A Kantian Reading of *Othello*: Duty, Deceit, and the Categorical Imperative

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the moral and psychological dimensions of Shakespeare's Othello through the framework of Immanuel Kant's ethical philosophy, particularly focusing on the concepts of duty, self-congruence, and the categorical imperative. By analyzing the characters of Iago and Cassio, the study contrasts Iago's calculated self-interest and manipulative detachment with Cassio's flawed yet earnest quest for moral redemption. Iago epitomizes a radical failure of Kantian self-congruence, as evidenced by his rejection of duty, the instrumentalization of others, and the deliberate erosion of his own integrity. In contrast, Cassio's crisis following his demotion highlights a profound concern for reputation and moral duty, aligning more closely with Kant's ideal of autonomous moral agency, despite his occasional lapses. The paper argues that Othello presents a dramatic conflict between Kantian morality and Iago's nihilistic arrogance, with Iago's dehumanization of others representing a significant violation of Kant's Formula of Humanity. Through close textual analysis and philosophical inquiry, this study illustrates how Shakespeare's characters both reflect and resist ethical selfhood, providing a critical reflection on the fragility of moral integrity in the face of resentment, ambition, and manipulation.

Keywords: *Kantian ethics, moral agency, dehumanization*

1. *INTRODUCTION*

In Othello, Shakespeare unfolds not only a narrative of jealousy and betrayal, but also a profound philosophical conflict: the tension between duty and self-interest, integrity and manipulation. From the very first lines, the audience is immersed in a world where appearances are deceiving and loyalty is exchanged for ambition. At the center of this ethical landscape is Iago, a master of deception who manipulates those around him with chilling precision. His declaration, "I am not what I am"(1.1.63) [1], foreshadows treachery and signifies a conscious renunciation of moral selfhood [1]. Through Iago and his counterpart, Michael Cassio, Shakespeare delves into the conflict between authentic moral agency and cynical self-interest. While both characters serve under Othello and operate within the same hierarchical structure of military duty, they diverge fundamentally in their internal moral frameworks. Iago uses duty as a façade for manipulation, whereas Cassio, despite his human flaws, endeavors to reclaim his sense of honor and moral worth. By examining these characters through the lens of Immanuel Kant's ethical philosophy, particularly his notions of self-congruence and the Formula of Humanity, this analysis will illuminate how Shakespeare dramatizes the fragile boundary between moral autonomy and moral degradation. Ultimately, what unfolds is not merely a political or personal tragedy, but an ethical battleground where the essence of duty is tested, distorted, and perhaps even redeemed.

1.1 Kantian Concept of Self and Duty

By saying:
"Others there are who
trimmed in forms and visages of duty
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves
and, throwing but shows of service in their lords

Do well thrive by them and when they have lined their coats
Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul: and such a one do I profess myself"
(1.1.48-53) [1].

Iago conveys that he only follows his motives and employs reason only for his self-serving ends, concluding that following Othello is just a hypocritical act. According to the "Theme of Personal Integrity" by R. Rappoport, Iago's character is fundamentally defined by his tendency to command others without acknowledging or accepting any responsibility for the consequences of his actions [2]. Iago exemplifies the role of the insinuator, observing the destruction of an entire forest while remaining indifferent to the flames, asserting his detachment as long as he remains unharmed. This trait is particularly evident in his interactions with Emilia, where he consistently dismisses her inquiries, refuses to provide explanations for his behavior, disregards her counsel, and anticipates her unconditioned compliance with his directives. Iago's refusal to recognize any interpersonal bonds or obligations demonstrates that he is solely motivated by self-interest, as such mutual recognition would confer no advantage to him. Iago can trust no one, not even his wife, and that is evident when he suspects Othello "Hath leaped into my seat" (2.1.285) [1].

According to the book Rethinking Authenticity and Sincerity by Howard Pickett, Kant's perspective on self-congruence involves four key aspects: (1) verbal congruence, which is the alignment between one's thoughts and words; (2) volitional congruence, the harmony between one's rational intentions and actions; (3) temporal congruence, the consistency between one's past and present self; and (4) anthropological congruence, the accord between one's self and the ideal human self one should aspire to be (p.13) [3]. Also, "For Kant, 'self-congruent' is not only the right way to be; it is the properly human way to be" (p. 14) [3]. in embodying the characteristics of a self-serving individual, Iago exemplifies a failure to achieve self-congruence as articulated within Kantian ethical theory. In fact, Iago stands as a contrast to the four aspects of self-congruence by saying one sentence: "I am not what I am" (1.1.63) [1]. While losing self-congruence is Iago's daily affirmation, Cassio mourns the loss of his self-congruence: "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial" (2.3.246-8) [1]. He is acutely aware that his drunken brawl contradicts both his duties and his honor as a soldier (Volitional congruence). The repercussions of his actions shatter the image of him as a noble lieutenant and evoke fears of regressing to a bestial state (Anthropological congruence). Throughout the play, it becomes clear to the audience that Cassio acts in alignment with his thoughts, displaying consistent verbal congruence. However, this alignment falters in his actions and intentions toward Emilia: "She is persuaded I will marry her, out of her own love and flattery, not out of my promise" (4.1.126) [1].

The Kantian system demands to talk of duty before talking about the concept of will that is good in itself. Duty is slightly different in Kant's opinion than what is commonly known. Imagine a shopkeeper who chooses not to overcharge an inexperienced customer. At first glance, it might seem like the shopkeeper is acting morally. However, Kant argues that if the shopkeeper is refraining from overcharging because it benefits his business or maintains a good reputation, then his action, though in accordance with duty (not overcharging), is not morally praiseworthy. The action is motivated by self-interest, not by a sense of duty. For Kant, the action would only have true moral worth if the shopkeeper refrained from overcharging solely because he recognizes that it is his duty to treat customers fairly, regardless of any personal gain or external rewards. This distinction underscores Kant's principle that actions are morally good not just because they conform to moral law but because they are done out of respect for the law itself. The example of a shopkeeper is "the action done neither from duty nor from immediate inclination but merely for purposes of self-interest" (p. 11) [4].

Every person has a duty toward others and even himself. If the scope is narrowed to Iago and Cassio, one can find them as soldiers who have duties toward their countries, their commander, and themselves. For a society to maintain order, individuals must sometimes show obedience to one another; especially in a military setting, one person serves as the general (Othello), another as the lieutenant (Cassio), and others as the lower ranks. What is honorable in such a setting is demonstrating loyal obedience. Building on this Idea, the researcher believes it is quite easy to understand why Iago was on a revenge mission from the beginning of the play. He was supposed to be the general's right hand, but then he was pushed to be one of the lower ranks. Honest Iago, with achievements along with Othello for years, is not going to be promoted, and Cassio, a Venetian aristocrat who knows little of war strategies, is chosen to be the lieutenant. As soldiers, both Cassio and Iago had a duty to obey their generals; however, both pursued their own ends. Thus, their duties toward their commander and themselves have not been fulfilled. The reason could be what Kant mentions in the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, "want of satisfaction with one's condition, under pressure

from many anxieties and amid unsatisfied needs, could easily become a great temptation to transgression of duty" (p. 12) [4]. From the researcher's perspective, it is evident that Iago's actions were not motiveless, unlike Coleridge's concept of "motiveless malignancy" for him [5]. In fact, what fueled him was his jealousy, envy, and selfishness, which made him act not from duty but from his own desires. Iago mentions that he detests the Moor for the refusal of promotion; however, at the end of the same act, he adds up to his reason:

"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" (1.3.380-3) [1].

A free and autonomous will follows rational principles of duty. It is clearly evident that Iago is under the influence of his self-serving purposes; therefore, he fails to act according to his duty in the play. Even though he preserves himself, in doing so, he violates others and defies all the Kantian principles.

On the other hand, from the researcher's perspective, Cassio is a lieutenant or a soldier who follows moral principles and actions according to duty. Even when he slips in his way (the drunken brawl), he tries his best to get back on track and seek redemption. His remorse and conscious need to uphold certain ethical standards, especially in his role as Othello's lieutenant. His desire to restore his reputation and willingness to make amends show an underlying recognition of moral duty. In Kantian words, Cassio's will moves toward aligning itself with the moral law. His conscience drives him to see redemption, and unlike Iago, Cassio can recognize and act according to moral principles that are not self-serving. Besides, In Kant's well-known second formulation of the categorical imperative (Formula of Humanity), which often supports the modern call for respecting others, self-respect is prioritized: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or the person of any other always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means"(p.38) [4]. It is evident that Kant emphasizes the importance of one's duty to oneself, while duties toward others should be fulfilled solely for the sake of the duty itself. Throughout the play, Cassio exemplifies his self-respect, which is intimately linked to his honor and reputation as a noble lieutenant. When this reputation is tarnished, he envisions himself reduced to his primal instincts or the monstrous aspects of his nature: "I will ask him for my place again; he shall tell me I am a drunkard! Had I as many mouths as Hydra, such an answer would stop them all" (2.3.283-4) [1]. While honor is widely regarded as a valuable virtue, Cassio constructs his sense of self-respect upon it, utilizing honor as a means rather than as an intrinsic end. Consequently, when he experiences a loss of honor, he is overtaken by desperation. In stark contrast, Iago demonstrates a disregard for both honor and self-respect, as evidenced by his assertion that: "Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving" (2.3.251-3) [1]. He only perceives self-respect as a tool for the manipulation of others, demonstrating a rejection of moral consistency unless he lectures others otherwise.

Furthermore, sometimes there is something you badly want to do, something on which your happiness depends, but you find, on reflection, that it would be wrong. For instance, approaching your commander's wife for reconciliation or destroying your commander's life because you were not chosen for the lieutenancy. However, a closer examination would remind the reader that it was Iago who initially suggested that Cassio seek Desdemona's help and who later schemed to have Emilia advocate for him and create the appearance of an inappropriate interaction between Cassio and Desdemona. If you are to be moved by this reflection to refrain from the action, the thought that you cannot will your maxim as a universal law must motivate you not to act. As Kant claims in Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, one must assign a worth to autonomous action and oneself as capable of it, in comparison with which one's happiness "is to be held as nothing" [6]. The argument, Kant complains, has not shown how this is possible. It has shown how we arrive at the consciousness of the moral law, but it has not demonstrated how, in such a case, we can be motivated by that consciousness. Moreover, unless one can be motivated this way, one is not free and autonomous (p. xxvii) [6].

Shakespeare's Othello strikingly contrasts Kantian moral ideals with the fractured self-congruence of its characters. While Cassio grapples with reconciling his actions with his ethical obligations—demonstrating moments of moral failure yet ultimately seeking redemption—Iago serves as the embodiment of Kantian immorality, entirely rejecting duty, self-respect, and the humanity of others. His infamous declaration, "I am not what I am" (1.1.63) [1], epitomizes his deliberate erosion of self-congruence, reducing all interpersonal bonds to instruments of "sport and profit" (1.3.380) [1]. Where Kant insists that individuals should act in accordance with respect for the moral law, Iago functions through a framework of envy and destruction, regarding even his wife Emilia as a mere instrument for his schemes. In contrast, although flawed, Cassio

embodies a Kantian desire for moral restoration, lamenting the loss of his honor as a profound degradation of his humanity.

This tension between moral aspiration and corrosive self-interest sets the stage for the next section, "Kantian Morality vs. Iago's Arrogance: The Dehumanization of Others as Means to an End." This analysis will explore Iago's manipulation of Othello, Roderigo, and Cassio through the lens of Kant's Formula of Humanity, which prohibits treating individuals merely as means to an end. Iago's entire scheme—ranging from exploiting Roderigo's wealth to weaponizing Desdemona's kindness—reveals a consistent violation of this ethical principle. In contrast, Cassio's missteps, such as his exploitation of Bianca, illustrate how even well-meaning individuals can struggle with Kant's stringent moral framework. This comparison highlights Kant's central dilemma: true moral agency demands not only outward adherence to duty but also an internal commitment to the dignity of oneself and others. This is a commitment that Iago completely rejects, while Cassio, despite his imperfections, strives to reclaim.

1.2 Kantian Morality vs. Iago's Arrogance: The Dehumanization of Others as Means to an End

In Kantian philosophy, feelings of guilt and resentment are assumed that all parties involved already view themselves and others as moral agents. To be suitable, these emotions require individuals to consider themselves and their peers worthy of blame and justification. However, a self-conceited individual does not perceive themselves or others as moral beings in the necessary manner. As Kant writes, the arrogant person "thinks he is entitled to treat [others] with contempt''[4]. If the arrogant person believes he is permitted to treat others as worthless, he treats them only as a means to his end without regard for their humanity. For instance, Iago keeps feeding on Roderigo's money; even when convincing Roderigo not to drown himself, he keeps emphasizing, "Put money in thy purse" (1.3.338) [1]. After witnessing Othello and Desdemona publicly declare their love before the Duke and Senators, a distraught Roderigo threatens to drown himself. After that, Iago elicits an extensive and mocking monologue, spanning around sixty lines and filled with misanthropic clichés. While Iago's speech ostensibly aims to boost Roderigo's confidence and restore his hope, it simultaneously serves to belittle him through manipulation, underscoring his perceived lack of masculinity and intensifying Roderigo's emotional dependence on Iago. Considering that Roderigo's threat of suicide seems little more than melodramatic theatrics, Iago's harsh and exaggerated response appears remarkably disproportionate.

Besides, as a way of using others as a means to his end, he engages others in motivational discourse imbued with an ironic tone concerning his own mechanization. This rhetorical approach is notably evident during two instances involving Cassio, specifically following the revocation of his title, as well as in his interactions with Othello: "But he that filches from me my good name, Robs me of that which not enriches him, And makes me poor indeed" (3.3.161-3) [1]. These words spoken to Othello are intended to deepen his despair over the prospect of losing his honor. Interestingly, this tactic seems quite familiar, as Iago employed a similar strategy against Cassio—stripping him of his good name and tarnishing the reputations of nearly every character in the play. Moreover, the research analysis suggests that Iago uses Othello more than others for his own ends. Iago is, at his core, a being defined by appearances, tailoring his actions to fit each circumstance while remaining essentially inscrutable, even to himself. His statement, "I am not what I am" (1.1.63) [1], highlights his absence of a stable, genuine identity. The conflicting motives he presents throughout the play further erode their plausibility, emphasizing his enigmatic and elusive character. During the silent scene where Cassio is implicated as the new owner of Desdemona's handkerchief, Iago exploits the ambiguity of visual symbols that he is tasked with displaying, using them to construct his lies. Through Iago's manipulation, Othello's bodily darkness becomes devilish as he is persuaded that his wife embodies the most sinister associations of obscurity and concealment. The disturbing result of Iago's scheming is the symbolic transfer of Othello's attributes of blackness onto Desdemona, the person closest to him.

In his performance, according to Harry Berger, Iago is not merely orchestrating events but also engaging in a theatrical display. His interactions with Roderigo, marked by impatience and disdain, prompt questions about why Iago confides in him and what satisfaction he derives from manipulating him. Iago employs Roderigo not only as a pawn in his pursuit of revenge but also as a sounding board for his manipulative rhetoric, seemingly intended for an invisible audience of perceptive onlookers. In the play, Iago brazenly showcased his duplicity only to Roderigo, a calculated Roderigo's potential to expose him [7]. According to Philipa Berry, a scholar specializing in English and European Renaissance culture, with a focus on feminist and postmodern theory, in Act 1, Scene 3, Iago acknowledges to his fictional audience that he has

manipulated Roderigo's trust for the singular purpose of "sport and profit", which stems from his animosity toward Othello. He contends that Othello has infringed upon his sexual honor, thereby justifying his deceitful actions and manipulations [8].

Nevertheless, Cassio is not a saint. He used others to achieve his ends, tarnished their autonomy, and violated Kant's ethics while serving his self-interested purposes. In a state of acute desperation to reclaim his title, Cassio exhibits a pronounced inclination to engage with Desdemona, repeatedly imploring her to intervene on his behalf. This insistent appeal occurs without adequate consideration of the potential repercussions for Desdemona herself: "I will beseech the virtuous Desdemona to undertake for me" (2.3.308) [1]. The utilization of the clown, music group, and Emilia's potential involvement to connect with Desdemona exemplifies a disregard for the autonomy of other characters. Besides, it is difficult to ignore how he treats Bianca. He never acknowledges her agency and his relationship with her. When Iago asks about her, we can see his attitude towards her: "I marry. What? A customer? Prythee, bear some charity to my wit, so not think it so unwholesome" (4.1.118-9) and " She haunts me in every place" (4.1.139) [1]. Cassio uses Bianca only for sexual pleasure and, by this objectification, does not validate her feelings.

Thus, it can be concluded that Iago uses everyone around him as a tool for his dirty work: Emilia to purchase the handkerchief, Cassio to be removed and vex Othello, "I'll have our Michael Cassio on the hip, Abuse him to the Moor…" (2.1.302-3) [1], and Othello to fall from grace and make him lieutenant. His actions are not just manipulative but also deeply destructive, leaving a trail of broken relationships and shattered lives. In this play, Cassio is not an exception; he, too, uses others as instruments. The difference between Cassio and Iago is that Iago is fully aware of his villainy and not once doubts himself. He dismisses virtue and morality while focusing on his self-centered goals, destroying everyone who stands in his way: "And besides, the Moor, May unfold me to him. There stand I in much peril. No, he must die" (5.1.20-3) [1]. Another difference between Cassio and Iago is that Iago uses others against their will by giving them the courtesy to convince him toward his own ends: "I have no great devotion to the deed, And yet he hath given me satisfying reasons" (5.1.8-9) [1].

Analyzing *Othello* through a Kantian lens reveals a significant violation of moral agency, as Iago and Cassio treat others as means to their ends rather than respecting their autonomy. Iago epitomizes this breach, dehumanizing those around him through manipulation and deceit, justifying his actions with distorted notions of honor and revenge. While less malicious, Cassio also instrumentalizes others—utilizing Desdemona's influence, Bianca's affection, and the Clown's labor—to restore his reputation, often neglecting their consequences.

This erosion of moral reciprocity sets the stage for the next critical inquiry: "Kant's Formula of Universal Law and the Conflict of Autonomy". If, as Kant argues, moral imperatives require acting only on maxims that could be universally willed without contradiction, then Iago's schemes and Cassio's opportunism unravel under scrutiny. Iago's maxims (Deceive to dominate) and Cassio's (Use others to recover honor) cannot be universalized without undermining the very fabric of trust and agency they depend upon. The tragedy of *Othello* thus becomes a case study of the catastrophic fallout when autonomy is violated—not only by villains but by those who, in desperation, compromise their own moral principles

The characters' failure to adhere to Kant's moral imperatives—especially the Formula of Universal Law—underscores a deeper conflict within the play: the struggle between individual desires and the need for ethical consistency. In the following analysis, we will explore how Kant's framework reveals the irrationality of Iago's and Cassio's actions. It will demonstrate that if their choices were to be universalized, they would make human coexistence impossible.

2. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, Shakespeare's *Othello* serves as a rich landscape for exploring the Kantian dichotomy between moral duty and self-serving ambition. Through the stark contrast between Iago and Cassio, the play illustrates the dire consequences of abandoning ethical self-congruence in favor of manipulation and deceit. Iago, driven by jealousy and wounded pride, exemplifies the failure to act from a sense of duty or to regard others as ends in themselves. His repeated assertion that he is not what he appears to be highlights his deliberate rejection of Kant's ideal of authenticity. Moreover, his calculated exploitation of characters such as Roderigo, Emilia, and Othello underscores his ethical emptiness. Conversely, Cassio, despite his flaws and occasional missteps, embodies a distinctly different moral outlook. His profound regret, commitment to restoring his honor, and respect for Othello's authority reflect a conscience striving to align with moral law, as Kant envisions it. The tension between these two figures encapsulates the broader ethical message of the play: true moral worth arises not from mere appearances or external conformity but from an internal and principled commitment to duty. In this context, *Othello* critiques the dangers of betrayal and self-interest while also serving as a poignant meditation on the fragility and necessity of moral integrity in both public and private life. Ultimately, Shakespeare's tragedy stands as a cautionary tale, revealing how the erosion of ethical selfhood can precipitate the collapse of both individual character and societal order.

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