Chapter 10

Shakespeare and Skepticism (2)

Epistemology

Current Shakespeare scholarship seems reasonably sure of two somewhat incompatible things: (1) we cannot be sure where Shakespeare stands on any particular issue, including religion (but he is sympathetic to Catholicism); and (2) we can be sure where he stands in the general philosophical world—that is, he was some sort of epistemological skeptic.[[1]](#endnote-1) So, we cannot be sure of anything except that he was sure that we cannot be sure of anything. Yet we can be sure of some things. Shakespeare had, or came to have, a definite and firm position on a major ethico-political issue—namely, whether social or political subordinates should follow commands that seem to them obviously wicked or misguided.[[2]](#endnote-2) Moreover, the essay previous to this one attempted to confute claim 1 with regard to some popular (Catholic) religious practices and beliefs about the supernatural. This essay will focus on claim 2, which (as I have suggested) is extremely widespread in current scholarship and criticism. My argument will be that Shakespeare was an anti-skeptic in the realm of epistemology, an epistemological realist.

Errors

This argument must begin, as did the argument that Shakespeare was a skeptic in relation to aspects of popular religion, with The Comedy of Errors. This is unsurprising, given the importance of error to the skeptical tradition. The play would seem to anticipate Descartes in a remarkable way. Indeed, if it had appeared in the mid-seventeenth century rather than the end of the sixteenth, it would certainly be seen as drawing on Meditations on First Philosophy (first printed in 1641) and perhaps also the Discourse on the Method (first printed in 1637). Descartes’s Meditations begin with the problem of error or false belief. Descartes (or his surrogate in the philosophical fiction—let’s call him “Descartes”) states that he has been struck for a number of years by the number of false or dubious things (about the physical world) that he has come to believe. Having, in the dramatized moment (“today” [hodie]), decided that he is now old enough and in an optimal practical and psychological situation (leisure, solitude, and lack of anxiety [mentem curis omnibus exsolvi]), he feels himself ready to embark on the great project of seeing whether he can rid himself of all false beliefs (about the physical world) and thereby arrive at a basis on which to build something stable and permanent in the sciences.[[3]](#endnote-3) He notes that he has based his previous cognitive structure on beliefs derived from sensory experience, and that sensory experience has sometimes led him astray. So, he now decides to take the path of prudence and not to have full confidence (plane confidere) in something that has previously deceived him. To make a new start, he is going to treat all the beliefs derived from his senses as if they were not merely dubitable but false.

But he finds that some of his sense perceptions seem indubitable—“that I am here, seated by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands,” and such. “How could I deny that these hands and this body are mine?” To doubt such matters would seem insane, and Descartes (and “Descartes”) knows that he is not insane (he does not have crazy ideas like thinking that he has “an earthenware head,” or is a pumpkin, or is made of glass).[[4]](#endnote-4) He discounts this possibility.[[5]](#endnote-5) Yet, after putting insanity aside, the narrator then recalls that he regularly has the experience of dreaming, in which state he has experiences just like those of madmen, and which seem to him just as obvious as that he is sitting by the fire, and so forth. This leads him to a thought that “astonishes” or stupefies him (obstupescam [*Meditationes*, 20])—not that he might be mad after all but that “there are no certain indications (certis indiciis) by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep.” Through this stupefying thought, he is led, at this moment, “almost” (fere) to think that he is asleep in the present, and possibly dreaming.

But “Descartes” moves past this moment of stupefaction. He accepts the point (for the time being at least) that he might, in the dramatized present, be dreaming. This would still leave him with certain beliefs that seem indubitable—“whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five.” But God is said to be omnipotent. This means that He could make it that Descartes goes wrong every time he adds two plus three. But that would seem to contradict the idea of God’s goodness. Yet God certainly allows Descartes sometimes to go wrong. Why not all the time? So, “Descartes” apparently has to doubt absolutely all of his former beliefs, including the ones about arithmetic and geometry. He finds, however, that as a matter of psychological fact, he cannot actually do this. And he recognizes that, from a philosophical point of view, it does not really make sense to do this. He is aware that some of his former beliefs are highly probable, and that it is “much more reasonable to believe than to deny” many of them.

To force himself to doubt even the highly probable, he decides to postulate (to “suppose” [supponam]), as a conscious fiction, “that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon [genius?] (genium aliquem malignum) of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.” He resolves to treat all his beliefs about the physical world and his own physical existence as “the delusions [absurd fictions?] of dreams” (ludificationes somniorum), which he falsely believes in. He resolves further to “stubbornly persist” (manebo obstinate) in this epistemological posture, so that he will assent to no beliefs whatever—and therefore cannot be in error about anything. The meditation ends with “Descartes” struck by the difficulty of this project, and wishing to remain in the dreamlike state of delusion rather than awake into the apparently “inextricable darkness” of the problems he has raised.

All that is in Meditation 1—merely, for Descartes, the beginning. Five more Meditations follow, at the end of which “Descartes” (by then, Descartes) feels he has succeeded in establishing a stable and enduring foundation for the sciences, a foundation, in other words, that is more than highly probable. But Shakespeare’s play might seem never to get beyond Meditation 1. The central character, Antipholus of Syracuse—the upper-class twin (with the same name as his brother) who is a stranger in the town (Ephesus) in which the play is set—finds himself, quite early in the play, in a mental state similar to that in which “Descartes” found himself in the course of Meditation 1. Antipholus of Syracuse quickly comes to lose all trust in the reliability of his sense-perceptions, and therefore, as in Descartes, of his ability to make sense of his experience. But unlike Descartes (or his persona in Meditations), who purposely, systematically, and merely heuristically puts himself into a state of uncertainty, Antipholus of Syracuse enters the play as a character who is psychologically prone to this state. From the very first moment when we meet him, Shakespeare presents this character as someone with an oddly weak conception of his own existence.

When, in undertaking, before dinner and a nap, to “view the manners of the town, / Peruse the traders, gaze upon the buildings” (1.2.12–13), Antipholus of Syracuse says he will “go lose myself” in doing this (1.2.30), the phrase seems to be merely a casual figure of speech for behaving like a good humanist traveler.[[6]](#endnote-6) Yet when one of the many benign merchants in the play leaves Antipholus S. for a while to, in a very ordinary phrase, his own “content,” this produces a verbally alert, poetical, and melancholy soliloquy (long before Hamlet):

He that commends me to my own content

Commends me to the thing I cannot get.

I to the world am like a drop of water

That in the ocean seeks another drop,

Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,

(Unseen, inquisitive) confounds himself.

So I, to find a mother and a brother,

In quest of them, unhappy, lose myself. (1.2.33–40)

This is not someone who can be counted on to have a robust sense of reality or of his own cognitive capacities. When the first of the “errors” in the play occurs, and this Antipholus, who has sent his servant to carry funds to where he will be staying, is confronted with the servant of the other (resident) Antipholus and told to come home to dine with the resident’s wife, the traveler immediately worries about his money. But his worry goes way beyond the ordinary. His soliloquy begins there—“They say this town is full of cozenage”—but continues:

As nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,

Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind,

Soul-killing witches that deform the body . . . (1.2.97–100)

These (imagined) “dark-working sorcerers that change the mind” are startlingly close to the “malign genius” that Descartes so memorably postulates in the First Meditation.

The “foreshadowing” of Descartes’s Meditation 1 continues even more strongly in the next scene in which Antipholus of Syracuse appears. He is confronted there with an apparently unaccountable phenomenon: an unknown woman addresses him by name as her husband and makes a passionate and eloquent speech to him about the meaning of marital oneness in relation to fidelity and infidelity.[[7]](#endnote-7) Instead of replying that he does not know why she is saying all this to him, this Antipholus falls into the (it is hard not to call it) “Cartesian” dilemma about waking and sleeping. He profoundly doubts his own “waking” understanding of the world: “What, was I married to her in my dream? / Or sleep I now, and think I hear all this?” (2.2.173–74). He is in a state of “Cartesian” astonishment; recall: “I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish waking from sleeping, that I am lost in astonishment.” The Syracusan Antipholus suspects, almost in philosophical terms, that something is wrong—“What error drives our eyes and ears amiss?” (2.2.175)—but in his state of suspended judgment (epoché), he adopts the normal pragmatic attitude of the skeptic, ancient and modern, with regard to existing mores: “Until I know this sure uncertainty / I’ll entertain the offered fallacy” (2.2.176–77).[[8]](#endnote-8)

In the Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Sextus Empiricus summarizes the position thus: “Adhering then to appearances, we live in accordance with the normal rules of life, undogmatically, seeing that we cannot remain wholly inactive.”[[9]](#endnote-9) In the third part of the Discourse on the Method, the historical Descartes (now not “Descartes”) explains that while pursuing the philosophical experiment dramatized in his Meditations, he adopted a “provisional morality” (une morale par provision) of obeying “the laws and customs of my country.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Montaigne similarly explained that his skepticism about the rational basis of laws led him to obey rather than to disobey them.[[11]](#endnote-11) In the final soliloquy of the scene from which we have been quoting, Antipholus of Syracuse recapitulates the whole movement from cognitive uncertainty to social conservatism. But it is notable that he considers the possibility that, as we have seen, Descartes rejected even when Descartes was trying his hardest to dislodge his ordinary opinions—namely, the possibility that he is insane. In the face of Adriana and her sister’s certainty, Antipholus of Syracuse says (to himself):

Am I in earth, in heaven, or in hell?

Sleeping or waking, mad or well advis’d?

Known unto these, and to myself disguis’d?

I’ll say as they say, and persever so,

And in this mist at all adventures go. (2.2.203–7)

“In this mist” seems exactly right for this play; compare the “inextricable darkness” by which “Descartes” feels threatened at the end of Meditation 1. Despite the play’s unusually solid and detailed bourgeois setting (which is fully consistent with the Pyrrhonist respect for “appearances” and practice)—“The capon burns, the pig falls from the spit”; “the desk / That’s covered o’er with Turkish tapestry”—The Comedy of Errors appears to have an extraordinarily dark view of human intellectual capacity. The major speech in praise of this capacity in the play (“Man, more divine . . . indued with intellectual sense”) seems as ironic in its context as is the assertion of female inferiority that, uneasily and creakily, it subserves (2.1.20–22).[[12]](#endnote-12) In the “slapstick” realm, the heads of the servants are constantly being treated as mere physical objects rather than as loci of intelligence—“an you use these blows long, I must get a sconce for my head and ensconce it too; or else I shall seek my wit in my shoulders” (2.2.36–39). Semantics are repeatedly reduced to somatics: “he told his mind upon mine ear” (2.1.48).[[13]](#endnote-13) In the realm of the “higher” characters, the weakness of the fallen, or perhaps merely embodied, intellect is directly asserted. When Antipholus of Syracuse speaks of his “earthy-gross conceit, / Smothered in errors, feeble, shallow, weak” (3.2.34–35), the account is phrased in such a way as to make the problem seem general. Bertrand Evans speaks of a striking feature of this play as “the universal depth of the participants’ ignorance.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The only way out of this impossible epistemological dilemma seems to be the one Montaigne envisions at the end of The Apology for Raymond Sebond: “letting himself be raised and uplifted by purely celestial means.”[[15]](#endnote-15) As Antipholus of Syracuse says, “here we wander in illusions— / Some blessed power deliver us from hence!” (4.3.36–37).

But, as we have seen, this is all a joke.[[16]](#endnote-16) It is not a picture of the human condition. It is a picture of a particular—indeed, peculiar—character. It is a picture of the inner life of a person with a very weak grip on his mind and personal identity. We can see very clearly, in this case, how the plot of the play mandated the psychology of this character. Antipholus of Syracuse is searching (all over the Mediterranean) for his missing twin brother. For the play to proceed, Shakespeare has to make this character the kind of person to whom the obvious would not occur. One would think that he would immediately realize that what is happening is that he is being mistaken for his twin. The obvious contrast is with Viola in Twelfth Night. When Viola finds herself in exactly the situation that Antipholus of Syracuse finds himself in—being addressed by a stranger who claims an intimate relationship—Viola immediately, on the spot, realizes what must (or at least, might) be happening: “I, dear brother, be now ta’en for you!” (3.4.361).[[17]](#endnote-17) The situation is slightly more complicated for Antipholus of Syracuse, since he is addressed by the name that he shares with his brother, but, on the other hand, he is the one looking for his long-lost brother (or rather, confounding himself and blurring his identity in his search for his identity). What is needed in the play, for reliable contact with reality to be attained, is not a miracle or a revelation but merely common sense. There are no more intractable epistemological dilemmas in the play than there are miracles, fairies, sorcerers, or witches.

Antipholus of Syracuse finally gets it: “I see we still did meet each other’s man [i.e., servant] / And I was ta’en for him [Antipholus of Ephesus] and he [Antipholus of Ephesus] for me, / And thereupon these errors are arose” (5.1.386–88). “Errors” are exactly the problem. Descartes points out that errors only seem to be an obstacle to epistemological success. It is wise not to trust the senses “fully” (plane), since they are sometimes deceptive. But this is different from not trusting them at all. The key point is that the same intellectual capacity (that for making judgments about reality) that can go wrong also has within it the capacity for self-correction. As Descartes put the point in his typically devotional way, “He [God] has not permitted any falsity to exist in my opinion which He has not likewise given me the faculty of correcting.”[[18]](#endnote-18) That comes from the Sixth Meditation, the final one, which, it should be noted, ends with an answer to the dreaming argument. As all the best readers of Meditations on First Philosophy have understood, the text is an anti-skeptical one, seeking—as the opening sentence of the First Meditation make clear—to make the world safe for epistemological realism.[[19]](#endnote-19) Errors, by definition, can be corrected (otherwise, there would be no such category, and simply a realm of undifferentiated assertions in relation to which Pyrrhonian epoché would be the only rational position).

Ocular Proof

So, The Comedy of Errors can be seen as “Cartesian” in the true sense. But what of other plays? A major candidate for demonstrating or asserting epistemological skepticism in Shakespeare is Othello. Ellen Spolsky sees the play as insisting on “the danger of relying on visual evidence as if it could deliver complete and thus reliable truth.”[[20]](#endnote-20) I am not sure what “complete” means here. It seems odd that “reliable” should require this, but that is what the sentence seems to say. Why “reliable” should require “complete” is never made clear. “Complete” evidence, relying on the senses, seems to be impossible because of “the modularity or multiplicity of knowledge itself”; apparently our various “modular systems” inevitably produce “structures of information which do not entirely confirm each other” (80). Again a modifier, another word like “complete” (“entirely”) is being asked to do a lot of work. The upshot is that because of this modularity and lack of entire confirmation “fully consistent knowledge” will “never be available” (with “fully” here doing the work). Aside from the hyperbolizing adjectives and adverbs, I am not sure where the argument for these views is to be found (perhaps it is hidden in “modular”). But procedurally, the point seems to be that Spolsky holds this version of skepticism herself, and thinks that the play confirms or instantiates it.

She is right that the physical sense on which the play focuses is sight, the sense that is almost always (and understandably) given epistemological privilege. Spolsky is quite firm that “it is Othello’s demand for ‘ocular proof’ that produces the disaster” (68). She asserts that “the false evidence of the misplaced handkerchief most literally fulfills Othello’s demand for ‘ocular proof’” (74). But is this true? I would argue that if Othello had stuck to his demand for “the ocular proof,” the tragedy would not have happened. The dramatic context for the demand must be examined. It occurs in the great central scene of the play (3.3). Othello is beginning to be affected, as Iago says, with the “poison” of suspicion (3.3.328).[[21]](#endnote-21) Othello has made the speech stating that, with the loss of his “tranquil mind,” he has also lost his “occupation” as a happy practitioner and connoisseur of warfare (350–60)—a speech that even Iago finds surprising (“Is’t possible, my lord?” [361]). Apparently Iago has succeeded beyond his hopes at this point. But here is where Othello pulls back from conviction and ferociously demands that Iago “prove” what he has claimed, and specifically that he provide “the ocular proof” (362–63). Iago retreats into his devoted “plain man” mode (“To be direct and honest is not safe”), and then seizes on the ambiguities of Othello’s demand to be emotionally and intellectually “satisfied” about the matter of Desdemona’s faithfulness or unfaithfulness (393).[[22]](#endnote-22)

Iago presents this “satisfaction” as a demand for crude and voyeuristic pleasure: “how satisfied, my lord? / Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topped?” (397–399a). Suddenly the “grossness” is in the onlooker, not the (imagined) adulterous agents, and “the supervisor” takes on the meaning (available then as now) of instructor or director rather than merely overlooker.[[23]](#endnote-23) Othello, of course, does not want that. But Iago has to go further. Othello could, after all, get over his revulsion at the imagined sight and insist that, if it is there to be seen, he does indeed want to see it, if not exactly “supervise.” Iago states that it would be practically difficult to arrange this—“It were a tedious difficulty . . . to bring them to that prospect” (400–401)—and relies again on stimulating sexual horror in Othello (“where’s satisfaction?” [404]). But Iago knows that this still not good enough. He has to eliminate the very possibility of ocular proof, and move it beyond the realm of the difficult. The key move is this: “It is impossible that you should see this” (405; emphasis mine).

Once Othello accepts this claim, he is lost—thrown, as Iago wishes him to be, into the realm of “imputation” and “circumstances.” Iago goes on to narrate the story of his (supposed) bedroom experience with Cassio (3.3.416-428), and begins to establish the spotted handkerchief as the possible agent of “ocular proof” of Desdemona’s adultery (436-38). The trick is the substitution. The “ocular proof” that Othello demanded was of the sexual liaison itself, as Iago perfectly well understood. Othello is not, contra Andrew Cutrofello, making a philosophical mistake, and demanding “knowledge by acquaintance,” direct knowledge, of something—Desdemona’s love for Cassio—of which such knowledge is impossible.[[24]](#endnote-24) The issue is not Desdemona’s feelings, but her behavior: has she slept with Cassio? That is what Othello is demanding “ocular proof” of. There is no reason why, if the adultery were going on, catching them in the act would be “impossible.” A “tedious difficulty,” perhaps; certainly not impossible. It is not even so clear that it would be such a “tedious difficulty.” In a play that may well be related to Othello, Thomas Heywood’s A Woman Killed with Kindness, there is in fact adultery going on between the wife and the husband’s best friend, and the husband, without a great deal of effort, does indeed succeed in seeing the couple in his bed “close in each other’s arms, and fast asleep.”[[25]](#endnote-25) If Othello had insisted on this sort of “ocular proof,” and had decided not to act until he had such proof, and, meanwhile, to believe the actual evidence of his senses (Desdemona’s appearance and her general behavior), Iago might not have succeeded.[[26]](#endnote-26) Iago has to say “Yet we see nothing done” (3.3.437) in order to prevent Othello from having exactly that thought -- that with regard to the supposed adultery, he has, in fact, seen nothing. When Othello later says, “I have seen her do ’t,” he is right—he has seen her kneel and pray (4.2.23).

As in Much Ado About Nothing, the actual (as opposed to manipulated) evidence of the senses is reliable. “If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself,” Othello says of Desdemona’s appearance, and he concludes, “I’ll not believe it” (that is, the suspicion [3.3.282–83]). Iago has to remind Othello regularly not to trust his sensory experience. “O, the world hath not a sweeter creature,” says Othello. “Nay, that’s not your way,” says Iago (4.1.180–81, 183). Othello would have been fine if he had followed his nose as well as his eyes. The smell of Desdemona’s breath almost prevents Othello from killing her (5.2.16–17).[[27]](#endnote-27) Moreover, if it be thought that Othello is presented as fundamentally unable to maintain a positive attitude toward Desdemona once the issue of sexual betrayal has been raised, he does maintain his positive attitude in response to Iago’s initial invitation to jealousy. In a magnificent moment of sanity, Othello declares, “’Tis not to make me jealous / To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company, / Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well” (3.3.186–88). This deprives Iago of a number of moves he might indeed have made. But Othello, in a moment like this, understands that aristocratic wives have this sort of “freedom,” and that “Where virtue is, these are more virtuous” (3.3.189).[[28]](#endnote-28) He says, “I’ll see before I doubt” (193), meaning that he’ll see the adultery. He would have been fine if he had stuck to this resolve—and to the attitude out of which it emerged.

As all Shakespeareans know, the most famous treatment of Othello in relation to skepticism is by Stanley Cavell.[[29]](#endnote-29) But it is not so clear that Cavell’s essay is about epistemological skepticism in the Pyrrhonian or Cartesian sense—that is, about the general problem of knowledge with a special emphasis on beliefs about the existence of the physical world. It is not even clear that Cavell's essay is about the more contemporary version of skepticism, skepticism with regard to knowledge of other minds (meaning other persons).[[30]](#endnote-30) Descartes touches on the latter—there is a moment in the Second Meditation when he looks out the window at a town square and notes that all that he physically sees are “hats and coats which could conceal automatons” (Cottingham, 21; automata, *Meditationes*, 32)—but Descartes does not see this as a special problem. Cavell seems to see the two kinds of skepticism as related, though I find his account of this obscure.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Cavell’s title for the essay, “Othello and the Stake of the Other,” suggests that his focus will be on “staking,” on placing (betting) one’s entire sense of the comprehensibility of the world on another person in a way parallel to that in which Descartes stakes his belief that he cannot always be wrong in his mental operations—that the malevolent genie does not exist—on the necessary existence of a benign God. This suggestion is tidily expressed in the idea of Othello placing “a finite woman in the place of God” (126). But Othello’s “stake” in his relationship is not well captured in cognitive terms, so Cavell’s favorite formulation for what the philosophical skeptic does wrong—interpreting “a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack” (138; emphasis mine)—does not apply well to Othello.[[32]](#endnote-32) If the “truth of skepticism” (141) is that other minds are not knowable the way stones are—though Descartes puts pressure on the way stones are known (see the wax experiment in Meditation Two)—the play stresses this truth more in regard to Othello’s attempt to know Iago’s mind than Desdemona’s.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Iago insists on “the truth of skepticism”—or pretends to. At the beginning of 3.3, when, after Cassio’s exit and then Desdemona’s, Iago is just warming up, there is an extended passage on the issue of coming to know what is in another person’s mind. Iago provokes this, suggesting that he may have an opinion on the question re Cassio, “Is he honest?” (3.3.103). Iago avers, pretending to be scrupulous or epistemically modest, that Cassio is so “For aught I know.” Naturally, Othello then asks, “What dost thou think?” Othello infers that there is “some monster” in Iago’s thought, and demands, “If thou dost love me / Show me thy thought” (118-119) Othello then “shrewdly” notes that the outward behavior that Iago is manifesting (“these stops of thine”) are, “in a man that’s just,” clear signs of effortfully suppressed inner turmoil.[[34]](#endnote-34) Iago insists on his right not to utter his thoughts (3.3.136b–139a), but then shifts to asserting that it would be both improper and imprudent for him to do so (3.3.155–57). All this works, as it is intended to do, to make Othello more determined in his inquiry. “By heaven, I’ll know thy thoughts,” Othello cries (164b). It is in response to this that Iago utters “the truth of skepticism”—“You cannot [know my thoughts, even] if my heart were in your hand” (3.3.165).[[35]](#endnote-35) That thoughts (of others) are not knowable in the way that physical objects are may be true. But that is not necessarily a, let alone the, truth of skepticism. Thoughts might be knowable some other way or ways. Moreover, in context, the fact that this may or may not be a deep truth about the human condition is barely relevant. The emphasis is much more on “thoughts” being in the agent’s control with regard to uttering them (though not with regard to experiencing them—see 3.3.140–44) than about anything ontological or epistemological. Iago is perfectly able to communicate his “thoughts” to Othello, and Othello is perfectly able to come to know them.

By contrast, when Othello confronts Desdemona, he shows remarkably little interest in trying to know her thoughts. His first piece of behavior toward her, after his vow to himself and pact with Iago for “revenge” (3.3.463), is to think about the meaning of Desdemona’s physical being, the moistness of her hand (3.4.36–44).[[36]](#endnote-36) He then works to plant some thoughts in her: the elaborate mythological fiction about the handkerchief (3.4.57–77). Othello seems to consider the inner or mental as quite available for interpretation and manipulation—which it seems to be. Yet in dealing with Desdemona, he barely listens to her words. His focus is on his own feelings and, with regard to her, on her physical appearance. He wants her, as he thinks, to forswear and specially damn herself because she is, in the physical world, “like one of heaven” (4.2.37). When she tries to engage him in rational dialogue, asking that he make clear exactly how he thinks she has been “false”—“To whom, my lord? with whom? How am I false?” (4.2.41)—he refuses to answer. When, on a plausible hypothesis, she attributes Othello’s strange behavior to the political situation (“this your calling back” [4.2.46]), he responds with an aria about his emotional dependence on her and inability to maintain “patience” (48–65). When she tries to get the focus shifted to his thoughts (“I hope my noble lord esteems me honest” [66]), he once again focuses on how awful it is that she is “so lovely fair and smell’st so sweet” (4.2.69). When she makes a powerful speech in her own defense, invoking biblical language (“to preserve this vessel for my lord” [4.2.85]), Othello does not respond to its power. He is focused on her person, not on her as a person, and he will not let his correct perceptions of the one lead him to correct thoughts about the other.

The next time we see Othello with Desdemona, he is again focused on her physical existence—on the whiteness and smoothness of her skin, on her “balmy breath” (5.2.4–5, 16). His project is to kill her in a way that preserves her bodily intactness.[[37]](#endnote-37) He has no skeptical doubts about her bodily existence or about the independent status of her soul, which he assumes, in good Catholic fashion, can be cleansed through confession of her (presumed) sins (5.2.53).[[38]](#endnote-38) Skepticism is not an issue. Shakespeare is interested in the bizarre mental / emotional state that Othello is in, not on the limitations of knowledge. Othello is profoundly in error, but the play leaves no doubt what the truth is. This brings me back to Cavell’s reading of the play. After some provocative stage-setting remarks about The Winter’s Tale and turning a woman to stone, Cavell’s essay provides an existentialized account of Descartes’s Meditations—Descartes wants “to know beyond doubt that he is not alone in the world” (126)—and an assertion (without argument) that Descartes cannot imagine other individuals to have the same ontological composition as himself (which somehow turns into “the problem of recognizing another to be Christ for oneself” [127]). The argument for the existence of God as necessarily deriving from the idea of God (the ontological argument) is turned into an argument about human nature and its necessary dependence on an other conceived of as perfect.

Bracketing the plausibility of this as a reading of Meditations, the connection to Othello can now be made: the play (through the peripety of its main character) shows “the logic, the emotion, and the scene of skepticism” (128). This goes as follows: Othello’s sense of the all-importance to him of his relationship to Desdemona shows “the stake necessary to best cases” (that is, the logic of skepticism); the “precipitousness” of his fall into jealousy is “the rhythm of skepticism” (which I suppose is imagined as very fast); and the extent of Othello’s mental suffering is “the most extraordinary representation . . . of the ‘astonishment’ in skeptical doubt” (this is “the emotion” of skepticism). Again putting aside the question of whether the “astonishment” in the First Meditation is real or pretended[[39]](#endnote-39)—that is, granting Cavell his reading of Meditations—the connections to Othello now seem straightforward enough.

But we are then told that when Othello loses consciousness (at 4.1.43), it “is not from conviction in a piece of knowledge” (Desdemona’s adultery) but in an effort to “stave off” some knowledge (128). The point is repeated when we are told that Iago “offers Othello an opportunity to believe something, something to oppose to something else he knows” (129). The problem, to use Cavell’s title phrase, is a “disowning” of knowledge. Now this is all very interesting, and is the core of Cavell’s final reading of the play. But it has nothing to do with skepticism, which is defined by doubt of knowledge, not by refusal of it. What Cavell goes on to provide—and I think we are genuinely indebted to him for this—is a cogent Freudian reading of the play.[[40]](#endnote-40) The question becomes why Othello wants to believe Iago, what work this belief does for Othello. However terrible this belief is, “it must be less terrible than some other” (130). After making it clear that the realm in which the play operates is that of married sexuality, Cavell can ask his question in more specific terms: “What could be more terrible to [Othello] than Desdemona’s faithlessness?” The paradoxical answer is “Evidently her faithfulness” (133). The next few pages explain this, culminating in the wonderful assertion, in response to the notion that Othello might have been impotent on his wedding night, that the problem, sexually, is that of “a success rather than a failure” (136).[[41]](#endnote-41) Othello is frightened by Desdemona’s sexuality, and by his own; he is “horrified by human sexuality, in himself and in others” (137), and for what human sexuality implies about the condition of the self (as embodied, not fully self-sufficient, etc.).[[42]](#endnote-42)

There is much to be said for this reading, even though it makes Iago almost irrelevant to the play (Cavell barely mentions him). But my question about this reading in the context of the issue of skepticism is raised by Cavell himself. In a moment of self-consciousness two-thirds of the way through his essay, Cavell objects to his own reading—not on the basis of its correctness but on the basis of its relevance. After an eloquent paragraph about the complexities of human sexuality and Othello’s relation to it, Cavell stops and exclaims, “But Othello certainly knows that Desdemona exists!” Cavell then follows up on this with the obvious question: “So what has [Othello’s] more or less interesting condition to do with skepticism?” (137).

I think that this is a very good question. Cavell warns against asking it in the wrong “spirit” (138). I am sure that I am doing so. I do not see that Cavell ever provides an answer. The point seems to be that skepticism in general is a refusal rather than a questioning of knowledge, that the skeptic would rather question the possibility of knowledge than accept the knowledge of finitude, mortality, and the separateness of individuals. The problem becomes an ethical rather than an epistemological one, since what is needed is the acceptance of the knowledge that the skeptic (on this account) would deny, and the consequent need for acknowledgment of this knowledge and of the full existence of other individuals.[[43]](#endnote-43) Whatever one thinks of all this, skepticism as consisting of doubt about the possibility of knowledge falls away. Epistemology, as I said, gives way to ethics. I am not sure that Descartes would recognize this picture of skepticism, and it is significant, I think, that at this point in the essay, Montaigne -- not as a skeptic but as a commentator on human sexuality -- supplants Descartes (139–40).[[44]](#endnote-44)

That Within

Important as Othello is in current discussions of skepticism in Shakespeare, I cannot end without some discussion of Hamlet. My focus will not be on the question of the status of the (supposed) ghost in the play, though the play certainly raises this question and perhaps means to answer it in a Protestant-skeptical way (that is, that “the thing” is a demon, and that truly no traveler returns from the dead).[[45]](#endnote-45) Peter Marshall points out that while ghosts are common in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, Hamlet is, as Marshall says, “highly unusual” in “explicitly addressing the question of whether the apparition is really the spirit of Hamlet’s father or a demonic illusion, and making it [this question] central to the action of the play.”[[46]](#endnote-46) Skepticism about whether “the thing” is a collective fantasy is answered; eighteen lines after Horatio is quoted as saying, “’Tis but your fantasy” (1.1.28), the thing appears. But skepticism about whether the thing is actually a ghost (the soul or spirit of a deceased human being) is never fully allayed. Hamlet vacillates on this, but Horatio seems to stay with his view of the thing as a demon.[[47]](#endnote-47) That is an ontological and religious issue, a matter of “things in heaven and earth” (and elsewhere), not a strictly epistemological one.

But Hamlet does seem to be a play in which “other minds” skepticism is at work and, indeed, to be dramatized and thematized. When, early on, Hamlet claims to have “that within which passes show” (1.2.85), he may be claiming that there is something special about interior (emotional) experience, a claim that is one of the major sources of the “other minds” problem.[[48]](#endnote-48) But it may be that Hamlet is claiming that there is something special about his interior (emotional) experience. Later, he claims to have a special “mystery” of which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are attempting to pluck out the heart (3.2.355–56), and he claims to have a special internal place for his affection for his true friend, Horatio, a “heart’s core” or “heart of heart” (3.2.73). There is no doubt that Hamlet is, and considers himself to be, a person of deep feeling. He seems to see this as special to himself, but unquestionably the play is interested in the issue of how one can come to know the thoughts and feelings of another. Hamlet asserts his “mystery” in response to the concerted efforts that Claudius and his instruments (willing, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or recruited, like Ophelia) are constantly making to find out what Hamlet is thinking and feeling. But the question is whether the play imagines such knowledge to be possible.

Hamlet resists being known in this way by Claudius and company, though he seems quite willing and able to speak his thoughts to his beloved friend.[[49]](#endnote-49) His attempt to penetrate to the heart of Claudius’s mystery through the power of theater—a humanist’s and dramatist’s fantasy—seems to have succeeded.[[50]](#endnote-50) Claudius’s conscience does seem to have been caught. Although Hamlet has less warrant to be sure of this (or that the “thing” is his father’s ghost) than he comes to believe, this does not affect the question in general, since we do know, unequivocally, that the experiment succeeded.[[51]](#endnote-51) So, it looks as if art can do what even very clever and pointed interpersonal manipulation cannot. This is borne out in the clearest case of (let’s call it, to be méchant) penetration in the play: Hamlet’s success with Gertrude.

It must be acknowledged, however, that between “The Mousetrap” and the closet encounter, there is a scene that seems to dramatize “other minds” skepticism precisely: Hamlet is standing right behind or at least fairly near the kneeling Claudius and thinks that Claudius is in the process of “the purging of his soul” (3.3.85), which would mean successfully repenting (in this Protestant world, no priestly presence or apparatus is needed for successful confession and repentance).[[52]](#endnote-52) Hamlet, the most intelligent character we are likely to encounter in life or literature, makes, on the basis of correctly observed behavior, a wrong inference about another’s inner state. So obviously behavior is not always revelatory of what it seems to be enacting. The play is deeply aware of this, of “actions that a man might play” (1.2.84). So we, even the most intelligent among us, can be wrong about another person’s inner life.

But does this mean that that life is epistemologically unavailable? We can be wrong about almost anything, and on the basis of inferences drawn from perception. In Claudius’s soliloquy, as in those of Hamlet, the speaker seems to have knowledge of his inner life and seems to be able to express such knowledge verbally. What if Hamlet could have heard Claudius’s words? That would seem to alter the epistemological situation significantly.[[53]](#endnote-53) With regard to observation of behavior, a certain amount of caution may be called for—as Descartes says, we must not trust “fully” (plane confidere) in observation—but that does not mean that further observation would not yield a more accurate result.[[54]](#endnote-54) Deception is clearly a special case, but not one that leaves us entirely helpless in the face of it.[[55]](#endnote-55) And with regard to the supposedly special status of one’s relation to one’s own mental states, it is important to note that one can be wrong about these as well.[[56]](#endnote-56) It is certainly possible to believe that Hamlet’s motive for not killing Claudius at this juncture may not be what Hamlet says it is; his motive (or motives) might be obscure to himself.[[57]](#endnote-57) As Shakespeare recognized, that simply puts him in the same situation in relation to his own motives as he is to that of others, which lessens the epistemological problem of “other minds” by eliminating some of the apparent special privilege that we have in relation to our own. We can, as Shakespeare clearly knew, be right or wrong about both, and might have—at least at times—an inferential or merely postulated relation to both.

But, as I said earlier, the play suggests that the inner life of a person can be known to someone else; it also suggests that such knowledge can be communicated from the second-person perspective in such a way that it can serve to produce material that would only seem to be available from the first-person perspective. Hamlet’s goal, in the confrontation with Gertrude, is to set up “a glass” for her wherein she “may see the inmost part” of herself (3.4.19), where this "part" is pyschological or spiritual, not physical. Obviously this implies that this “inmost part” of one person can be brought into (conceptual) visibility by another. In the play, the means for doing this seems to be passionate speech in combination with visual aids. Hamlet is acting in his role here as “scourge and minister” (3.4.177). Glenn Clark has shown parallels between Hamlet’s project and emotions here and those of English Protestant ministers, who were supposed to both rebuke and love the sinners to whom they preached.[[58]](#endnote-58) But Hamlet’s use of "this picture . . . and this" suggests, as did his use of theater with Claudius, his humanist as well as his Protestant orientation.[[59]](#endnote-59) Hamlet leads Gertrude to feel, or, better, to acknowledge and access guilt about her sexual attraction to Claudius, specifically to the elements of “reason” and “will” in it.[[60]](#endnote-60) Hamlet’s impassioned and intellectually complex presentation serves to give her as well as him access to Gertrude’s “inmost part.” “Thou turn’s my eyes into my very soul,” she tells Hamlet (3.4.89). This is a remarkable success, and one not troubled by any of the ambiguities that surround the catching of Claudius’s conscience. Again, the play is highly optimistic about the possibility, through art—especially mixed media presentations (like theater or pictures plus words)—of “getting to” another, which implies having and conveying knowledge of their “inmost part.” Assuming his role as lay minister, Hamlet instructs Gertrude in the Protestant version of penitence—“Confess yourself to heaven”—directly, without a priest—and change your life (3.4.151), though Hamlet’s very Aristotelian reliance on the instrumentality of habit in doing the latter may suggest an Arminian rather than a strictly Calvinist theology.[[61]](#endnote-61) Whether or not Gertrude truly does change her life in response to this encounter may be unclear in the play, but that is irrelevant to the matter of “other minds” skepticism.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Recently, it has been suggested that the play ends on a note of epistemological and “practical” skepticism. James Kuzner acknowledges that Horatio evinces “epistemological confidence on several issues,” but asserts that by the end of the play, Horatio is “epistemologically weak, unsure of who he is or who Hamlet was, unsure what is to be done.”[[63]](#endnote-63) Since Kuzner’s book is in praise of “epistemological humility” (6), he basically admires Horatio’s existence in this state despite or because of Horatio’s “skeptical commitment to Hamlet without a clear picture of him” and his “skeptical commitment to Danish politics without a clear solution to political difficulties” (19). But does any of this hold up? Kuzner sees Horatio, at the end of the play, as torn between his friendship for Hamlet and the truth of what he knows (i.e., that Hamlet killed Polonius and is responsible for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern). That is not in itself an epistemological issue, but in response to Horatio promising that he will “truly deliver” the substance of what he has summarized in general (“carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts . . . accidental judgments, casual slaughters . . . deaths put on by cunning and [forc’d] cause”),[[64]](#endnote-64) Kuzner states that it is “unclear if this is truth” (17).

But where is the evidence that Hamlet does not want the facts known or that Horatio does not know them? Hamlet has already publicly asserted his role in Polonius’s death (though, as we have seen, in a complicated way), and has stated that the deaths of his two childhood friends are “not near his conscience” (5.2.58).[[65]](#endnote-65) As Kuzner knows, what Hamlet is concerned about is that he not be remembered as a traitor. When Hamlet stabs Claudius, the onlookers “all” cry out “Treason, treason!” (5.2.328), since no one but Horatio knows that Hamlet believes (rightly, if on insufficient evidence) that Claudius murdered his brother, the former king, to gain the throne (“things standing thus unknown”).[[66]](#endnote-66) When Hamlet tells Horatio to “report me and my cause aright” (5.2.344), his “cause”—legal and moral—must be the justification for his regicide.[[67]](#endnote-67) There is no doubt what the “wounded name” (349) would be (“traitor”). The public justification for his action is, naturally, Hamlet’s primary concern. But it should also be noted that before he falls into silence, Hamlet instructs Horatio to tell “th’ occurrents more and less / Which have solicited” (5.2.363–64).

This sounds like a call for a pretty full account (“more and less”). And there is no doubt that Horatio is in a position to tell all this, having been uniquely privy to Hamlet’s motives, plans, and actions. Horatio’s summary of what he will tell (“carnal, bloody . . . ”) is striking and rather masterful. It does not include anything about Hamlet’s philosophical musings—James Shapiro criticizes Horatio for this—but why should it?[[68]](#endnote-68) There are, as Fortinbras rightly notes, a lot of physically present dead bodies to be accounted for, and others as well. Horatio is trying to gain attention for the story that he is going to tell—his summary is just the prologue—and he succeeds in this. “Let us haste to hear it,” says Fortinbras. For better or worse, Horatio does offer a “clear solution” to the political difficulties of Denmark, suggesting (accurately) that he can confer legitimacy on Fortinbras’s claim to have “rights” in the kingdom. Horatio’s “epistemological confidence” never deserts him, as it should not. As Lars Engle says, it “survives modern skepticism.”[[69]](#endnote-69)

Shakespeare was skeptical about some things: fairies, demonic possession, the need for auricular confession. But from an epistemological point of view, he was indeed a Cartesian skeptic, one who believed that the senses, corrected as necessary by reason and judgment, are reliable, and that our minds can know the world and—to at least the same extent that we can know ourselves—other people.

1. Chapter 10

   In *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), David Kastan shows the weakness of the case for the Catholic Shakespeare (and his father), yet nonetheless backs away from the conclusion that Shakespeare was consistently Protestant into the claim that it is "impossible to know" what Shakespeare actually believed (30) and even into the highly skeptical but truly implausible claim that "it is impossible to *know* what anyone in the period 'actually' believed" (31; italics and quotation marks original). Can we not know what, for instance, Luther or Cardinal Bellarmine actually believed? For a recent book that sees living with "epistemological weakness" as the key to Shakespeare's works, see James Kuzner, *Shakespeare as a Way of Life: Skeptical Practice and the Politics of Weakness* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See “The Tempest (1): Power,” note 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Philosophical Works of Descartes, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 1:145; hereafter “Haldane and Ross.” I have mostly used the Haldane and Ross translation, but sometimes have preferred the translation in vol. 2 of The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); hereafter “Cottingham.” For the Latin, I have used Meditationes de Prima Philosophia, texte latin et traduction du Duc de Lynes, intro. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis (Paris: J. Vrin, 1978); hereafter “*Meditationes*.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Apparently thinking that one's body or one's head was made of earthenware or, especially, glass was a well-recognized rather comical version of insanity in the period. See "An odd kind of melancholy: reflections on the glass delusion in Europe (1440-1680)," *History of Psychiatry* 1 (1990): 191-206. I owe my awareness of this to Timothy Harrison (who credits his awareness of it to a lecture by Jean-Luc Marion). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In a key passage in his history of madness (first published in 1961), Foucault explains why, for Descartes in the Meditations, “madness is an altogether different affair” than sensory errors or dreaming (Michel Foucault, History of Madness, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa [London: Routledge, 2006], 45). Derrida responded to this passage in “Cogito and the History of Madness” (originally published in 1964) by denying that Descartes really rejects this possibility, seeing him as only pretending to do so (see Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 31–63, esp. 50–51). Foucault responded to Derrida’s essay in an appendix to the second edition of the madness book (1972) with “My Body, This Paper, This Fire,” in History of Madness, 550–74 (rpt. in Michel Foucault, Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology, ed. James D. Faubion [New York: The New Press, 1998], 393–417), in which Foucault reasserted the legitimacy and importance for Descartes of the exclusion of madness. A view similar to Foucault’s was developed independently in the Anglo-American analytic tradition by Harry G. Frankfurt, Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes’s “Meditations” (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 28, 36–40. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For the text of the play, I have used the edition by T. S. Dorsch, rev. Ros King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For the character of Adriana in the play, and for the play’s attitude toward marriage, see Richard Strier, The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 165–86. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. On epoché, see Miles Burnyeat’s introduction, and David Sedley, “The Motivation of Greek Skepticism,” in The Skeptical Tradition, ed. Miles Burnyeat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 9–29. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, ed. and trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,1933), 1: 8–10. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. René Descartes, Discourse de la méthode; Discourse on the Method: A Bilingual Edition, ed. and trans. Georg Heffernan (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1994), 40, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See “Of Custom, and Not Easily Changing an Accepted Law,” in The Complete Essays of Montaigne, trans, Donald M. Frame (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958), 77–90 (esp. 86). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On the illogic of the speech, see Strier, The Unrepentant Renaissance, 45–46. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. On servants being beaten in the play, see Richard Strier, “Against the Rule of Reason,” in Reading the Early Modern Passions, ed. Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 33–35; and Patricia Akhimie, Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference (New York: Routledge, 2018), ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Bertrand Evans, Shakespeare’s Comedies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 4–5. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The Complete Essays of Montaigne, 457. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See “Shakespeare and Skepticism (1): Religion,” 000. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. David Simon has reminded me that Viola does not actually assert this here, but only hopes that it is so. But what is important for my argument is the fact that she has the thought. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Haldane and Ross, 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See, inter alia, Frankfurt, Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen; E. M. Curley, Descartes Against the Skeptics (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ellen Spolsky, Satisfying Skepticism: Embodied Knowledge in the Early Modern World (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 68. Further citations of this work appear parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. All quotations from and citations of Othello are from the edition by A. J. Honigmann (1996), intro. Ayanna Thompson (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. On the importance of the “plain man” mode in the play, see Richard Strier, “Paleness vs. Eloquence: The Ideologies of Style in the English Renaissance,” Explorations in Renaissance Culture 45 (2019): 91–120. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. OED, n. supervisor, 1a. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See Andrew Cutrofello, “Is Othello Jealous? Coleridge and Russell contra Wittgenstein and Cavell,” in Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy, ed. Jennifer Ann Bates and Richard Wilson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 121–35. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Thomas Heywood, A Woman Killed with Kindness, scene 13, line 42, in A Woman Killed with Kindness and Other Domestic Plays, ed. Martin Wiggins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). The historical relation between the two plays (if any) is disputed. Peter Rudnytsky, “A Woman Killed with Kindness as Subtext for Othello,” Renaissance Drama, n.s., 14 (1983): 103–24, sees Othello as responding to A Woman Killed. Honigmann, on the other hand, sees Heywood’s play as a “reply” to Shakespeare’s (355). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. It might be objected that “ocular proof” is not necessarily in itself reliable. After all, in Shakespeare’s first jealousy play, Much Ado About Nothing (1598?), a man is convinced of his fiancé’s infidelity by a visual representation purporting to show the fiancé in a compromising position with another man. Claudio thinks he has ocular proof of Hero’s infidelity. But this “proof” (the word is not used) relies on darkness, distance, and an elaborate charade. “Ocular proof,” if the phrase is to have any meaning, requires optimal viewing conditions—such as the husband in A Woman Killed with Kindness has—and correct interpretation (thanks to Andrew Cutrofello for pressing me to make this explicit) . A key scene in Much Ado in fact validates close and careful observation, the Friar’s “noting of the lady” (4.1.158). This “experimental” knowledge (4.1.166) turns out to be veridical. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Colin McGinn, Shakespeare’s Philosophy: Recovering the Meaning Behind the Plays (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) is certain that the marriage between Othello and Desdemona is unconsummated because “Desdemona’s real love for him [Othello] would surely have shown through if they had enjoyed normal marital relations” (82). Apart from the bizarreness of this latter assumption (that successful sex “surely” indicates love), it is worth noting that something of the sort is, in fact, at work in the play, since direct sensory perception -- "A fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman! (4.1.175-76) -- is reliable therein. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. For a similar moment, see “Mind, Nature, Heterodoxy, and Iconoclasm in The Winter’s Tale, 000.” [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. The essay on Othello was initially published as the final portion of Cavell’s The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 482–96. It is reprinted in Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 125–42, and in the “updated edition” (Seven Plays, 2003), with the same pagination. I will cite the essay from *Disowning Knowledge*; page numbers from that volume will appear parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. On the history and varieties of skepticism, see Burnyeat, The Skeptical Tradition, and Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present, ed. Diego E. Machuca and Baron Reed (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). On skepticism about other minds, see the essay by Anil Gomes by that title in the Machuca and Reed collection, 700–713. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See Disowning Knowledge, 6, quoting The Claim of Reason, 461–62. It is not clear which form of skepticism Cavell finds more basic. It might be fair to say that he thinks that object-skepticism provides the form, but mind-skepticism the content of skeptical doubt. In any case, he thinks general skeptical doubt unlivable, and something that philosophy inflicts on itself (as Wittgenstein would say), but that “other mind” skepticism is not only livable but part of the human condition. For the view that it is just as “lunatic” to hold “other mind” skepticism as world-skepticism, see Anita Avramides, “Perception, Reliability, and Other Minds,” in Knowing Other Minds, ed. Anita Avramides and Matthew Parrott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 107–26. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. This formulation comes from Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays (New York: Scribner’s,1969), 238–66 (quotation on 263). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. For doubts about whether other minds are known in any way different from the way that stones are, see Jerry Fodor as quoted in Gomes, “Skepticism About Other Minds,” in Machuca and Reed, Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present, 702; and Asa Wikforss, “Knowledge, Belief, and the Asymmetry Thesis,” in Avramides and Parrott, Knowing Other Minds, 47 (“We should hesitate before giving up on the idea that such knowledge [knowledge of other minds] involves ordinary empirical justification”). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. There is a notable textual crux here, regarding how the voiced “stops” are designated. The Folio has “dilations” (emended by the eighteenth-century editor George Steevens to “delations,” which is accepted by Honigmann). The Quarto has “denotements” (see Shakespeare’s Plays in Quarto, ed. Michael J. B. Allen and Kenneth Muir [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981], 811). Both readings make sense, but they are significantly different, and cannot be transforms of one another. On the Folio reading and the suggested emendation, see Patricia Parker, “Shakespeare and Rhetoric: ‘Dilation’ and “Delation’ in Othello,” in Shakespeare and the Question of Theory, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 54–74. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Compare McGinn, Shakespeare’s Philosophy, 68: “This is an outright statement of the problem of other minds.” Compare Cutrofello, “Is Othello Jealous?,” 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. On this moment, see Strier, The Unrepentant Renaissance, 14–16. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. See Richard Strier and Richard H. McAdams, “Cold-Blooded and High-Minded Murder: The ‘Case’ of Othello,” in Fatal Fictions: Crime and Investigation in Law and Literature, ed. Alison L. LaCroix, Richard H. McAdams, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 111–38 (esp. 118). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. While I do not believe, with Robert N. Watson, that the play is an anti-Catholic allegory (“Othello as Protestant Propaganda,” in Religion and Culture in Renaissance England, ed. Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 234–57), I do believe that it can be seen as embodying a critique of Catholic attitudes toward sexuality (see the discussion of Othello on Desdemona’s hand cited in note 35 above). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. As I have already suggested, in the Meditations, the clause after the claim about astonishment is a kind of joke: “And this astonishment almost confirms me in the opinion that I am asleep” (translation and emphasis mine). The Latin is equally careful (or arch): fere . . . confirmet [*Meditationes*, 20]). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. If one believes, as Cavell came to do, that “philosophy is fulfilled in the form of psychoanalysis,” the apparent shift in frameworks disappears. The argument for this, such as it is, appears in Images in Our Souls: Cavell, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 11–43 (23). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. This contradicts Cavell’s earlier assertion that “there is reason to believe that the marriage has not been consummated,” to which he added (even less plausibly) “anyway reason to believe that Othello does not know whether it has” (131). The “success” reading is much more powerful psychologically, as well as more interesting, than the failure one, and I think it is the reading that Cavell wants, so to speak, to go with, despite the contradiction of what he earlier said “there is reason to believe.” Cavell tends, in general, to correct himself by addition rather than by revision. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. For the possibility of historicizing this view more precisely than Cavell does, see note 36 above. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. See Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging” (note 32 above). But the issue of sexuality, which emerges so powerfully in the Othello essay and is central to the introduction to Disowning Knowledge (which ends with a long discussion of Cleopatra’s orgasms [31–37]), is not present in the early, more traditionally philosophical essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. The essays cited are "On Some Verses of Virgil" and "Of Experience." *The Apology for Raymond Sebond* is not longer relevant. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. See “Happy Hamlet,” note 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Peter Marshall, Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 258. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Horatio’s initial worry is that the apparition “In the same figure like the King that’s dead” (1.1.44) will tempt Hamlet to suicide (“What if it tempt you to the flood, my lord . . .?” [1.4.69]), which is certainly a demonic project. When Hamlet is convinced, on the basis of Claudius’s reaction to the performed play (or to Hamlet’s commentary thereon) that the thing’s “word” is reliable (regardless of its ontological status), Horatio simply affirms that he has seen the same reactions in Claudius that Hamlet has seen (“I did very well note him” [3.2.284]), affirming nothing further. Hamlet is cited from the edition by Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), but I will indicate when a line or passage is unique to the Quarto or the Folio. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. See Gomes, “Other Minds Skepticism,” in Machuca and Reed, Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present, 703–4. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. McGinn’s assertion of the necessity of “other minds” skepticism almost runs aground on his recognition that “language can seem like a solution to the problem” (Shakespeare’s Philosophy, 63). But McGinn quickly moves to the much more comfortable topic (for a skeptic) of lying and deception. Cavell struggles with the problem of language and skepticism throughout The Claim of Reason, especially in pt. 1. In his essay on“Austin at Criticism,” Cavell warns against adopting J. L. Austin’s anti-skeptical position based on ordinary language and ordinary experience (Must We Mean What We Say? 110). For an argument that Wittgenstein’s view of language is anti-skeptical, see Michael Williams, “Wittgenstein and Skepticism: Illusory Doubts,” in Machuca and Reed, Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present, 481–505. For the view that “successful communication proves the existence of a shared, and largely true, view of the world,” see Donald Davidson, “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics,” in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 201 and passim. See also the essays cited in note 52 below. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. On “The Mousetrap” plan as a humanist fantasy, and on the problem of what Hamlet can legitimately conclude from the episode, see “Happy Hamlet.” [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. On the crucial epistemological role for the reader or audience of Claudius’s post-Mousetrap soliloquy, see Amir Khan, “My Kingdom for a Ghost: Counterfactual Thinking and Hamlet,” Shakespeare Quarterly 66 (2015): 29–46, rpt. as ch. 2 of Shakespeare in Hindsight: Counterfactual Thinking and Shakespearean Tragedy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. On the Reformation conception of repentance, see “The Tempest (1): Power,” 000. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. On the role of “testimony” with regard to knowledge of the inner lives of others, see J. L. Austin, “Other Minds,” in Philosophical Papers, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 82, 112–15; Anil Gomes, “Testimony and Other Minds,” Erkenntnis 80 (2015): 173–83. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ramie Targoff suggests something of this sort in “The Performance of Prayer: Sincerity and Theatricality in Early Modern England,” Representations 60 (1997): 49–69 (esp. 59). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. See Austin, “Other Minds,” 112; and Avramides, “Perception, Reliability, and Other Minds,” 123. In a commentary on the book of Proverbs published in 1592, Peter Moffett notes that even when “a secret intent of the minde is cunningly hidden and closely concealed,” it often happens that a person “indued with discretion, either by propounding of questions or by observing of gestures, soundeth and fisheth out the secret purpose of him who is so close.” I owe this reference to Christopher Crosbie’s paper, “Intention,” for the Shakespeare Association seminar “Boundaries of Violence” (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Compare Austin, “Other Minds,” 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. For Shakespeare’s presentation of cases where a character’s motives seem opaque to that character, see “Excuses, Bepissing, and Non-being.” [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Glenn Clark, “Speaking Daggers: Shakespeare’s Troubled Ministers,” in Shakespeare and Religious Change, ed. Kenneth J. E. Graham and Philip D. Collington (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 176–95. I see no reason to think that Hamlet is being satirized in this role here, as is proposed by R. Chris Hassel, “The Accent and Gait of Christians: Hamlet’s Puritan Style,” in Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern Europe, ed. Dennis Taylor and David N. Beauregard (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 285–310; and apparently accepted by Mareile Pfannebrecker, “Hamlet and Habit: The Renaissance Problem of Programmable Life,” Modern Philology 118 (2020): 25–47 (37). That Hamlet’s language is perhaps “over-the-top” here in its intensity, as Pfannebrecker suggests, does not mean that it is satirized. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Whatever form these "pictures" take (see Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet*, 517-519), they are physical objects. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ellen MacKay, Persecution, Plague, and Fire: Fugitive Histories of the Stage in Early Modern England (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), denies this (66–69). Her point seems to be that the “grounds” for Gertrude’s feelings of guilt are never made explicit (68). But it seems pretty clear that it is her relationship with Claudius that is at issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. As already suggested (see “Excuses, Bepissing, and Non-being,” note 7), I do not agree with Paul Cefalu that Hamlet “refuses to take seriously the possibility that virtuous habits might provide antidotes to vicious ones” (“Damnéd Custom . . . Habit’s Devil: Hamlet’s Part-Whole Fallacy and the Early Modern Philosophy of Mind,” in Revisionist Shakespeare: Transitional Ideologies in Texts and Contexts [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004], 158). I think that Pfannebecker is right that Hamlet’s address to his mother “points to human plasticity outside and beyond childhood” (“Hamlet and Habit,” 39). [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Clark holds that Gertrude is not permanently changed (“Speaking Daggers,” 183). I am not so sure. In the next scene, when Gertrude has to reveal the death of Polonius to Claudius, she tells Claudius that Hamlet was “Mad as the sea” at the time (4.1.7), thereby following Hamlet’s instructions not to reveal that he is only “mad in craft” (3.4.190). See William Kerrigan, Hamlet’s Perfection (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 113–14. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. James Kuzner, Shakespeare as a Way of Life: Skeptical Practice and the Politics of Weakness (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 18. Further citations of this work appear parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. “Forc’d cause” is the Folio reading; the Quarto has “for no cause.” [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. On the complexities of Hamlet's apology to Laertes, see "Excuses, Bepissing, and Non-Being." [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. For the speech heading “All” in Q2 and F, see The Three-Text “Hamlet,” ed. Bernice W. Kliman and Paul Bertram, 2nd ed. (New York: AMS Press, 2003). I do not know why Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, in their editions of both Q2 and F (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), substitute “Lords.” They claim to be following the 1986 Oxford Complete Shakespeare, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, in substituting “Lords” for “All,” but that edition has “All the Courtiers.” These emendations are not only textually unwarranted but also dramatically inferior to “All.” [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. “Me and my cause a right” is the Q2 reading. The Folio has “me and my causes right” (see The Three-Text “Hamlet”). Given the lack of the convention of marking possessives, the Folio reading could also be “cause’s right,” though I have not seen any edition that adopts this. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. James Shapiro, A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599 (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 299. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Lars Engle, “How Is Horatio Just? How Just Is Horatio?,” Shakespeare Quarterly 62 (2011): 256–62 (quotation on 262). I share Engle’s admiration for Horatio, which is much less guarded and tentative than Kuzner’s. When I was asked (bizarrely) at a conference, which Shakespeare character I identified with, I picked Horatio. Richard (then Judge) Posner rebuked me for aiming too low, but I maintained that this identification was aspirational. See the “Roundtable” in Shakespeare and the Law*: A Conversation Among Disciplines and Professions*, ed.Bradin Cormack, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Strier(Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2013), 318-320. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)