinn that knowledge of other minds is *indirect* or *inferential* to see the force of his point. Even if we hold that knowledge of other minds is typically direct and

¹ McGinn 2006, pp. 62-64.

quasi-perceptual, it is nevertheless fallible – and indeed arguably far more prone to error than our knowledge of external bodies.

But describing Othello’s problem as an instance of the philosophical problem of other minds might well seem a mistake. To be sure, Othello misreads the mental states of the two people closest to him; he trusts the person he should trust least (Iago) and distrusts the person he should trust most (Desdemona) – with dire results for everyone concerned. All the same, Othello’s problem of other minds seems to be one of much narrower scope than the problem of that name that has traditionally attracted the attention of philosophers. After all, Othello doesn’t seem to have a *general* inability to read the people around him; it’s only Iago and Desdemona that he finds opaque. And even in their case the opacity is far from total; Othello’s problem is not that Iago and Desdemona might be zombies, or that when they seem to be asking him to pass the salt they are really asking him to pass an undetached salt shaker part. It’s only a certain fairly narrow range of their mental states that he gets wrong.

This apparently narrower version of the problem of other minds is easier to motivate than the traditional one; most of us don’t know anybody who turned out to be a brain in a vat, but we all know people who’ve been betrayed by someone they trusted, so it’s not exactly a fanciful science-fiction scenario.

The narrower version also seems more intractable; most attempts to solve the problem of other minds tackle only the global version of the problem, leaving the narrower version standing. For example, it might be argued that God must have made our ability to detect others’ mental states generally reliable, else he would be a deceiver. Or, more promisingly, it might be argued that the ability to apply a concept is part of having the concept, so we couldn’t even formulate questions about other people’s mental states unless our means of identifying those states were generally reliable. But in either case, the best we can get is general reliability – which addresses the traditional, global version of the problem, but offers Othello little reassurance. For what good does it do Othello to be *generally* reliable in detecting others’ mental states, if that ability fails him in the particular case of Iago and Desdemona? “By heaven, I’ll know thy thoughts,” says Othello; “you cannot, if my heart were in your hand,” is Iago’s reply.²

² *Othello* III.3.162-163.

But if the narrower problem is more intractable, we might nevertheless worry that it lacks the generality to be a *philosophical* problem at all. An evil demon deceiving us about everything is a philosopher's worry; an evil Venetian deceiving us about a few particular things is seemingly not. The traditional philosophical problem of other minds treats a worry about the particular mental states of particular others as a stepping stone to a worry about others' mental states in general. (In Cavellian terms,³ it treats the particular mental states of particular others as *generic objects*.) But the worry raised by *Othello* seems never to leave the circle of particularity, and so never to rise to the empyrean heights (or, if you prefer, slide down into the treacherous morass) of philosophy. Watching or reading *Othello* may inspire epistemological anxiety; but the anxiety takes the form "Othello is wrong about his loved ones, so I might be wrong about mine" – not "Othello is wrong about his loved ones, so we might all be wrong about everyone all the time and in every respect." By analogy: if you're worried that every attempt ever made to add up a column of figures has gone wrong, call in a philosopher; but if all you're worried about is that *you've* made a mistake *just now* in trying to balance your checkbook, go recheck your calculations and leave the philosophers alone.

This response is natural enough; but while I think Othello's version of the problem of other minds is more different from the traditional version than McGinn seems willing to acknowledge, I do think it is of genuine philosophical interest – for two reasons. The first is one to which McGinn himself points (though he does not offer it as a response to the generality objection). For McGinn, the problem of other minds is "not just a philosopher's abstract puzzle" but "an intensely human problem" that "affects the way we live our lives, our friendships, even (or especially) the relationship of marriage."⁴ McGinn explains:

In my view, the first-person version of the problem is the more primitive and powerful, because in it I am most aware of the *asymmetry* between my knowledge of my mind and your knowledge of my mind. It is surely a momentous day in a child's life when she realizes that her knowledge of her thoughts and feelings is not duplicated by other people's knowledge of her thoughts and feelings ("My mind is not open for all to see!"): for in that moment the possibility of *deception* becomes temptingly apparent. Iago is vividly aware that what is open to him is closed to others, and he seeks to

³ This is perhaps the point to note that what Cavell (1999, ch. 13) has to say about *Othello* and the problem of other minds is far more interesting than anything I say here; but it's also too big a meal for me to tackle here.

⁴ McGinn 2006, p. 67.

exploit that fact. From the first-person perspective, I am aware of how much I am keeping back, how easy it is for me to mislead others, how privileged and exclusive my access to my own mind is. All they have to go on is my outward behavior, and that is at best an imperfect guide to my true state of mind. This gives me an extraordinary power – my impenetrability is something I can exploit. ... And, of course, the possibility of the lie can thwart the sincerest person's desire to reveal the truth within: you may want desperately to reveal yourself to another, and yet your sincere statements be suspected of intentional falsehood, no matter how much you insist on your truthfulness (Desdemona is the victim of this kind of opacity).⁵

McGinn thus reminds us of the potential opacity of other minds to us, by drawing our attention to our own opacity to others. We all know *from our own case* how much of what we think and feel can remain unexpressed in outward behaviour. Each of us is an iceberg, with far more below the surface than above; and in being reminded of this in our own case, we are thereby reminded that others are assuredly icebergs as well.

Of course that is only half the story. For we also know that we can give ourselves away, that others can sometimes see past defenses we had thought impenetrable. But even if our mutual opacity is not complete, it is real enough to make the fate of Othello and his companions a permanent possibility:

Othello has to be ignorant of his wife's real love for him in order to be persuaded by Iago. Desdemona has to be ignorant of her husband's weakness of character in order not to worry about the jealousy her advocacy of Cassio might inspire. So too must she be ignorant of Iago's character. Emilia must be ignorant of her husband's nature not to suspect him ... And unless Iago was ignorant of Emilia he would not be caught out as he eventually is The mutual ignorance of man and wife is here profound and shocking, as they stare at each other in utter incredulity, each striking the other as a total cipher. How could such ignorance thrive in a relationship of such intimacy? It is because of the essential impenetrability of the mind, even in situations of utmost proximity. The epistemological barrier between people cannot be surmounted even by the most intimate of connections. This is, in a way, the central tragedy of the play – the tragedy of knowledge itself. ... In *Othello* Shakespeare has written a play in which the ability to see only the physical body of others tragically limits what the characters can know of each other's inner workings. Some characters strive to make themselves known and fail, as with Desdemona; others try to keep themselves unknown and succeed, as with Iago. The soul of the other

⁵ McGinn 2006, pp. 64-65.

remains systematically elusive. If we seek union with others through knowledge of them, then we are destined to disappointment, because such putative knowledge is subject to extreme and corrosive skepticism.⁶

One way of putting McGinn's point is that Othello's problem has a kind of generality after all; the worry that it drives is not that others might deceive us *all* the time, but rather that they might deceive us at *any* time. And the ever-present possibility of deception, misinterpretation, and the like – the perfectly quotidian, non-science-fictional versions of those things, mind you – shapes all our human relationships.

The second reason for regarding Othello's problem as genuinely philosophical is almost the opposite of the first reason: not the ever-present possibility of deception, but the ever-present reality of trust. Our reliance on the trustworthiness of other minds – and not just other minds in general, but the particular other minds in our lives – plays a role in everyday doxastic practice analogous to that of common-sense Moorean truths. The possibility that those closest to us are deceiving us is like an outlandish science-fiction hypotheses in that we (ordinarily) find it hard to take it seriously “outside the study;” yet unlike such hypotheses in that we know perfectly well that situations of deception are frequent occurrences. We rely on our loved ones' trustworthiness as we rely on the ground beneath our feet – despite the fact that while it is relatively rare for the ground to give way beneath people's feet, betrayals of trust are all too common.

“If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself! I'll not believe't,” is Othello's initial reaction to the suggestion of Desdemona's infidelity.⁷ Of course Othello's trust in Desdemona turns out to be less unshakable than he initially supposes; but when he becomes convinced that she has in fact deceived him, his reaction is that of a man for whom the ground has dropped away from under his feet: “Is't possible? – confess – handkerchief! – O devil!”⁸

Both deception's permanent possibility and its temporary inconceivability are illuminated still more clearly in *Caleb Williams*. Godwin's novel dramatises what McGinn calls “the first-person version of the problem” – Desdemona's problem, if you will. The accusations that

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

⁷ *Othello* III.3.278-279.

⁸ *Ibid.* IV.1.43.

Caleb levels against Falkland are true; the accusations that Falkland levels against Caleb are false. Yet everybody believes Falkland and nobody believes Caleb. (It is specifically Falkland's innocence in its own right, and Caleb's guilt only secondarily, as an implication thereof, that they find unquestionable: if *Falkland* be false, then heaven mocks itself.)

Initially Caleb is convinced that his own inner trustworthiness *must* somehow manifest itself in outwardly detectable signs:

I am innocent. It is in vain that circumstances are accumulated against me; there is not a person upon earth less capable than I of the things of which I am accused. I appeal to my heart; I appeal to my looks; I appeal to every sentiment my tongue ever uttered. ... You are a man of penetration; look at me, do you see any of the marks of guilt? Recollect all that has ever passed under your observation; is it compatible with a mind capable of what is now alleged against me? Could a real criminal have shown himself so unabashed, composed, and firm as I have now done? ... Why have we the power of speech, but to communicate our thoughts? I will never believe that a man, conscious of innocence, cannot make other men perceive that he has that thought. Do not you feel that my whole heart tells me, I am not guilty of what is imputed to me?⁹

(Ironically, Caleb here echoes his archnemesis Falkland, who at his own defense asks: "Great God! what sort of character is that which must be supported by witnesses?")¹⁰ But in fact Caleb finds that he cannot make his mind visible, even to those who had initially thought well of him. And this is because Caleb's adversary, Falkland, strikes everybody as so *obviously* trustworthy that it becomes impossible for them to take seriously the possibility that he might be in the wrong and Caleb in the right.

Former friend Laura Denison, for example, explains why she refuses to listen to Caleb's side of the case:

The maxim of hearing both sides may be very well in some cases; but it would be ridiculous to suppose that there are not cases, that, at the first mention, are too clear to admit the shadow of a doubt. By a well-concerted defence you may give me new reasons to admire your abilities; but I am acquainted with them already. ... Your conduct even at this moment, in my opinion, condemns you. True virtue refuses the drudgery of explanation and apology. True virtue shines by its own light, and needs no art to set it off. ...

⁹ Godwin 1977, pp.169-171.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Virtue, sir, consists in actions, and not in words. The good man and the bad, are characters precisely opposite, not characters distinguished from each other by imperceptible shades. The Providence that rules us all, has not permitted us to be left without a clue in the most important of all questions. Eloquence may seek to confound it; but it shall be my care to avoid its deceptive influence. I do not wish to have my understanding perverted, and all the differences of things concealed from my apprehension. ... I am astonished you have the effrontery to pronounce [Falkland's] name. That name has been a denomination, as far back as my memory can reach, for the most exalted of mortals, the wisest and most generous of men. ... I command you to be silent. I command you to withdraw.¹¹

The difference between innocence and guilt, Mrs. Denison insists (as Caleb himself initially had), is too clear not to be externally detectable. Falkland's moral flawlessness is such an unquestionable premise with her that any arguments Caleb might offer against it, Mrs. Denison considers ahead of time as the equivalent of Zeno's paradoxes – sophisms that might impress with their cleverness but, given the absurdity of their conclusions, could never carry conviction.

Thomas, a fellow servant of Falkland's, likewise advises Caleb to give up protesting his innocence, since he “will never be able to persuade people that black is white.”¹² And another character, Mr. Forester assures Falkland that Caleb's “malignant aspersions” will be “found of no weight,” since the “purity of your motives and dispositions is beyond the reach of malice”; and he warns Caleb that the “dexterity” of his arguments “will avail little against the stubbornness of truth,” since “the empire of talents has its limitations,” and “it is not in the power of ingenuity to subvert the distinctions of right and wrong.”¹³ For all these characters, if Falkland be false, then heaven mocks itself.

Caleb, for his part, is as certain of Falkland's guilt as the rest of the world is of Falkland's innocence. Caleb even asks himself (early on, before he has as much evidence as he will later) whether his conviction is justified; but while he grants in theory the possibility that he is wrong about Falkland, he finds the hypothesis as hard to take seriously as Mrs. Denison does the contrary:

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 299-301.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

[W]hat had occurred amounted to no evidence that was admissible in a court of justice. Well then, added I, if it be such as would not be admitted at a criminal tribunal, am I sure it is such as I ought to admit? There were twenty persons besides myself present at the scene from which I pretend to derive such entire conviction. Not one of them saw it in the light that I did. It either appeared to them a casual and unimportant circumstance, or they thought it sufficiently accounted for by Mr. Falkland's infirmity and misfortunes. Did it really contain such an extent of arguments and application, that nobody but I was discerning enough to see?

But all this reasoning produced no alteration in my way of thinking. For this time I could not get it out of my mind for a moment: "Mr. Falkland is the murderer! He is guilty! I see it! I feel it! I am sure of it!"¹⁴

Caleb turns out to be right, of course. Yet Caleb's confidence that he has perceived Falkland's guilt is matched by Mrs. Denison's confidence that she has perceived Falkland's innocence. The problem is not that Caleb's conviction is unjustified; the novel makes clear that it is entirely justified. The problem is rather that Caleb's justified conviction is an inner state that he finds himself unable to convey to others possessed of the opposite conviction.

But there are also suggestions that the desire to avoid having to recognise the fallibility of our knowledge of other minds is part of the *motive* for Caleb's friends' refusal to consider the possibility of his innocence and Falkland's guilt. Mrs. Denison, as we've seen, insists on avoiding the "deceptive influences" of Caleb's "eloquence" in order to prevent having "all the differences of things concealed from [her] apprehension"; in other words, if she were to entertain seriously the possibility that her conception of Falkland as "the most exalted of mortals" might be mistaken, she would have to give up her confidence in the reliability of her ability to judge others' characters. She even invokes the Cartesian-style argument that "Providence" would not allow us "to be left without a clue in the most important of all questions."

Similarly, Mr. Collins offers the following startlingly honest explanation of his refusal to listen to Caleb's evidence:

Of what would you convince me? That Mr. Falkland is a suborner and murderer? ... And what benefit will result from this conviction? ... [I] have always admired him as the living model of liberality and goodness. If you could change all my ideas, and show me that there was no criterion by which vice might be prevented from being mistaken for virtue, what benefit would

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

arise from that? I must part with all my interior consolation, and all my external connections. And for what? ... If you even succeed in perplexing my understanding, you will not succeed in enlightening it.¹⁵

In other words, Collins admits that his reason for refusing to consider the possibility of Falkland's guilt is to avoid the epistemic anxiety and disruption of his personal relationships that would come from admitting the absence of a "criterion by which vice might be prevented from being mistaken for virtue."

Now Godwin was a defender of epistemological skepticism in his nonfiction works, holding that "we have no sound and satisfactory knowledge of things external to ourselves, but merely of our own sensations."¹⁶ But, like Hume, Godwin thinks such skepticism poses no threat to practical life: skeptical reasonings are all "very well in the closet," he says, but when the skeptic "comes out of his retirement, and mixes in intercourse with his fellow-creatures," he becomes "another man," for whom a "table then becomes absolutely a table, and a chair a chair."¹⁷ Hence, again like Hume, Godwin maintains that "it is not from reason and argument, that I infer, when I hear the voice of my friend, that my friend is near me; but from an impulse which I can neither account for nor resist; from a principle which associates my ideas together"¹⁸ – a natural inclination which is "too strong, to be prevailed on to retire, and give way to the authority of definitions and syllogistical deduction."¹⁹

But if skepticism, including skepticism about other minds, is only a theoretical problem, not a practical one, according to Godwin's nonfiction writings, how does it become a practical problem in his fiction? The answer, I think, lies in the *political* twist that the story gives to the problem of other minds. *Caleb Williams* may be an epistemological novel, but it is much better known as a political novel, and indeed as a companion piece to his anarchist manifesto of the previous year, the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*; Godwin tells us in the preface to *Caleb Williams* that the book is intended as a "general review of the modes of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 309-310.

¹⁶ Godwin, *Enquiry* 3rd ed. I.4-5.

¹⁷ Godwin, *Thoughts on Man* XXII.

¹⁸ Godwin, "Essay of Scepticism."

¹⁹ Godwin, *Thoughts on Man* XXII. For discussion of Godwin's epistemological views, see Long 2008.

domestic and unrecorded despotism, by which man becomes the destroyer of man,”²⁰ and it was certainly its political rather than its epistemological content that inspired the English censors to forbid the novel’s adaptation for the stage.

Godwin has Caleb lament:

I held my life in jeopardy, because one man was unprincipled enough to assert what he knew to be false; I was destined to suffer an early and inexorable death from the hands of others, because none of them had penetration enough to distinguish from falshood what I uttered with the entire conviction of a full fraught heart!

But from what might seem a complaint about the moral and epistemic failings of humankind in general, Caleb immediately goes on to draw a much more specific moral about the evils of social, economic and political *power*:

Strange, that men, from age to age, should consent to hold their lives at the breath of another, merely that each in his turn may have a power of acting the tyrant according to law! ... Turn me a prey to the wild beasts of the desert, so I be never again the victim of man dressed in the gore-dripping robes of authority! Suffer me at least to call life, and the pursuits of life, my own! Let me hold it at the mercy of the elements, of the hunger of beasts or the revenge of barbarians, but not of the cold blooded prudence of monopolists and kings!²¹

Godwin evidently sees a connection between the epistemological and the political problems dramatised in his novel; and we need not look far to find what it is. The difference between Caleb’s and Falkland’s credibility is directly correlated with the difference in their social stations. Falkland is “a man of rank and fortune,” with an “extreme delicacy of form and appearance,” while Caleb is “a poor country lad,” and, in Falkland’s eyes, an “insolent domestic.”²² As one magistrate puts the point: if, when “gentlemen of six thousand a year” raise accusations against their servants, the servants were permitted to “trample upon ranks and distinctions” by raising accusations in turn against their employers, it would mean “a speedy end to all order and good government.”²³ Caleb reminds us that “[i]deas respecting

²⁰ Godwin 1977, p. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 118, 171.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

the inequality of rank pervade every order in society,”²⁴ and says of one character that he “reverenced the inborn divinity that attends upon rank, as Indians worship the devil.”²⁵ (It comes as news to me that Indians worship the devil, but never mind.)

Falkland, though he fancies himself a man of sensitivity and compassion, is a great supporter of social hierarchy, explaining that the “distinction of ranks” is “a good thing, and necessary to the peace of mankind,” even if it regrettably “puts some hardship upon the lower orders of society.”²⁶ The distance between his and Caleb’s perspectives becomes evident in their discussion of Alexander the Great, whom Caleb, echoing Godwin’s own judgment, considers a “Great Cutthroat,” “madman,” and “common disturber of mankind” who “spread destruction and ruin over the face of nations,” while for Falkland Alexander is “a model of honour, generosity, and disinterestedness ... who for the cultivated liberality of his mind, and the unparalleled grandeur of his projects must stand alone the spectacle and admiration of all ages of the world.” In the face of the magnificence of Alexander’s ambition to “civilise mankind” by delivering Asia from “stupidity and degradation,” what is the “death of a hundred thousand men,” asks Falkland, “more than a hundred thousand sheep?”²⁷ (One suspects that Godwin’s real target here is less the imperialism of 4th-century Macedon than that of 18th-century Britain.)

The extent to which social distinction serves as a barrier to empathy, exemplified in Falkland’s comparison of Alexander’s victims to sheep, is taken up elsewhere in the novel in the relation of the wealthy squire Barnabas Tyrell to his ward Emily Melville, whom he upbraids as follows when she objects to his choice of husband for her:

You, whom we took up out of charity, the chance-born brat of a stolen marriage! ... Could I ever inflict upon you such injuries as you have made me suffer? And who are you? The lives of fifty such cannot atone for an hour of my uneasiness. If you were to linger for twenty years upon the rack, you would never feel what I have felt.²⁸

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

In Tyrell's case the difference in rank (and no doubt gender), and relation of dependency, between Emily and himself renders him unable to regard her suffering as fully real, at least in comparison with his own. And this general tendency to take the sufferings of the great more seriously than those of the lowly is expressed by most of the characters in the novel, the lowly as well as the great – and even at times by Caleb himself, whose solicitude toward his “noble” persecutor is extraordinary. But if social distinctions are a bar to empathy – that is, to our capacity to enter into the perspective of others – then must they not equally be a bar to the correct identification of others' mental states? Caleb's inability to make his mind visible to those around him is not, then, a mere symptom of what McGinn calls “deep structural facts about our faculties for knowing”; it is much more specifically a symptom of deep structural facts about a class-based society. Godwin has *politicised* the problem of other minds.

Not only do class distinctions make the mental lives of the lowly inaccessible to the great; they also give the great the incentive to render themselves opaque as well. As Falkland himself admits, his life “has been spent in the keenest and most unintermitted sensibility to reputation,” sacrificing his moral integrity in an effort “to cover one act of momentary vice”; or, as Caleb puts it, Falkland “imbibed ... the poison of chivalry with [his] earliest youth.”²⁹ In other words, projecting an admirable, rather than an accurate, image of himself in others' eyes has been Falkland's primary goal.³⁰

The effect of rank on the visibility of one's mental states is particularly apparent in the novel's original ending, where Falkland defends himself against Caleb's accusations in a final court battle. Caleb describes Falkland's testimony:

To these allegations he would offer under the present circumstances only one short answer. The character of neither of the parties, the accuser or the accused, was wholly unknown. He had lived in the face of his country and in the face of Europe. His life had been irreproachable; it had been more than this; he must say it, it had been uniformly benevolent and honourable. I also was known, notwithstanding the meanness of my origin, as extensively as he was. My history was notorious; first a thief; then a breaker of prisons; and last a consummate adept in every species of disguise. The question under

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 324.

discussion by its very nature depended upon the veracity of the parties. ... Which of the two would they believe? What credit was due to the palpable mockery of oaths and asseverations, when put into competition with a life of unimpeachable virtue?³¹

Of course all the supposed evidence that Falkland offers against the reliability of Caleb's testimony – *apart from* “the meanness of [Caleb's] origin” – is itself the result of Falkland's machinations, as Caleb has just been explaining to the court. Caleb is known as a thief because he was previously falsely accused of theft by Falkland; he was formerly in prison because Falkland had arranged for him to be put there on spurious charges; and he has had to disguise his identity because Falkland has ruined his reputation. Falkland's advantage over Caleb in terms of apparent trustworthiness is itself the product of the power differential between the two men, and thus not something that can legitimately be appealed to in order to justify that differential. Falkland's evidence of Caleb's guilt *presupposes* Caleb's guilt. But when Caleb offers to introduce evidence and witnesses of his own, the presiding judge calls his story a “bare faced and impudent ... forgery,” refuses to hear his witnesses, and orders him dragged off to prison, where Caleb descends into madness.

In the revised ending, the trial ends differently; Caleb's “artless and manly story” carries “conviction to every hearer,” and Falkland's true nature stands “completely detected.” But the crucial moment in the trial is Caleb's success in making himself visible, not so much to the court, as to Falkland himself:

He saw my sincerity; he was penetrated with my grief and compunction. He rose from his seat supported by the attendants, and – to my infinite astonishment – threw himself into my arms!
Williams, said he, you have conquered! I see too late the greatness and elevation of your mind.³²

In other words, Falkland comes to recognise that it is only his own inability, or unwillingness, to perceive his servant's interiority aright, that has made his long persecution of Caleb psychologically possible for him.

The tendency of class distinctions to affect people's certainty of guilt and innocence is

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 324.

also dramatised in Kafka's *Amerika*.³³ The protagonist, Karl Rossmann, finds himself in a Catch-22 situation while working as an elevator operator at the Hotel Occidental. Karl temporarily leaves his post (though not without securing a replacement) in order to get rid of a drunken, vomiting acquaintance (hardly a friend) – for fear of being fired if he does not:

[W]ould not Karl be dismissed at once, since it was unheard of for a lift-boy, the lowest and most easily replaced member of the stupendous hierarchy of the hotel staff, to allow a friend of his to defile the hotel ...? Could a lift-boy be tolerated who had such friends, and who allowed them actually to visit him during working hours? Did it not look as if such a lift-boy must himself a drunkard or even worse, for what assumption was more natural than that he stuffed his friends with food from the hotel stores ...? And why should such a boy restrict himself to stealing food and drink, since he had literally innumerable opportunities for theft because of the notorious negligence of the guests, the wardrobes standing open everywhere, the valuables lying about on tables ...?³⁴

But Karl's attempt to avoid being fired leads, of course, to his being fired. As Mr. Isbary, the head waiter, explains:

'You were absent from duty without leave. Do you know what that means? It means dismissal. I'll listen to no excuses, you can keep your lying apologies to yourself; the fact that you were not there is quite enough for me. ... Do you know who was left stranded down below when this fellow here ran away from his lift?' he asked, turning to the porter. And he mentioned a name at which the porter, who certainly knew all the hotel clients and their standing, was so horror-stricken that he had to give a fleeting look at Karl to assure himself that the boy did exist who had deserted a lift and left the bearer of that name to wait a while unattended.³⁵

Here the social gulf between the elevator boy and the unnamed guest renders Isbary unwilling to consider the possibility that Karl's actions might have been justified; anything that Karl might have to say on his own behalf is dismissed in advance as "lying apologies."

When the charges eventually escalate to theft, and Karl goes on attempting to defend himself, Grete Mitzelbach, the head cook – initially one of the characters most sympathetic

³³ It's no accident that the 1984 German film adaptation is called *Klassenverhältnisse*, or *Class Relations*. Watch it online: <http://tinyurl.com/6zzozh4>

³⁴ Kafka 2008, pp. 330-331.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

to him – tells him:

No, Karl, no, no! We won't listen to any more of this. When things are right they look right, and I must confess that your actions don't. ... The Head Waiter, whose knowledge of people I have learned to prize in the course of many years, and who is the most trustworthy man I know, has clearly pronounced your guilt³⁶

Miss Mitzelbach's confidence that "[w]hen things are right they look right" echoes Mrs. Denison's confidence, in *Caleb Williams*, that "[t]rue virtue shines by its own light," just as her unquestioning trust in Isbary, the head waiter, echoes Mrs. Denison's trust in Falkland. If Isbary be false, then heaven mocks itself! Yet it is obvious to the reader that Isbary's "knowledge of people" is far less reliable than Miss Mitzelbach imagines; and so it is hard to see the her confident judgment as stemming from anything but the gap in rank between the Isbary and Karl.

Kafka clearly has in mind a more general moral than simply the failings of these particular hotel functionaries; for he has Karl reflect that although "he had worked here for two months as well as he could, and certainly better than many of the other boys," he must recognise that "such considerations were taken into account at the decisive moment in no part of the world, neither in Europe, nor in America"³⁷ Likewise significant is Karl's taking the name "Negro" after he is dismissed from the hotel, thus identifying himself with a class even more oppressed than his own. Kafka's own sympathy for the working class is well known; he expressed sympathy with socialist anarchism, and while employed at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute in Prague, once told his friend Max Brod: "How humble these people are. They come to beg at our feet instead of taking the building by storm and stripping it bare."³⁸

Kafka adds yet a further dimension, less explicit (though arguably not absent) in Godwin, in respect of which class distinctions impede recognition of others' mental states: namely the bar to upward visibility posed by underlings' fear of speaking their minds frankly. When Karl is accused both of failing to greet the head porter regularly, and of spending

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-52.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

³⁸ Löwy 1997.

every night partying in the city, he explains, truthfully:

I spend every night in the dormitory; all the other boys can confirm it. When I'm not sleeping I study commercial correspondence; but I have never left the dormitory a single night. That's quite easy to prove. The Head Porter has evidently mistaken me for someone else, and I see now, too, why he thinks I pass him without a greeting.

Feodor, the head porter, responds in a rage:

So I've mistaken you for someone else, have you? How could I go on being the Head Porter here if I mistook people? In all my thirty years' service I've never mistaken anyone yet, as hundreds of waiters who have been here in my time could tell you³⁹

Of course Feodor neither brings these potential witnesses forward nor allows Karl to bring his own. Isbary, like Caleb's judges, even dismisses the latter possibility as an absurdity, its futility a foregone conclusion:

No doubt he [= Karl] would like us to undertake a full-dress enquiry into his night-life before he leaves us. I can well imagine that that would delight his heart. Every one of our forty lift-boys would have to be trotted out, if he had his will, to give evidence [A]nd though he would be flung out in the end he would at least have had his fun.⁴⁰

Yet the reader knows that the head porter *has* misidentified Karl, and so is naturally led to speculate that there may after all have been other misidentifications during Feodor's "thirty years' service." But Feodor's confidence as to what those "hundreds of waiters" under his authority would testify suggests that whatever misidentifications he may have made during those three decades were never pointed out to him – and the reticence of these hundreds of waiters is surely attributable to Feodor's superior status. (Therese Berchtold, Miss Mitzelbach's secretary, likewise tells Karl that although "the Manageress is as kind to me as if she were my mother," nevertheless "there's too great a difference between our positions for me to speak freely to her.")⁴¹ Feodor's underlings' recognition of the risks of honest

³⁹ Kafka 2008, p. 343.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 343-344.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

communication leads them to reinforce their superior's mistaken self-understanding as a reliable judge of bodies and minds alike.

Feodor in turn has anxieties of his own; his insistence that he could not have misidentified Karl must be read in the light of his remark that he could not “go on being the Head Porter here if I mistook people.” In short, just as the waiters beneath him must disguise their thoughts for fear of dismissal, so Feodor himself must pretend to a perceptual acuity he does not possess in order to avoid the displeasure of his own employers.

Feodor's misreading of his subordinates' mental states, and his misleading presentation of his own, illustrate what anarchist writer Robert Anton Wilson calls the Snafu Principle. Wilson explains the principle as follows:

[C]ommunication is only possible between equals. Every hierarchy is a communication jam. Every ruling elite suffers from Progressive Disorientation: the longer they rule, the crazier they get. That's because everybody lies to the men in power – some to escape punishment, some to flatter and curry favor. The result is that the elite get a very warped idea of the world indeed. This applies to all pyramidal organizations – armies, corporations, or governments. It even applies to old-fashioned patriarchal families. The individual or group at the top feed entirely on flattering and deceptive garbage⁴²

As we've seen, the desire of subordinates to escape punishment or curry favour is not the only *only* reason that communication is possible only among equals; but it is plausibly one of them.

The obstacle to visibility posed by subordinates' fear of superiors is less explicit in *Caleb Williams* than in *Amerika*; but it can be found there too. As we've seen, in the revised ending Falkland finally repents when he is led to see Caleb as he truly is. But why does it take him so long? Caleb lays part of the blame on the tendency of class-ridden society to hinder honest mutual perception among human beings; but Caleb also lays a portion of the blame upon himself:

I now see [my] mistake in all its enormity. I am sure that, if I had opened my heart to Mr. Falkland, if I had told to him privately the tale that I have now been telling, he could not have resisted my reasonable demand. ... Mr. Falkland is of a noble nature. ... It is therefore impossible that he could have

⁴² Wilson 1997, p. 20.

resisted a frank and fervent expostulation, the frankness and the fervour in which the whole soul is poured out. I despaired, while it was yet time to have made the just experiment; but my despair was criminal, was treason against the sovereignty of truth.⁴³

This ending is surprising; at the conclusion of a lengthy narrative in which incident after incident has tended to undermine Caleb's initial in the self-revelatory character of a person's true inward nature, Caleb is still expressing confidence in the "sovereignty of truth" and the ability of a "frank and fervent expostulation" to have won his adversary over. Given that he does finally win Falkland over, though, we are evidently meant to conclude that Caleb is right about this. If so, why did Caleb not previously attempt it? Caleb attributes his decision to "resentment and impatience," but surely fear of approaching Falkland – a fear shown by the novel's events to be well-justified – must have played a role.

Likewise, when Mr. Collins is explaining to Caleb his reasons for refusing to consider the possibility that he lacks a "criterion by which vice might be prevented from being mistaken for virtue," he notes that "for the purchase of this uncertainty, I must sacrifice all the remaining comforts of my life." The anxiety he has in mind is not merely epistemological; Collins is in Falkland's employ, and thus has a quite straightforward fear of Falkland's power:

I believe Mr. Falkland to be virtuous; but I know him to be prejudiced. He would never forgive me even this accidental parley, if by any means he should come to be acquainted with it.⁴⁴

Thus, like Feodor in *Amerika*, who could not "go on being the Head Porter here if [he] mistook people," Collins cannot afford to consider the possibility that he has mistaken Caleb and Falkland, because his social position and job security depend on his allegiance to Falkland.

Returning to *Othello*, we can see that social distinctions, and not merely "deep structural facts about our faculties for knowing," contribute to Othello's epistemic plight – though in his case the relevant distinctions are less those of class than those of race and gender. That the trustworthy person Othello distrusts is female, and the untrustworthy person he trusts is male, is no accident; in a patriarchal culture, women are constructed as enigmatic and

⁴³ Godwin 1977, p. 323.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

deceptive, while men are plain-dealing, reliable comrades for other men. Iago's remarks on women are an endless commentary on their supposed deceitfulness; women are "pictures out of doors, bells in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players in your huswifery, and huswives in your beds," who "rise to play and go to bed to work."⁴⁵ Iago even claims, absurdly, to suspect his own wife Emilia of infidelity with Othello: "it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets he has done my office: I know not if't be true; but I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety."⁴⁶ Othello himself has certainly internalised these sorts of suspicious attitudes toward women, and has no trouble leaping from Desdemona's supposed deceptiveness to that of a woman: "If that the earth could teem with woman's tears, each drop she falls would prove a crocodile."⁴⁷

In a culture where men subordinate and objectify women, it's no surprise that men have trouble perceiving women's subjectivity – that notorious "feminine inscrutability" that men have so long simultaneously romanticised and complained about, without asking the "Copernican" question of whether the fault might lie in the vantage point rather than in the object. Othello compares Desdemona to a statue – "that whiter skin of hers than snow, and smooth as monumental alabaster"⁴⁸ – and fantasises about making love to her corpse: "Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee, and love thee after."⁴⁹ In thinking of Desdemona as a statue and a corpse, Othello constructs her quite specifically as *opaque* – even as he endlessly bemoans her supposed opacity. At the same time, Othello resents the very existence of Desdemona's subjective interiority, precisely because it cannot be subordinated to him as her body can: "O curse of marriage, that we can call these delicate creatures ours, and not their appetites!"⁵⁰ Iago's wife Emilia is by contrast the champion of women's subjectivity: "Let husbands know their wives have sense like them: they see and smell and have their palates both for sweet and sour, as husbands have."⁵¹

⁴⁵ *Othello* II.1.109-115.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* I.3.387-390.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* IV.1.245-246.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* V.2.4-5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* V.2.18-19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* III.3.268-270.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* IV.3.93-95.

Godwin, in his nonfiction writings, maintains that the institution of marriage itself, at least in its traditional form, is a bar to mutual understanding between the sexes. Godwin describes “conversation” as “the intercourse of mind with mind” and one of “the most fertile sources of improvement”; yet “[c]onversation is a species of cooperation, one or the other party always yielding to have his ideas guided by the other” – in short, a condition requiring equality rather than subordination.⁵²

Moreover, the indissoluble character of the marriage tie, combined with the ban on close relations between the sexes prior to marriage, are a virtual guarantee that married life will be a tragedy of mutual deception and self-deception alike:

The method is, for a thoughtless and romantic youth of each sex, to come together, to see each other, for a few times, and under circumstances full of delusion, and then to vow to eternal attachment. What is the consequence of this? In almost every instance they find themselves deceived. They are reduced to make the best of an irretrievable mistake. They are led to conceive it is their wisest policy, to shut their eyes upon realities, happy, if, by any perversion of intellect, they can persuade themselves that they were right in their first crude opinion of each other. Thus the institution of marriage is made a system of fraud; and men who carefully mislead their judgments in the daily affair of their life, must be expected to have a crippled judgment in every other concern.⁵³

Hence Godwin concludes the “abolition of the present system of marriage” would “involve no evils.”

Godwin is especially critical of the husband’s claim of virtual ownership over his wife:

So long as I seek, by despotic and artificial means, to maintain my possession of a woman, I am guilty of the most odious selfishness. Over this imaginary prize, men watch with perpetual jealousy⁵⁴

Godwin does consider infidelity a vice, at least in “ordinary cases”; its occurrence indicates that a “person’s propensities were not under that kind of subordination which virtue and self-government appear to prescribe.” But in his eyes it is a relatively minor vice, one that

⁵² Godwin, *Enquiry* VIII.8.

⁵³ *Ibid.* VIII.8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* VIII.8.

“would not be found incompatible with a character of uncommon excellence.” In any case, in the “state of equality” that Godwin advocates, “no ties ought to be imposed upon either party, preventing them from quitting the attachment, whenever their judgement directs them to quit it.”⁵⁵

Othello’s attitude, needless to say, is rather different from Godwin’s. His problem is not just that he thinks his wife unfaithful, but that he thinks her infidelity justifies him in killing her. But these two mistakes are not unrelated; the objectification that renders Desdemona’s interiority invisible to Othello also makes her a fit chattel. Alabaster statues are inscrutable, but they also have no rights.

Racial distinctions also play a role in rendering Desdemona’s subjectivity inaccessible to Othello. Othello lives in a racist culture that constructs whiteness as purity and blackness as repellent, and so can only see his relationship with Desdemona as abhorrent. Iago and Roderigo describe Othello as “thick lips” and a “black ram .. tupp[ing] [a] white ewe,” and Desdemona as a “fair daughter” in the “gross clasps of a lascivious Moor.”⁵⁶ Iago further lists “loveliness in favor” and “sympathy in years, manners and beauties” as traits “which the Moor is defective in.”⁵⁷ The effect is to render Desdemona’s love for Othello inconceivable; as her father Brabantio puts it:

For nature so preposterously to err, being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, sans witchcraft could not. ... To fall in love with what she fear’d to look on! It is a judgment maim’d and most imperfect that will confess perfection so could err against all rules of nature⁵⁸

Othello himself internalises this association of his own skin colour with the befouling of purity, as when he says: “Her name, that was as fresh as Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face.”⁵⁹ But if the racial difference between Desdemona and Othello makes her love for him inconceivable – *invisible* – then it is of course that much easier to suppose that her apparent fidelity to him is a sham as well. Othello thus readily accepts his

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* VIII.8.

⁵⁶ *Othello* I.1.66, 88-89, 122-126.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* II.1.229-230.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* I.3.62-64, 98-101.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* III.3.386-388.

own racial difference from the rest of Venetian society as simultaneously evidence of and explanation for Desdemona's supposed adultery: "Haply, for I am black and have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have ... she's gone."⁶⁰

But not only does Othello's blackness make Desdemona's attraction to him unbelievable in Othello's eyes, but even on the assumption that the attraction was *genuine* the problem nevertheless persists. Iago plants the thought that only "a will most rank, foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural" could explain Desdemona's choice of Othello over "matches of her own clime, complexion, and degree, whereto we see in all things nature tends," and that it is only to be expected that when "recoiling to her better judgment" she begins to "match [Othello] with her country forms," she will "happily repent."⁶¹

In short, Desdemona's very preference for Othello, rather than constituting evidence of her fidelity, proves her to be an unnatural and unreliable woman, and thus one likely to betray Othello. Brabantio makes a similarly paradoxical point: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: she has deceived her father, and may thee."⁶² In other words, the fact that Desdemona defied her father to marry Othello proves not her love for Othello, but only her defiance of male authority, thus rendering her an unreliable wife. If Desdemona does not love Othello, then she is a deceiver; but if she does love him, she thereby betrays both masculine and white hegemony, and so is just as untrustworthy. So rigidly do racial and gender hierarchies limit the interpretive possibilities that Othello's chances of actually seeing Desdemona as she truly is are virtually nil.

I don't take this analysis of *Othello* to be anything revolutionary. The role of patriarchy and white supremacy in leading Othello to distrust and ultimately murder Desdemona is old news. What I take the role of race and gender in *Othello*, and of class and power hierarchies in *Caleb Williams* and *Amerika*, to illuminate, however, is the extent to which the problems of mutual perception to which McGinn points depend not on unavoidable features of human cognition, but on social institutions and practices that are not beyond alteration.

The "narrow" problem of others minds – the problem of knowing, and being known to, particular others in particular respects – initially seemed more intractable than the traditional

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* III.3.263-267.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* III.3.229-238.

⁶² *Ibid.* I.3.292-293.

version because there seemed to be no way of addressing it. But to the extent that the problem turns out to be “political not metaphysical,” produced and sustained by alterable features of human society rather than by inalterable features of cognition as such, then we are no longer without resource in combating it. That is not to say that in an egalitarian anarchist utopia there would be no misunderstandings and betrayals; social equality is not the kind of solution that makes the problem disappear, the way a logical paradox disappears when you see your way through it. Rather, social equality is a solution to the “narrow” problem of other minds in the same way that fire departments are a solution to the problem of fires.

Can such a seemingly “practical” solution really be philosophical? Well, I argued earlier that the “narrow” problem of other minds was a genuinely philosophical problem. Must not the solution to a philosophical problem be a philosophical solution?

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