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Nicomachean and Neo-Aristotelian Ethics and Shakespeare's Tragedies

Janine Bayer

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NICOMACHEAN AND NEO-ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS
AND SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

The degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Janine M. Bayer

December 2010

NICOMACHEAN AND NEO-ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS
IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

By

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ABSTRACT

NICOMACHEAN AND NEO-ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

By

Janine M. Bayer

December 2010

Dissertation supervised Dr. Anne Brannen

“Nicomachean and Neo-Aristotelian Ethics in Shakespeare’s Tragedies” examines two of Shakespeare’s most compelling tragedies—*Othello* and *King Lear*—through the lens of contemporary virtue ethics theory, thereby offering new conceptions of how morality operates in these plays. Although neo-Aristotelian moral philosophers locate the roots of their theories in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, their arguments reach far beyond Aristotle’s original theoretical conception, offering innovative ways for us to understand virtue in our analysis of morality. The dissertation Introduction provides an overview of contemporary moral philosophy—i.e., the state of normative ethics today, including brief explanations of Deontology, Teleology, and Virtue theory. Discussion in Chapter One focuses on Aristotle’s original conception of Virtue Ethics as espoused in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Chapter Two highlights the theories advanced by prominent contemporary neo-Aristotelian philosophers: Rosalind Hursthouse’s argument in defense of the action-guiding principles of virtue ethics, Christine Swanton’s Nietzschean

formulation of virtue, Michael Slote's Agent-Based approach to understanding human morality, and the collaborative efforts of Virginia Held, Annette Baier, Michael Slote, and Nel Noddings in the development of the Ethics of Care. Chapter Three examines the principal characters in *Othello* through lenses offered by Swanton and Slote, thereby offering viable new analyses of the characters' behaviors. And through a close reading of *King Lear*, Chapter Four illustrates the scholarly import of the Ethics of Care in literary analysis. An innovation in virtue ethics that locates the very essence of morality in human caring, the Ethics of Care offers an avenue for us to gain greater insight and a deeper appreciation of literature from a new and significant philosophical perspective.

DEDICATION

In loving memory of Dr. Albert C. Labriola, who taught me how to love Shakespeare and then passed me the torch so that I might light the path for others. In my mind and heart, Dr. Labriola has always been a giant among men. Even in death, he remains a colossus— an enduring inspiration to me to be the kind of teacher that would make him proud. And in that spirit, I dedicate this passage from *Antony and Cleopatra* to his greatness:

His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
Crested the world. His voice was propertied
As all the tunèd spheres, and that to friends;
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,
There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas,
That grew the more by reaping. His delights
Were dolphin-like; they showed his back above
The element they lived in. In his livery
Walked crowns and crownets. Realms and islands were
As plates dropped from his pocket. (V. ii. 81-91)

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My sisters Jacqueline and Nicole, my father (Jimbo!), and my very dearest friends— Mary, Michelle, Bill, and Mark: you have nourished my heart and spirit with so much love, confidence, and encouragement that I sometimes truly believe I could fly if I wanted to. My feelings of gratitude for all that you do and all that you are to me run so deeply that—even with a Ph.D. in English—I can't seem to find words that adequately express my appreciation.

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To my students, past and present: thank you for giving me a professional purpose in this world. I love to teach, and I live to teach, and your enthusiasm for learning is my constant inspiration. Individually and collectively, you have a profound impact on me every single day, and I pray that you will always be happy, successful, and greatly loved.

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Part One

1 An Introduction to Normative Ethics

In this dissertation, I plan to examine William Shakespeare's tragedies *Othello* and *King Lear* through the lens of contemporary (neo-Aristotelian) Virtue Ethics. Over the years, various literary scholars have taken up the task of analyzing Shakespeare's plays from an Aristotelian ethical perspective. This has resulted in a small but meaningful body of scholarship that connects Shakespeare's texts with Aristotle's moral theories. Contemporary virtue ethics, however, is a relatively new field in moral philosophy, originally sparked by Elizabeth Anscombe's seminal work "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958). Anscombe's paper revived a long-dormant interest among philosophers in exploring virtue as a viable means of understanding morality. Although Anscombe and the virtue ethicists who followed her locate the roots of their theories in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, they have developed their particular philosophies beyond Aristotle's original theory, building upon his foundational concepts and expanding in completely new and different directions. A significant majority of philosophical scholarship in this area has been published only within the past twenty-five years; consequently, Shakespearian literary scholars have not yet made connections between Shakespeare's works and neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics theory. I see this dearth of criticism as an excellent scholarly opportunity; I have therefore decided to analyze developments in contemporary virtue ethics theory in order to determine how important shifts in ethical thought impact or altogether change present-day moral readings of Shakespeare's tragedies. It is important scholarship in that it introduces literary scholars to an entirely new and rapidly growing field of philosophical analysis to use as a lens for

understanding literature. Those who are intrigued by connections between ethics and literature, therefore, now have a fresh supply of excellent source material.

This project consists of an analysis of two of Shakespeare's most compelling and best-loved tragedies—*Othello* and *King Lear*—through the lens of contemporary virtue ethics theory. Before I offer a comprehensive neo-Aristotelian ethical analysis of each play, however, it is essential that I provide a logical framework for my reader's understanding of the project's purpose and scope. Toward this end, I use this Introduction to furnish my reader with an overview of contemporary moral philosophy (i.e., the state of normative ethics today). Chapter Two outlines the basic tenets of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that specifically lend themselves to Shakespearian character analysis; and in Chapter Three, I offer a comprehensive explanation of contemporary virtue ethics: what it is, how it developed, who the most prolific scholars are, and what theories they are currently advancing. Chapters Four and Five are devoted to the analysis of the plays from a neo-Aristotelian perspective. In these chapters, I examine the moral development of the major characters (each of whom makes decisions that carry significant moral consequence), focusing primarily on how the characters' virtues (and vices) operate; how they influence the characters' thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and overall moral development.

The study of ethics, also known as moral philosophy, concerns ideologies of what constitutes ethical and unethical behavior. Generally speaking, the major ethical theories can be divided into three subject fields: metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. *Metaethics* explores the origin and development of our moral principles and attempts to ascribe meanings to them. It ponders whether or not our ethical principles are more than

merely social constructions, and it focuses on issues such as “universal truths, the will of God, and the role of reason in ethical judgments” (Fieser). *Normative ethics* is much more practical in nature, as it attempts to provide an outline of moral standards that can be used to determine proper behavior. What good habits should we adopt? What are the various consequences of our actions? What are our duties to ourselves and others? Finally, *applied ethics* attempts to offer viable solutions to various controversial issues, including abortion, animal rights, the environment, homosexual marriage, capital punishment, and war (Fieser).

Since my dissertation concerns specific judgments about moral behavior in Shakespeare’s tragedies, I dedicate my attention to normative ethics throughout. Specifically, my interest lies with Virtue Ethics — a moral theory within the school of normative ethics. I believe, however, that my discussion of virtue ethics will be of greater value to my reader if placed within a larger framework of ethical theory. To that end, I now offer a brief synopsis of the basic precepts of normative ethics today.

Within the school of normative ethics, Deontology, Consequentialism, and Virtue Ethics are generally accepted as the three chief approaches to examining moral behavior. “Deontology” comes from the Greek *deon*, meaning “duty” and *logos*, meaning “logic.” Here, duties and rules are emphasized as the factors that must govern our actions. According to this moral theory, the locus of value in an action is the act or kind of act itself, not the outcome or consequence of the act. Certain features in a particular act either have intrinsic value or are intrinsically wrong (Pojman 225-26). Deontologists would argue, for example, that there is something intrinsically wrong in the act of lying, even if

the consequence of the lie is positive. Since truth-telling is intrinsically right and lying is intrinsically wrong, we have a duty to tell the truth.

Consummate deontologist Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is generally esteemed as the greatest philosopher of the Enlightenment. In the Introduction to Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Kantian scholar Marvin Fox reminds readers of the extraordinary importance of Kantian philosophy with the well known adage: "You can philosophize with Kant or against Kant, but you cannot philosophize without him" (vii). Even those who disagree entirely with Kant's philosophy invariably concur that his theory of the "supreme principle of morality" had a profound influence on all subsequent scholarship on morality and metaphysics. Fox explains Kant's supreme principle of morality:

Kant was convinced that there is a supreme principle which controls all valid moral judgment, and that this principle is purely rational in character. It can be established independently of any consideration of empirical factors in the moral life. The advantages of such a rational moral principle are clear enough. In appealing to reason, which Kant thought to be universally the same in all men, we transcend the limitations of particular societies and cultures, and we free ourselves from any consideration of the individual differences among men. Were we to permit these many diversities to enter into our formulation of the supreme principle of morality we would have moral chaos rather than a stable moral order. For to consider the differences among men and cultures would mean to restrict morality to a relativistic or even an individually

subjectivist foundation. The good would then differ from person to person and society to society. If, on the other hand, we are able to ground morality in reason alone, then we have achieved the foundations of a universal morality whose basic principles, like the rule of logic or mathematics, are the same for all men, in all places, and at all times. (qtd. in Kant ix-x)

All morality, according to this theory, is based on reason as opposed to emotion, feeling, sympathy, or self-interest. And, as a supreme principle that encompasses all people and cultures, it disallows any hint of subjectivism or relativism.

As rational beings, Kant argues, we must act out of respect for the Moral Laws—which are unconditional and universally valid—regardless of the possible consequences (Pojman 295). And where can these Moral Laws be found? According to Kant, most moral laws can be derived from the first and second formulations of his *Categorical Imperative*: First—“Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time *will* that it should become a Universal Law” (Kant 38). This means that we should only judge an action as morally right if we can consistently wish that everyone in the world would engage in that type of action. If we cannot will that everyone engage in that action or behavior, then the action or behavior is morally wrong. The second formulation of Kant’s Categorical Imperative holds that “Man and generally any rational being exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must always be regarded at the same time as an end” (Kant 45). By virtue of our reason, Kant insists, each of us possesses dignity and tremendous worth. Therefore, no person should ever be

manipulated, exploited, or used merely as a means to a particular end. On the contrary, each person must be recognized and treated as an end in and of him or herself.

In addition to the importance of the Categorical Imperative in determining moral action, Kant outlined what he called the *Three Propositions of Morality*:

1. An action must be done from a sense of duty, if it is to have moral worth.
2. An action done from duty derives its moral worth *not from the purpose* which is to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is determined, and therefore does not depend on the realization of the object of the action, but merely on the *principle of volition* by which the action has taken place, without regard to any object of desire.
3. Duty is the necessity of acting from respect for the moral law. (Kant 17-18)

These principles, according to Kant, are absolute and clearly justify the duty that we, as rational beings, owe to the moral law.

On the opposite end of the normative ethics spectrum, we have the school of Teleology, from the Greek *teleos*, meaning “having reached one’s end” or “finished.” A consequentialist moral theory, teleology holds that the locus of value is the outcome or consequence of the act; there is no such thing as an act having intrinsic worth. So, for a teleologist, the action that produces the best consequence is morally right. From this perspective, then, lying is only wrong if it produces negative consequences. If we can reasonably calculate that a lie will do even slightly more good than telling the truth, we actually have a moral obligation to lie (Pojman 226). This example clearly illustrates the

fundamental mission of moral action from a consequentialist perspective: “to enhance the amount of intrinsic goodness in the world, and to diminish the amount of what is intrinsically bad” (Shafer-Landau 453).

Philosopher William Shaw explains standard consequentialism (the most common type in the family of consequentialist ethical theories) as a maximizing doctrine:

Standard consequentialism holds [. . .] that we are not merely permitted or encouraged to act so as to maximize good; we are required to do so.

Accordingly [. . .] an action is morally right if and only if there is no other action, among those available to the agent, that has better consequences; otherwise, the action is wrong. Thus, several actions might be equally right, and what morality requires is that the agent do one of them. Finally, an action might have bad consequences and yet be right. This will be the case if all alternative actions have worse results. (463-64)

In this sense, standard consequentialism distinguishes itself from the thesis that critics often erroneously ascribe to it: that an action is right *only* if the consequences of that action are good. Instead, standard consequentialism maintains that we are required to engage in moral actions that will maximize good, that we have a responsibility to engage in the actions that will produce the very best of the available consequences, and that sometimes taking the right moral action will mean choosing the lesser of the possible evils that may result from the action. Shaw additionally clarifies that it is the *expected* consequences, not the *actual* consequences of an action that count. Since we rarely know in advance exactly what the consequences of our actions will be, the onus is on us to “do

what has the highest expectation of good as judged by what a reasonable and conscientious person in the agent's circumstances could be expected to know" (466). This may involve some degree of educated guesswork. However, as long as we are making decisions based on reason and good judgment about expected consequences, then we are morally right.

Clearly the best-known consequentialist theory, Utilitarianism aims at maximizing happiness. Developed by humanist reformers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), utilitarianism advances the belief that morality should serve humanity. (Kant's deontological theory, by contrast, argues that humanity should serve morality.) As advocates of social progress and reform, Bentham and Mill felt strongly that following the letter of the law often impeded progress, and that our moral actions should be based on what would produce "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (Pojman 227) and what would aid us most effectively in achieving the ultimate end: "an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality" (Mill 457). Mill issues a stern warning, however, against using this moral theory to advance purely selfish individual objectives. An agent's own individual happiness never determines the standard for what is considered correct moral behavior in Utilitarianism. Instead, this approach to moral conduct asserts that the happiness of *all* people concerned must be considered in deciding moral action: "As between [an agent's] own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator" (Mill 457). Here, Mill references Jesus of Nazareth's Golden Rule as the essence of utility: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and "Love your neighbor as

yourself”: together, these “constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality” (Mill 457).

Utilitarians generally follow the tenets established by either Act or Rule Utilitarianism. The classic version, Act Utilitarianism, simply states that an act is right to the extent that it promotes the most overall happiness. According to this theory, before we engage in any action, we must consider if another action might produce greater happiness. If so, we have a moral obligation to do that act instead. A more moderate version of this theory, Rule Utilitarianism, states that we must select a certain set of rules that promise to produce the greatest overall happiness. These rules must be followed by the members of the society at all times—even when a particular instance arises that will clearly *not* produce the greatest happiness for the most people.

The third major contemporary moral theory (which I examine at length in chapters one and two) is Virtue Ethics. Also known as *Arêtetic Ethics*, and derived from the Greek word *Arête*, meaning “excellence” or “virtue,” this moral theory has its roots in the teachings of Plato and, more specifically, Aristotle. Instead of emphasizing duty or consequence, Virtue Ethics centers in the heart and personality of the agent—in his or her moral character. It focuses on *being* a certain kind of person instead of *doing* good works. Virtue Ethics asks “What type of person should I become?” instead of “What should I do?” and seeks to produce excellent or virtuous persons: persons whose behavior is guided by spontaneous goodness.

As outlined in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle’s esteemed treatise on ethics, *Arête* (excellence or virtue), *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom) and *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing) stand as the three central concepts in the development of virtuous

character and moral goodness. And, according to Aristotle, we cannot possibly become genuinely virtuous or achieve ultimate happiness unless we observe the Doctrine of the Mean. Briefly stated, this doctrine asserts the importance of moderation in all human activity. Each moral virtue, Aristotle explains, exists somewhere between the vices of excess and deficiency. As responsible moral agents, we must consistently locate the appropriate “middle ground” or “Golden Mean” between excess and deficiency, for only then will we be practicing the virtuous behavior that leads to *eudaimonia*.

A true understanding of virtue ethics also requires an acknowledgement of the importance of friendship and community to Aristotle. Relationships, both personal and community, are an essential part of the good life; without them, we cannot possibly flourish as independent agents. Through good, healthy friendships and communal relationships, we experience moral growth and aspire to the supreme goal of *eudaimonia* (Aristotle VIII).

Let us now examine Aristotle’s virtue ethics theory in detail so that we may ultimately apply it to a contemporary moral reading of Shakespeare’s tragedies.

2 Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: Virtue and the Good Life

Aristotle was born in 384 BC in Stagira, Greece, but he moved to Athens when he was still quite young. In Athens, he immediately found an intellectual home at Plato's Academy, where he embraced the scholarly life with other academicians: philosophers, mathematicians, scientists, and politicians. A gumptious student, Aristotle demonstrated an early interest in the study of rhetoric, logic, ethics, and metaphysics, and he "drank deeply from the Platonic springs" (Barnes qtd. in Aristotle x). By his death at age 61 (323 BC), Aristotle had amassed a formidable body of work that included essays, treatises, and entire books. Although only a fraction of his original oeuvre survives, it still comprises approximately fifteen volumes of text. Two of the surviving treatises on ethics are the *Eudemian Ethics* (named after the editor of the treatise, Eudemus), and the *Nicomachean Ethics* (most likely named after Aristotle's son, Nicomachus). The ethical perspectives with which I am primarily concerned in this dissertation are those contained in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—the treatise that scholars generally agree represents Aristotle's mature and more fully developed philosophies on ethics. It is also important to note here that I will not be attempting to discuss every aspect of *The Nicomachean Ethics*; instead, I will be directing my attention toward the philosophies that most effectively lend themselves to neo-Aristotelian revision and to Shakespearian character analysis. These include, in a rather general sense, Aristotle's conception of *Eudaimonia*, the Moral and Intellectual Virtues, the Doctrine of the Mean, and the importance of Friendship and Community in civilized life.

Although most of Aristotle's surviving works can be categorized as "theoretical" because they are concerned with natural science (physics), *The Nicomachean Ethics* is a

work of “practical science.” This means that the attainment of knowledge *about* action is not the primary objective of studying ethics; instead, the goal of studying ethics is action itself. We do not study ethics, according to Aristotle, merely to learn about the characteristics of good persons; we study ethics so that we may become good persons. In Book II—“Moral Goodness”—Aristotle clearly states this pragmatic intention:

Since the branch of philosophy on which we are at present engaged is not, like the others, theoretical in its aim—because we are studying not to know what goodness is, but how to become good men¹ [. . .] since otherwise it would be useless—we must apply our minds to the problem of how our actions should be performed, because [. . .] it is these that actually determine our dispositions.² (ii. 1103b 27-32)

The Nicomachean Ethics is not practical only in its objective (as stated above), however; it is also very functional in its prescribed method, which, according to Aristotle, is quite simple: learn by doing. Again in Book II he explains:

Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it: people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments. Similarly, we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones. This view is supported by what happens in city-states. Legislators make their citizens good by habituation; this is the intention of every legislator, and those who do not carry it out fail of their object. This is what makes the difference

¹ While Aristotle’s original language is obviously non-inclusive, I will be using inclusive language—i.e., “persons,” “men and women” instead of “man” and “men” in my discussion of his work.

² All textual quotes are taken from *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Trans. J.A.K. Thomson. Rev. Trans. Hugh Tredennick. New York: Penguin, 2004.

between a good constitution and a bad one. (i. 1103a 33-35; 1103b 1-7)

Aristotle's purpose in *Nicomachean Ethics* is clear: to teach us that our aim in life should be to become good persons, and to convince us that we can only achieve that goal by practicing virtuous behavior.

At this point, a critical reader may justifiably question why we should care so much about becoming good persons. What, in other words, is the ultimate objective or desired consequence of our good behavior? This query provides a logical segue to Aristotle's conception of *Eudaimonia*. A key term in ancient Greek moral philosophy, *eudaimonia* is commonly translated as "happiness," "flourishing," or "well-being." For Aristotle, however, *eudaimonia* represents an ultimate human state or condition: happiness as the "*summum bonum* or supreme end of life" (Barnes qtd. in Aristotle xxviii). Here, we must endeavor to understand that Aristotle's quest for happiness or "the good life" refers not to any immediate aim or action in our lives but rather to an ultimate objective. We admittedly engage in daily activities that are not directly connected to our quest for happiness. The immediate goal of holding a job, for example, may be to make money, and the immediate objective of making money may be to meet our financial obligations. At some point, however, the line of reasoning through which we trace the intention of our actions (unless they are completely frivolous) must conclude with the acknowledgment that "this would make me happy." Aristotle contends in Book I:

If, then, our activities have some end which we want for its own sake, and for the sake of which we want all the other ends—if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for this will involve an infinite progression, so that our aim will be pointless and ineffectual)—it is clear

that this must be the good, that is, the supreme good. (i. 1094a 18-23)

In other words, our final response in a conversation investigating the reasons for our actions must always be “Because by doing so, I will achieve happiness.”

Certainly, only the most ascetic types would reject the notion of happiness as a worthwhile goal. Aristotle’s conception of exactly *what* constitutes happiness (or the good life) and precisely *how* we should work toward achieving it, however, often cause great consternation. In Book I, Aristotle states that “happiness is a virtuous activity of the soul.”³ In order to reach this conclusion, however, Aristotle claims that we must first determine what the *proper function* of a person is, as distinct and separate from other sentient beings:

If we assume that the function of man is a kind of life, namely, an activity or series of actions of the soul, implying a rational principle; and if the function of a good man is to perform these well and rightly; and if every function is performed well when performed in accordance with its proper excellence; if all this is so, the conclusion is that the good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and most perfect kind.

There is a further qualification: in a complete lifetime. One swallow does not make a summer; neither does one day. Similarly, neither can one day, or a brief space of time, make a man blessed and happy. (vii. 1098a 14-26)

³ The word “soul” as used by Aristotle carries no religious connotations; it refers simply to being alive. So, “activities of the soul” are merely activities in which living beings can and inanimate objects cannot engage.

In examining the first part of this quote, we understand that happiness, in Aristotle's estimation, can only be achieved through the development of good moral character (via the practice of virtuous behavior). And in the second part, we learn that it takes time to achieve *eudaimonia*. Unlike pleasure, which can certainly be temporary (and often very brief!), our *summum bonum*, or ultimate happiness, takes a lifetime to cultivate; by its very nature, it cannot be short-lived.⁴ In summary, then, Aristotle's conception of happiness is not concerned with *feeling* happy; instead, it is more a matter of *living properly*. As Dr. Robert Zunjic, professor of philosophy at the University of Rhode Island⁵ explains, "A person who is happy (*eudaimon*) is not simply enjoying life but is enjoying life by living it to the fullest, that is to say, by living successfully under stable conditions rather than trying everything anew."

Good moral character, then, is essential to achieving ultimate happiness and can only be attained by the cultivation of the virtues. According to Aristotle, however, acting virtuously is not always a natural human inclination; we must *practice* virtuous behavior so that it ultimately *becomes* a habit. He offers the following reasoning in Book II:

Moral goodness [. . .] is the result of habit, from which it has actually got its name, being a slight modification of the word *ethos*.⁶ This fact makes it obvious that none of the moral virtues is engendered in us by nature, since nothing that is what it is by nature can be made to behave differently by habituation. For instance, a stone, which has a natural tendency

⁴ This does not imply that we can never experience happiness in a general sense until late in life. On the contrary, Aristotle explains in Book I, Chapter X that "the happy man [. . .] in fact will be happy throughout his life; because he will spend all his time, or the most time of any man, in virtuous conduct and contemplation"(1100b 19-22).

⁵ This and all other quotations that do not have a parenthetical page reference are from non-paginated websites or online sources. See Works Cited for complete citation information.

⁶ Editor's note: The words *ēthos* 'character' and *ethos* 'custom' show different grades of the same root *eth*—.

downwards, cannot be habituated to rise, however often you try to train it by throwing it into the air; nor can you train fire to burn downwards; nor can anything else that has any other natural tendency be trained to depart from it. The moral virtues, then, are engendered in us neither *by* nor *contrary to* nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit. (i. 1103a 16-27)

Here, Aristotle reminds us that we can only progress toward *eudaimonia* once we have successfully cultivated the habit of virtuous conduct.

Since we have been challenged to develop virtuous habits, therefore, we must ascertain the specific features of Aristotle's virtue theory. Virtue—*aretē*—denotes possessing a particular skill, or excellence. He offers the following explication in Book II, "Moral Goodness":

Let us assert [. . .] that any kind of excellence renders that of which it is the excellence *good*, and makes it perform its function *well*. For example, the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and the function good (because it is through the excellence of the eye that we see well). Similarly the excellence of a horse makes him both a fine horse and good at running and carrying his rider and facing the enemy. If this rule holds good for all cases, then human excellence [virtue] will be the disposition that makes one a good man and causes him to perform his function well.

(vi. 1106a 15-24)

He imposes a strict condition on this definition, however: in order to be considered virtuous individuals, we must always be obedient to our human reason. A more accurate

explanation, then, might indicate that virtues are those “good character qualities that enable an individual to achieve happiness while obeying the commands of reason” (Zunjic).

Aristotle makes a clear distinction between the two types of virtues: Moral and Intellectual. Moral virtues are those which must be cultivated by habit (as explained above). They include courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, magnanimity, proper ambition, patience, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, modesty, and righteous indignation (Aristotle Appendix 1). Intellectual virtue, on the other hand, refers to a quality of the mind; it “owes both its inception and its growth chiefly to instruction, and for this very reason needs time and experience” (Aristotle II. i. 1103a 15-16). The intellectual virtues include practical skill, knowledge, prudence (*phronēsis*), intuition, wisdom, resourcefulness, understanding, judgment, and cleverness. We can only function at our full potential when we exert both moral and intellectual virtue because, according to Aristotle, our moral virtue “ensures the correctness of the end at which we aim,” and prudence, or intellectual virtue, ensures the correctness of the means toward it (Aristotle VI. xii.1144a 7-9).

The very core of Aristotle’s position on moral goodness is his Doctrine of the Mean, in which he argues the importance of moderation in all human activity. Each moral virtue, he contends, exists somewhere between the vices of excess and deficiency.⁷ Courage, for example, is a moral virtue. If a person exhibits too much courage, however, he may be said to be rash (a vice), and if he exhibits no shred of courage at all, he is said

⁷ See Appendix I for the Doctrine of the Mean chart illustrating the moral virtues and their corresponding vices of excess and deficiency.

to be cowardly (also a vice). We must strive, therefore, for the appropriate middle ground or “Golden Mean” between excess and deficiency:

It is possible [. . .] to feel fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and pleasure and pain generally, too much or too little; and both of these are wrong. But to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, that is to the best, degree; and this is the mark of virtue.

(Aristotle II. vi. 1106b 19-25)

The difficulty, however, lies in the fact that the virtuous mean is very rarely found at an exact mathematical center between the vices on each end. Instead, it is our responsibility to determine whether the virtue that we seek may be found closer to the vice of excess or the vice of deficiency. Referring back to courage, for example, the actual virtue of courage is closer on the scale to the vice of rashness (excess) than it is to the vice of cowardliness (deficiency). The challenge of determining the mean, according to Aristotle, contributes to the very real difficulty of being good, for “failure is possible in many ways [. . .] but success in only one. That is why one is easy and the other difficult; it is easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it. Here, then, is another reason why excess and deficiency fall under evil, and the mean state under good; ‘For men are bad in countless ways, but good in only one’ ”⁸ (II. vi. 1106b 29-35).

Since Virtue comprises the pith of *Nicomachean Ethics*, it makes sense to offer a compendious of Books III through VI at this time. In these chapters, Aristotle defines and analyzes the moral and intellectual virtues, offering specific examples to elucidate his discussion. He begins with an exhaustive treatment of Courage, clarifying that it refers to

⁸ Editor’s note—the source of the quotation is unknown

a “mean state in relation to feelings of fear and confidence.” The courageous man, he explains, “will fear what it is natural for man to fear, but he will face it in the right way and as principle directs, for the sake of what is right and honourable; for this is the end of virtue” (III. vi. 1115a 7; 1115b 12-14). This type of courage, according to Aristotle, is proper and noble, as opposed to the brutishness exhibited by one who behaves as if he fears nothing:

The man who exceeds in confidence about things that are fearful is rash.

The rash man is considered to be both a boaster and a pretender to courage; at any rate he wishes to *seem* as the courageous man really *is* in his attitude towards fearful situations, and therefore imitates him where he can (i.e. where there is no real danger). Hence such people are usually cowardly as well as rash, because while they make a show of confidence when circumstances permit, they cannot face anything fearful. (III. vii. 1115b 28-33)

Both the rash man and the coward (i.e. one who “exceeds in fearing”; one who “fears the wrong things in the wrong way”) are despondent, as opposed to the courageous man, who is confident and optimistic.

Naturally, soldiers in a war have the greatest opportunity to display their courage, as they are faced with the possibility of painful wounds and even death every day. But the truly courageous soldier, Aristotle clarifies, is not the one who flies blindly into battle without concern for the potentially dire consequences. Instead, the courageous soldier is pained by the knowledge that he may be wounded or die, and he does not *willingly* endure these consequences. But since it is the right thing to do, and since it would be a

disgrace not to, the courageous man endures the consequences—accepting even the possibility of death with a noble spirit. Aristotle makes an important distinction here regarding the truly virtuous man of courage:

The more completely a man possesses virtue, and the happier he is, the more he will be distressed at the thought of death. For to such a man life is supremely worth living; and he is losing the greatest blessings, and he knows it; and this is a grievous thing. But that does not make him any less brave; he is probably even braver for it, because in preference to these blessings he chooses a gallant end in war. (III. ix. 1117b 10-15)

The virtue of courage, then, consists in fearing what it is appropriate to fear, and facing these fears in the right way.

Next, Aristotle introduces the moral virtue of Temperance, which concerns the avoidance of excess in regards to physical pleasure. Those who eat or drink too much are crude; those who engage in indiscriminate sexual behaviors are base; and those who display excess in every form, allowing themselves to be carried away by their physical desires, are licentious. But the temperate man, Aristotle states, “enjoys neither the things that the licentious man enjoys most (he positively objects to them) nor wrong pleasures in general, nor does he enjoy any pleasure violently; he is not distressed by the absence of pleasures, nor does he desire them—or if he does, he desires them moderately” (III. xi. 1119a 11-13). Appropriate restraint and proper appreciation of physical pleasures are the keys to temperance.

The virtue of Liberality means having the right attitude with regard to giving and receiving money. The liberal man, Aristotle informs us, “will not only give and spend the

right amount on the right objects, in great and small matters alike, and do it with pleasure; he will also accept the right amounts from the right sources” (IV. i. 1120b 28-30). A virtuous man neither squanders his money nor takes it too seriously. Instead, he makes the very best use of wealth, or goods, or any possession that is to be given or received.⁹ Aristotle issues a stern warning about the dangers of prodigality (i.e. excessive spending; wasting or squandering money). Most prodigal people, he argues, are actually illiberal:

They become acquisitive because they want to spend money and cannot do so readily, since their resources quickly run out; so they are forced to get a supply from elsewhere. What is more, since they care nothing for honourable conduct, they take money irresponsibly from any source; because they are eager to give, and it makes no difference to them how or from where they get it. For this very reason their gifts are not liberal either, because they are not fine, nor given from a fine motive, nor in the right degree. Sometimes they enrich those who ought to be poor; and while they would not give anything to people of respectable character, they heap gifts on flatterers or purveyors of some other pleasure. Hence, most of them are licentious as well; because, spending freely as they do, they squander their money on forms of self-indulgence, and as they do not direct their lives towards an honourable end, they fall into sensuality.

(IV. i. 1121b 1-10)

Despite the various dangers of prodigality, however, Aristotle argues that Illiberality, or meanness, is a much more heinous vice. These types go to any length to get money from

⁹ Aristotle makes a further moral distinction regarding spending and receiving money, which he explains as the virtue of “Magnificence.” This virtue primarily concerns matters on a larger scale than those discussed in relation to Liberality. Its opposing vices are Vulgarly and Pettiness.

any source, even if their actions are illegal (such as the card shark or pick-pocket). They will not hesitate to cheat their friends for their own profit, and they do not mind the bad reputation they earn—as long as it makes money. This kind of illiberality is, according to Aristotle, “sordidly avaricious” (IV. i. 1122a 13).

The next virtue, Magnanimity, is generally considered a very upper-class Greek virtue. Commonly interpreted as proper pride or self-respect, Aristotle defines it as “Greatness of soul,” and specifies that it concerns matters of honor and dishonor. A magnanimous man is one who *correctly* thinks that he is worthy of great things; in this sense, he differs from both the foolish, vain man who overestimates his own worth, and the pusillanimous man, who undervalues his worth. The magnanimous man is “the best man of all,” and is “characterized by greatness in every virtue” (IV. iii. 1123b 28; 30). Due to his impeccable moral conduct, the magnanimous man is worthy of honor, which is the prize of virtue: “So magnanimity seems to be a sort of crown of virtues, because it enhances them and is never found apart from them. This makes it hard to be truly magnanimous, because it is impossible without all-round excellence” (1124a 37-39).

Next, Aristotle expounds upon the virtue of Patience and its opposing vices—irascibility and lack of spirit. These very different dispositions concern how we deal with feelings of anger. Arguing that certain events and circumstances merit an angry response, Aristotle explains that the patient man will only demonstrate anger in the right way—i.e. toward the right people, at the right moment, for the right reason, and for the right length of time. The patient man never becomes perturbed over insignificant matters, and does not allow his emotions to get the best of him; he also lacks a vengeful spirit, invariably opting to forgive others instead of harboring ill feelings against them. Although the

patient man cautiously monitors his anger, Aristotle clarifies that certain situations absolutely call for an angry or indignant response. If one fails to become angry about a severe injustice or flagitious wrongdoing, for example, then he is foolish, “deficient in perceptivity and sensitivity” or even servile, since he lacks the spirit to defend himself or others against insult or injustice (IV. iv. 1125b 25-35; v. 1126a 1-10).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, irascibility manifests itself in various degrees of offensiveness. All irascible people share the characteristic of becoming angry too quickly at the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Possessing no self-control, these people vent their anger openly and sometimes violently; once they have released their emotions, they feel better and drop the whole matter. Although their temper-tantrums can be hostile and even ferocious, their anger completely vanishes when the tantrum concludes. Aristotle distinguishes between irascibility and other types of anger that can potentially be more dangerous. As the name implies, hypercholeric people are exceedingly quick-tempered and become angry about anything for any reason. Their response to any given situation is impossible to predict, so others tend to be on edge around them—always wondering when the next anger-inducing moment will occur. Bitter men, on the contrary, suppress their anger for long periods of time—building resentment that is difficult to reconcile. For these people, Aristotle claims, the only possible relief is retaliation: “For revenge provides release from anger by substituting pleasure for pain. In default of this, they still labour under the weight of resentment; because owing to its concealment nobody helps to persuade the sufferer out of it, and it takes him time to digest his anger internally” (IV. v. 1126a 22-25). Therefore, although

every man is entitled to feelings of anger for the right reasons, Aristotle strongly censures both the deficiency (lack of spirit) and the various excesses associated with anger.

As an enthusiastic proponent of the virtues, Aristotle remains within character in his discussion of truth and falsehood regarding our daily speech and actions. The virtuous man, he explains, is “sincere both in his daily life and in his speech, acknowledging the qualities that he possesses and neither exaggerating nor depreciating them. [. . .] Such a person would seem to be a good type; for a lover of truth, who speaks it when nothing depends on it, will speak it all the more when something does depend on it” (IV. vi. 1127a 24-25; vii. 1127b 3-5). The corresponding vices regarding our daily pretensions include boastfulness and understatement, both of which Aristotle condemns. Although depreciating one’s own qualities can certainly be considered dishonest, however, Aristotle censures boastful men as having “worse character” than their self-deprecating counterparts, for their lies place them on an undeserved pedestal.

The final virtue I will discuss here concerns the art of conversation, a very important aspect of “the good life” in Aristotle’s Greek society. Proper social conduct and good taste mandate certain ways of speaking and listening, including knowing the right things to say and how to say them as well as knowing when we would be better served by listening. One who dismisses all decency of expression and cares only about making others laugh is, according to Aristotle, a buffoon. Such a vulgar individual “cannot resist a joke, sparing neither himself nor anybody else provided that he can raise a laugh, and saying things that a man of taste would never dream of saying, and some that he would not listen to, either” (IV. viii. 1128a 34-36). The boor, on the other hand, is completely humorless—neither attempting to be witty himself nor appreciating the humor

of others. Such a sour individual, according to Aristotle, “is useless for any kind of social intercourse, because he contributes nothing and takes offence at everything” (1128b 2-3). But the individual who exercises good taste regarding humor is witty (or nimble-witted) and should be commended, for this “intermediate disposition also has the property of tact, and the mark of tact is saying and listening to the sort of things that are suitable for a man of honourable and liberal character” (1128a 18-19). Clearly, relaxation, amusement, and good conversation are necessary in the Aristotelian conception of a happy life. The parameters between socially acceptable and socially objectionable behaviors, however, must always be strictly observed.

Throughout Aristotle’s discussion of the virtues and vices, he insists that “freedom of the will” is vital to virtue, for it holds within it both virtuous and vicious possibilities. “Courage, for instance, is only really worthy of the name when done from a love of honor and duty: munificence again becomes vulgarity when it is not exercised from a love of what is right and beautiful, but for displaying wealth” (“Aristotle”). As individuals, we are continually making choices that ultimately determine our moral character. And, although one bad or vicious choice does not automatically condemn us as “bad characters” (any more than one swallow makes a summer), the more we practice virtuous behavior by making morally sound choices, the faster we will achieve ultimate happiness.

Regardless of how many virtuous behaviors we practice and how many morally sound choices we make, however, only those of us who have friends can ever experience

the “good life.”¹⁰ As we learn in Books VIII and IX of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle feels strongly that friendship is indispensable to moral goodness because “friendship provides the ideal conditions for the successful pursuit of excellence” (Thunder). He drives directly to the heart of his position in Chapter 1 of Book VIII, as he substantiates the claim of the chapter title—“Friendship is necessary”:

Nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other good things. Indeed those who hold wealth and office and power are thought to stand in special need of friends; for what is the use of such prosperity to them if they are denied the opportunity for beneficence, which is most commonly and most commendably directed towards friends? Or how can their prosperity be guarded and preserved without friends? because the greater it is, the more precarious. In poverty too and all the other misfortunes of life people regard their friends as their only refuge. Friends are indeed a help both to the young, in keeping them from mistakes; and to the old, in caring for them and doing for them what through frailty they cannot do for themselves; and to those in the prime of life, by enabling them to carry out fine achievements. (1155a 5-15)

Clearly, Aristotle feels that friendship is necessary to all people, regardless of age or economic standing in the community. And the purpose of friendship, as we understand from the quote above, is quite simple: to help and to be helped; to engage in morally virtuous behaviors (i.e. young people caring for old people), and to accept morally

¹⁰ It is important to clarify here that Aristotle’s conception of friendship differs significantly from our modern conception, for Aristotle includes family members, business associates, and minor acquaintances in his definition of “friend.”

virtuous behaviors that are bestowed upon us (i.e. allowing friends to enable our successes). But not all friendships qualify as what Aristotle calls “complete” and therefore morally good or excellent friendships. He divides friendships into three distinct categories: those based on utility (engaging in a friendship only to seek some advantage from it), those based on pleasure (befriending someone who makes us laugh or flatters us), and those based on goodness—moral goodness, excellence. Only this third type of friendship is perfect, according to Aristotle:

For these people each alike wish good for the other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves. And it is those who desire the good of their friends for the friends’ sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he is, and not for any incidental quality. (VIII. iii. 1156b 8-12)

This reciprocal goodness—genuine, selfless love of other—solely qualifies as complete and therefore perfect friendship. The circumstances of these friendships are not changeable, and they are not motivated by short-term considerations; on the contrary, they are steadfast and enduring. Each friend wants what is best for the other, and each truly appreciates the other. This kind of friendship, Aristotle insists, “is perfect both in point of duration and in all other respects; and in it each party receives from the other benefits that are in all respects the same or similar, as ought to be the case between friends” (1156b 33-36). This complete and perfect brand of friendship constitutes Aristotle’s conception of “virtuous” friendship, for a true friend acts as our second self—offering us a “mirror” of good and moral actions. Such friendship, Aristotle maintains, which helps us to understand ourselves more completely and enjoy life more fully, is absolutely necessary for true happiness.

It is important to note that Aristotle's idea of friendship extends beyond mere individual relationships and into the political realm. In fact, he argues that an individual cannot live successfully if he is not an active, engaged member of the polis. As R.G. Mulgan states in *Aristotle's Political Theory*:

The polis can exist without the individual, but the individual cannot exist without the polis . . . If men are separated from the polis, they cease to be men in the same way as a hand ceases to be a hand if cut off from the body . . . the function of man, the realisation of his essence, lies in the achievement of the good life which cannot be lived except in the polis.

(14)

Evidently, then, a solitary man leading a solitary life will never achieve *eudaimonia*, for "It is [. . .] paradoxical to represent the man of perfect happiness as a solitary; for nobody would choose to have all the good things in the world by himself, because man is a social creature, and naturally constituted to live in company" (Aristotle IX. ix. 1169b 16-17). Man's very function in life is to live *well*, and this function cannot be performed without friends and full community engagement.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics held a prestigious position in Western philosophy as the dominant approach to understanding human moral action for well over two thousand years. During the nineteenth century, however, bold new systems of ethics such as Deontology and Utilitarianism dominated Western philosophical study, entirely deracinating Virtue as a feasible means for exploring morality. It wasn't until 1958, with the publication of Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy" that ethicists began

to re-examine Virtue as an effective method for understanding morality. In this seminal work, Anscombe

criticizes modern moral philosophy's pre-occupation with a law conception of ethics [. . .] that deals exclusively with obligation and duty. Among the theories she criticizes for their reliance on universally applicable principles are Mill's utilitarianism and Kant's deontology. These theories rely on rules of morality that were claimed to be applicable to any moral situation. [. . .] This approach to ethics relies on universal principles and results in a rigid moral code. Further, these rigid rules are based on a notion of obligation that is meaningless in modern, secular society because they make no sense without assuming the existence of a law-giver—an assumption we no longer make. (Athannassoulis "Virtue" 2)

In place of our law and duty-driven ethics, Anscombe argues for a return to Aristotelian emphasis on excellence, moral wisdom, and flourishing. At the time of its publication, Anscombe's paper enjoyed a tremendous critical reception by the philosophical community. Ethicists were beginning to recognize that the moral standards of the day—duty and consequence—alone simply did not provide the scope necessary for examining moral action. Despite positive scholarly reception of Anscombe's initial foray into virtue, however, the philosophical community at the time did not immediately take her lead, and a majority of the scholarly conversations in ethics continued to focus on Deontological and Consequentialist ideologies. In fact, academic interest in developing new principles regarding virtue and moral character has only occurred within the past twenty-five years.

Since approximately 1980, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has become a burgeoning field of philosophical specialization. We will examine some of the major theories in this relatively new school of ethics in Chapter Three.

Table of Virtues and Vices

Action or Feeling	Excess	Mean	Deficiency
fear and confidence	rashness <i>thrasutēs</i>	courage <i>andreia</i>	cowardice <i>deilia</i>
pleasure and pain	licentiousness <i>akolasia</i>	temperance <i>sōphrosunē</i>	insensibility <i>anaisthēsia</i>
getting and spending (minor)	prodigality <i>asōtia</i>	liberality <i>eletheriotēs</i>	illiberality <i>aneleutheria</i>
getting and spending (major)	vulgarity <i>apeirokalia</i> , <i>banausia</i>	magnificence <i>megaloprepeia</i>	pettiness <i>mikroprepeia</i>
honour and dishonour (major)	vanity <i>chaunotēs</i>	magnanimity <i>megalopsuchia</i>	pusillanimity <i>mikropsuchia</i>
honour and dishonour (minor)	ambition <i>philotimia</i>	proper ambition ...	unambitiousness <i>aphilotimia</i>
anger	irascibility <i>orgilotēs</i>	patience <i>praotēs</i>	lack of spirit <i>aorgēsia</i>
self-expression	boastfulness <i>alazoneia</i>	truthfulness <i>alētheia</i>	understatement <i>eirōneia</i>
conversation	buffoonery <i>bōmolochia</i>	wittiness <i>eutrapelia</i>	boorishness <i>agroikia</i>
social conduct	obsequiousness <i>areskeia</i>	friendliness <i>philia(?)</i>	cantankerousness <i>duskolia</i> (<i>duseris</i>)
indignation	envy <i>phthonos</i>	righteous indignation <i>nemesis</i>	malicious enjoyment <i>epichairekakia</i>

(Source: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics 285-6)

3 The New Aristotelians: 21st Century Virtue

In Chapter One, I presented a synopsis of some essential ideas in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Clearly, concepts of virtue assume a crucial role in Aristotle's conception of ethical behavior and moral character development. Despite the central role of the virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, the term "virtue ethics" is never specifically used by Aristotle. Certainly, Elizabeth Anscombe's 1958 essay "Modern Moral Philosophy" sparked twentieth-century philosophical interest in a return to virtue as a way of understanding moral behavior. Even her work, however, never makes specific reference to "virtue ethics." Instead, she calls for a return to a more Aristotelian approach to doing philosophy, suggesting that we look to "character, virtue, and flourishing" as important concepts in our examination of morality (Athanasoulis "Virtue"). In fact, "virtue ethics" as an acknowledged field of academic study is a relatively recent addition to the scholarly stage. It was not until the 1980's, by which time a significant number of philosophers had taken up Anscombe's call for a return to virtue, that "virtue ethics" as a field of philosophic specialization actually came to be.

If virtue ethics is a relatively new field of study, then, what ideas does it espouse and what theories does it advance? Part of the allure of contemporary virtue ethics is its infancy: it is still so new that the major theories and ideologies that will ultimately identify it in the future are still being hashed out by the scholars. The new virtue ethicists (neo-Aristotelians) have embraced an exciting and burgeoning area of specialization—one that changes, develops, and grows more solid and reputable with each new scholarly publication.

One conclusion about this flourishing subject area is certain, however: today's philosophers do not share the same ideas regarding the operation of virtue and moral action. Rosalind Hursthouse, for example, combines Kant's focus on human reason with Aristotle's insistence on *eudaimonia* as the ultimate human goal, arguing that acting virtuously is rational and invariably leads to *eudaimonia*. Philippa Foot, on the other hand, suggests that virtuous behavior should be used as a model for how we can improve the world, thus benefiting both the virtuous individual and the greater community. Michael Slote advances a radical departure from Aristotle's "Agent-Focused" virtue theory, arguing that moral judgments about the motives, attitudes, or inner life of an individual must be made before the virtue of an action itself can be evaluated. And Christine Swanton's pluralist perspective connects virtue theory with Nietzsche. These four scholars represent a small but important segment of the neo-Aristotelian population. It is worth noting that, despite the very recent establishment of this field, the sheer number of philosophers who have joined the virtue ethics conversation is quite daunting. I do not, therefore, attempt a comprehensive discussion of today's virtue ethicists. Instead, I dedicate this chapter to a sampling of esteemed critical theories—focusing especially on those that lend themselves to Shakespearian literary analysis.

Before I discuss specific theories of the neo-Aristotelian scholars, I believe it will be helpful to assess some important beliefs that today's virtue ethicists actually do share. In an article titled "Varieties of Virtue Ethics," Philosopher Justin Oakley outlines six commonly held views that he calls "positive features" of virtue ethics.¹¹ It is worth

¹¹ I am indebted to philosopher Justin Oakley for his clear and concise scholarship on this topic. This is an important article because, as he explains in the introduction, the resurgence of virtue ethics occurred in response to "dissatisfaction with standard Kantian and Utilitarian ethical theories"; therefore, the claims

reminding my reader here that a vast majority of contemporary virtue ethicists locate the essential roots of their theories in the teachings of Aristotle. The striking similarities between the claims that Oakley makes about today's virtue ethics and those advanced by Aristotle, therefore, should not be entirely surprising.¹² The first of these six claims is that "An action is right if and only if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances" (129). This first claim concerns "the primacy of character in the justification of right action" (129). In other words, an action can be considered right if it is in accordance with what a virtuous person would do under those particular circumstances. And the important part of this claim is that the action being considered is the action that a *virtuous person* would take. The focus is on the person's character, *not* on the specific action being taken or the result of the action. Philippa Foot offers an excellent example of this first claim: If a person possesses the virtue of justice, then s/he will always repay money s/he has borrowed. Even if s/he knows that the person to whom s/he owes the money will waste it on gambling or drugs, a virtuous person will nonetheless repay the money (Foot *Virtues* 44).

A second belief commonly held by virtue ethicists is that "Goodness is prior to rightness" (Oakley 138). This acknowledges a relationship between goodness and right action, but ascribes primacy to the notion of human goodness. According to this claim, we cannot determine which action is right in a particular situation until we have an account of "*human good*"—i.e., which human traits and characteristics are considered

made by virtue philosophers are usually stated "in negative form, and expressed in terms of an opposition to an 'ethics of principles' or [. . .] an 'ethics of action', etc. Unfortunately, this negative emphasis has resulted in virtue ethics becoming better known to many by what it is *against* rather than by what it is *for*" (Oakley 128-29).

¹² See chapter one of this dissertation for a synopsis of main ideas in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* .

estimable. Although this second claim seems to be implicit in the first claim, Oakley makes the statement explicitly in order to highlight the distinction between virtue-based character assessments and deontological character-based ethics. Deontologists hold that a good agent will take certain actions because those particular actions are in accordance with moral rules; and moral rules, by the same token, are consistent with practical rationality. Virtue ethics, by contrast, “derives its account of rightness and right action from prior aretaic notions of goodness and good character, which (in Aristotelian virtue ethics) are themselves grounded in an independent account of human flourishing that values our emotional as well as our rational capacities” (Oakley 139). Although virtue ethics certainly recognizes reason as an important guiding factor in our lives, then, it also acknowledges our emotions and our ultimate desire for “the good life” (*eudaimonia*) as key factors in how we live and how we develop our moral character.

A third claim of virtue ethics, according to Oakley, is that “The virtues are irreducibly plural intrinsic goods” (139). In order to comprehend the meaning of this claim, it is important to remember that virtue ethics holds certain traits of character (i.e., virtues) to be essential to human flourishing. Each of these virtues is important in a way that cannot be reduced to one single value. They are, in other words, intrinsically valuable as opposed to being valuable only as a means to some other objective. Those who possess the virtues appreciate and value them for their own sake.

The next claim—that “the virtues are objectively good”—clarifies the notion that the virtues are valuable in and of themselves, regardless of whether or not the agent desires them. A person may not necessarily want to be patient, for example, but the absence of desire does not detract from the objective value of the virtue. Likewise, if an

agent merely desires a virtue without actually acquiring it, s/he cannot be described as virtuous. A person who desperately wants to be perceived as courageous, in other words, will only be perceived as courageous if s/he actually exhibits that particular trait.

Claims five and six—that “some intrinsic goods are agent-relative” and that “acting rightly does not require that we maximize the good”—require little explanation. The former simply refers to the notion that a particular virtue *of mine* may give it additional moral importance *to me*. For example, suppose that I have established a very close friendship with Mary; our friendship is genuine and extremely important to me. Although I may have told a group of new friends at my workplace that I would attend their party on a given night, I am absolutely justified in cancelling that commitment if Mary develops a sudden problem that requires my attention and support. The virtue of friendship in this case is agent-relative: my friendship with Mary holds greater moral importance *to me* and cannot, therefore, be considered equal in value to that of my new friendships at my workplace. The final claim (“Acting rightly does not require that we maximize the good”) rejects the Consequentialist belief that right action should be determined by what would produce the most overall good. The entire idea of maximizing the good is patently neglected by virtue ethicists, who focus instead on the inherent quality or excellence of the virtues themselves. Referring to the example of friendship (above) then, a virtue ethicist would not feel a need to cultivate friendships with large numbers of people, even if a massive peer group could guarantee that s/he would win an election. On the contrary, a virtue ethicist would concentrate on developing *excellent* friendships, wherein quality (not quantity or consequence) matters.¹³

¹³ See chapter one, pp. 16-18 for an explanation of Aristotle’s conception of excellent friendship.

Now that we have examined the core philosophical beliefs that today's virtue ethicists seem to share, let us shift our focus to a much larger and more exciting subject—the multifariousness of their virtue theories. I begin with Rosalind Hursthouse, as she has been a staunch proponent of virtue ethics since its reintroduction as a viable philosophical approach to behavior examination. Hursthouse's scholarly contributions to this field are extensive and multifaceted; my interest in her scholarship, however, primarily concerns her work in defense of virtue ethics as a normative rival to the schools of deontology and consequentialism. The most pervasive objection to virtue as a normative ethical theory is its inability, according to its detractors, to actually “tell us what we should do [. . . since it is] concerned with Being rather than Doing, with good (and bad) character rather than right (and wrong) action, with the question ‘What sort of person should I be?’ rather than the question ‘What should I do?’ ” (Hursthouse “Virtue” 184-85). Although Hursthouse acknowledges virtue ethics as “being-centered,” she argues that it is no less action guiding than deontology or utilitarianism. Following the rules of deontology, for instance, one determines how one should act by adhering to moral rules. The premise specifying right action in this case would be: “An action is right if and only if it is in accordance with a correct moral rule or principle” (186). If one wishes to use utilitarianism as a guide for behavior, one must determine which action or course of action would result in the greatest good for the most people. The premise here would be: “An action is right if and only if it promotes the best consequences” (185). Clearly, however, neither of these first premises serves as a sufficient guide to behavior. Knowledge of the moral law is requisite for deontology to be action-guiding, so a second premise is necessary—one clarifying or outlining what constitutes a moral rule or principle. And, until one knows exactly what

constitutes the “best consequences,” one is offered no action guidance whatsoever from the school of consequentialism. For this theory to guide behavior, then, a second premise explaining that “best consequences are those in which happiness is maximized” is required.

In much the same fashion, Hursthouse argues, virtue ethics can guide right action. A first premise working toward such an objective might posit: “An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances” (187). In order to guide behavior, however, second and third premises-- clarifying what a virtuous agent is and possibly enumerating the virtues-- are probably necessary. Hursthouse suggests that once a person understands what the virtues are, what a virtuous agent is, and how that virtuous agent would characteristically act, that person can easily determine right action.

A second objection to virtue ethics is manifested in the “conflict problem.” Simply stated, the conflict problem arises when the requirements of different virtues point us in opposite directions. For example, “Charity prompts me to kill the person who would (truly) be better off dead, but justice forbids it. Honesty points to telling the hurtful truth, kindness and compassion to remaining silent or even lying” (192). Certainly, Hursthouse admits, this type of virtue conflict is problematic and often unavoidable. It would be blatantly untrue, however, to suggest that similar conflicts never arise in deontological or utilitarian systems of ethics. Proponents of utilitarianism often fail to achieve consensus regarding the meaning of and logical relationship between the two uses of “greatest” in their definitive rule (“the greatest good for the greatest number”), for example; and the various hard-line rules of deontologists also frequently clash: “ ‘Don’t

kill,' 'Respect autonomy,' 'Tell the truth,' 'Keep promises' may all conflict with 'Prevent suffering' or 'Do no harm' ” (192). Furthermore, according to Hursthouse, both deontology and virtue ethics employ the same strategy in resolving these purportedly conflicting edicts: they argue that the conflicts are merely *prima facie* and may easily be resolved by considering which moral rule or virtue takes precedence in each particular case. Deontologists, for instance, readily admit that certain moral rules outrank others and must be respected as the weightier rules when conflicts arise. Likewise in virtue ethics, if a particular truth is of great import, the moral necessity of telling the truth to the other outweighs the hurt feelings that the act of truth-telling may cause. Sometimes, Hursthouse acknowledges, an agent may still be unsure of how to resolve a conflict because he lacks certain moral knowledge of what to do in such difficult situations. According to virtue theory, this lack of moral knowledge “arises from a lack of moral wisdom, from an inadequate grasp of what is involved in acting *kindly* (or unkindly) or *charitably* (uncharitably), in being *honest*, or *just*, or *lacking in charity*, or, in general, of how the virtue (and vice) terms are to be correctly applied” (“Virtue” 193). This type of moral wisdom, according to Aristotle, is not generally found in people who are too young to have gained life experience, and it cannot be acquired simply by pursuing an education. Instead, some combination of accumulated knowledge and life experience allows an individual to attain moral wisdom. This in itself is viewed by some as problematic, for how can a moral theory be considered viable if it cannot be accessed by the very young or the uneducated? Hursthouse dismisses this objection, however, by arguing the necessity of a similar skill in moral differentiation for resolving deontological and utilitarian conflict as well.

In her text *On Virtue Ethics*, Hursthouse defends what she calls a “bold” thesis concerning moral motivation:

The perfectly virtuous agent, when she acts virtuously, from virtue, sets the standard for “moral motivation,” for acting “because one thinks it’s right,” “from duty,” etc., a standard against which we assess the extent to which the less than perfectly virtuous do the same. The more an agent’s character resembles that of the perfectly virtuous, the more he may be credited with “moral motivation” when he does what is V [virtuous] for X reasons. (141)

One direct result of this, according to Hursthouse, is that moral motivation can and does manifest itself in degrees rather than as an “all or nothing matter,” as many ethicists believe it to be. In other words, an agent will only be considered as acting from pure moral motivation when her character is sufficiently virtuous to justify such an assessment.

Following this logic, then, one can only act from moral motivation if her character can be said to be—to some degree—virtuous. The actions of a person whose character is thoroughly immoral, such as an extreme racist, member of a wicked cult, or Nazi can never be said to be morally motivated. Even if, say, this extreme racist does something that others view as very noble, courageous, generous, or self-sacrificial (i.e., boldly standing against a tyrant or giving a large amount of money to a charitable cause)—and even if this particular action is not uncharacteristic of the type of actions this person routinely engages in, she cannot, according to Hursthouse, be said to be morally motivated. Although this person may claim that she acted out of principle, because it was

the right thing to do, she cannot be said to have acted from moral motivation because morally motivated acts do not and cannot exist as isolated events. Instead, they must exist as part of the person's virtuous character. Since an extreme racist, Nazi, or member of an evil cult has essentially adopted wicked moral beliefs (he may be cruel, violent, hypocritical, intolerant, lacking any semblance of integrity, dishonest, etc.), his character is far from virtuous. Therefore, according to Hursthouse, his individual actions can never be judged as virtuous, and he cannot be said to have any virtues at all:

The Nazism or racism or religion (supposing them to be very bad) has poisoned their characters to such an extent that no character trait they have can count as [a virtue]. And this means that I would go back to the apparently splendid act and, denying that it was done from virtue to any extent at all (since the agent has none), deny that the agent acted "because she thought it was right" (or on principle, etc.). And this would allow me to say (what does not seem so far from the truth) that such people have no real idea of rightness or goodness in action, no moral principles, no real idea of moral duty, at all. They say they have, they think that they have, and they are just wrong, hopelessly corrupted by the wicked doctrines they have embraced and made their own. (*On Virtue* 147)

On this point, Hursthouse stands firmly. An agent's actions can only be viewed as morally motivated if that person can be judged (to some degree) as having a virtuous character. And, the more *perfectly* virtuous the person's character is, the more likely it will be that her actions are motivated by moral principles.

A self-professed devotee of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, Philippa Foot is generally credited as a leading scholar in the neo-Aristotelian movement. One of the founders of Oxfam, Foot feels strongly that ethics must achieve more than “dry theorizing” among scholars. Ethics, she argues, must explore how we can make the world a better place. Since virtuous action often benefits both the individual and the community in which one exhibits virtuous behavior, the virtues contribute to the good life, Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* (Athanasoulis “Virtue”). Like Hursthouse, however, Foot believes that our complex contemporary world problematizes how virtue is defined and often obfuscates the critical difference between virtuous action and intention.

As a first order of business, then, Foot sets out to offer a working definition of virtue, one comprised of several equally important parts. The first part of her definition speaks to the human necessity of the virtues: “Virtues are in general beneficial characteristics, and indeed ones that a human being needs to have, for his own sake and that of his fellows” (Foot 3). Some measure of courage, temperance, and wisdom, for example, certainly benefit the possessor; he is neither paralyzed by fear nor overwhelmed by desire, and he exercises good practical judgment when faced with difficult decisions. In the same way that the aforementioned virtues benefit the individual, virtues such as justice and charity directly concern the welfare of others. Although an individual’s charitable donation to a worthy cause may only benefit him by giving him a sense of self-satisfaction, for instance, the donation will certainly be of direct benefit to the recipient(s).

The second part of Foot’s definition of virtue concerns the will, for “it is the will that is good in a man of virtue [. . .] . It is primarily by his intentions that a man’s moral

dispositions are judged” (4). Foot refines her definition even further by adding “attitude” as a qualifying factor for virtue because, as she explains, the inclination of the heart is part of virtue. A person’s intention, or will, “covers what is wished for as well as what is sought” (5). Her definition in sum, then, incorporates three equally important aspects of virtue: that it is not only beneficial but also necessary, to the individual and society; that an individual’s will (or intention) is paramount; and that genuine desire must be inherently connected with the will.

After establishing her working definition of virtue, Foot turns her attention to a thesis with which Aristotle was concerned: that the virtues are “*corrective*, each one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good. As Aristotle put it, virtues are about what is difficult for men” (8). Temperance and Courage are considered virtues, for example, because desire for pleasure and the urge to run away from something often operate as temptations. Temperance is corrective in that it prevents us from immersing ourselves excessively in pleasure for its own sake; likewise, courage acts correctively in situations where we might want to run away or shirk responsibility instead of doing the right thing by standing firm and acting steadfastly. Foot explains that many of the virtues serve as curbs to temptation: humility is a virtue because people tend to develop large egos; industriousness is a virtue because people find it so easy to be lazy or idle; hope prevents people from succumbing to despair. Virtues such as charity and justice, on the other hand, serve as correctives to man’s lack of motivation. We tend to care much more deeply about our own individual rights, for example, than we do about the rights of others; and we care a good bit more about our own well-being than that of others.

Because human nature tends toward this type of selfishness, we require the motivation provided by the virtues of charity and justice to keep us on the right moral path.

Having established the virtues as corrective in nature, Foot tackles the great ethical controversy regarding the connection between difficulty and virtue. Is a man who finds it very difficult to act virtuously more or less virtuous than the man who finds it very easy to act well? According to Aristotle, the man who takes great pleasure in acting virtuously, the man who finds it easy to act morally, is truly the most virtuous type of person. The man who acts virtuously despite the fact that he finds it very difficult to do so, argues Aristotle, is only second best (Foot 10). The difficulty that the second man experiences in behaving morally demonstrates that he is imperfect in virtue. If his character were more virtuous, he would not only find it easy to behave well, but would actually find pleasure in doing so. On the other side of this debate, however, philosophers argue that the more difficulty a person experiences in acting virtuously, the more virtue s/he displays by acting well. In *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant suggests that only actions done out of a sense of *duty* have “positive moral worth.” He offers the example of two philanthropists; the first takes great pleasure in the happiness he provides to those around him with his generous donations and gifts, while the second acts only from what he perceives as his duty. Since he is a wealthy man, he believes that his moral duty must be to help relieve the suffering of those less fortunate than himself. Since he is acting from a sense of moral duty, this second philanthropist, according to Kant, is more virtuous than the first philanthropist, who may well be helping others, but whose primary motivation is the pleasure he derives

from his actions. For Kant, moral praise should only be bestowed when moral *effort* is exhibited.

Embracing neither Aristotle nor Kant entirely in this matter, Foot argues that each specific situation presents its own set of moral concerns, and that no blanket statement regarding virtue and difficulty can adequately speak to all situations. To illustrate, she offers the following example of honest action:

We may suppose [. . .] that a man has an opportunity to steal, in circumstances where stealing is not morally permissible, but that he refrains. And now let us ask our old question. For one man it is hard to refrain from stealing and for another man it is not; which shows the greater virtue in acting as he should? It is not difficult to see in this case that it makes all the difference whether the difficulty comes from circumstances, as that a man is poor, or that his theft is unlikely to be detected, or whether it comes from something that belongs to his own character. The fact that a man is *tempted* to steal is something about him that shows a certain lack of honesty: of the thoroughly honest man we say that it “never entered his head,” meaning that it was never a real possibility for him. But the fact that he is poor is something that makes the occasion more *tempting*, and difficulties of this kind make honest action all the more virtuous. (11)

In this illustration, Foot demonstrates that neither Aristotle’s nor Kant’s position will suffice. The man who is so thoroughly honest that stealing was never a consideration cannot be praised as more virtuous than the poor man who had to resist great temptation

in deciding not to steal. The first man acted in accordance with virtue, but virtue was not required for the performance of that action; the second man, however, acted in accordance with virtue—and that action (unlike the first man’s action) proves the possession of virtue.

Foot’s final thesis regarding virtue in action¹⁴ concerns another point of partial departure from Aristotelian theory. According to both Aristotle and Aquinas, virtues can produce only good actions; no one can make bad use of the virtues. Following this logic, then, courage could never be displayed in an act of villainy since only good and innocent actions can result from virtues. Foot disagrees to a certain extent, electing to side conditionally with the majority of her contemporaries who claim that the virtues can sometimes be displayed in bad or evil actions. Her position, however, exposes the claim (that the virtues can sometimes be displayed in bad actions) as an oversimplification. She readily admits that courage may certainly benefit a villain in his criminal behavior. But it is fallacious, she argues, to leave this matter in such an unexamined state. Using the example of a sordid murder, for example, a murder that is committed purely for personal gain or out of jealousy, she asks her reader to imagine that the murderer faces real danger in committing the murder. Although many modern philosophers would readily admit that the murderer displayed real courage in facing the danger and committing the murder, Foot suggests otherwise. Although he may have acted boldly or with intrepidity, and although his actions could not be described as cowardly, Foot argues that it is a *non sequitur* to say that an act of villainy can be courageous. She uses the following analogy to shed light on her position:

¹⁴ This is the final aspect of Foot’s theory with which I am particularly concerned in this dissertation. It is not, however, her final theory regarding virtue in general.

We might think of words such as “courage” as naming characteristics of human beings in respect of a certain power, as words such as “poison” and “solvent” and “corrosive” so name the properties of physical things. The power to which virtue-words are so related is the power of producing good action, and good desires. But just as poisons, solvents, and corrosives do not always operate characteristically, so it could be with the virtues. If P (say arsenic) is a poison, it does not follow that P acts as a poison wherever it is found. It is quite natural to say on occasion “P does not act as a poison here” though P is a poison and it is P that is acting here. Similarly courage is not operating as a virtue when the murderer turns his courage, which is a virtue, to bad ends. (16)

And so it becomes clear that, according to Foot, behaviors that we generally label as virtuous do not always operate as virtues. In distinguishing good actions from bad ones, we must examine the specific circumstances of the action in order to determine whether or not the particular action is operating as a virtue in each case.

Regardless of whether they are examining aspects of virtuous action, character, or motive, contemporary ethicists tend to hail back to Aristotle as the penultimate authority on virtue. University of Auckland Professor of Ethics Christine Swanton, however, steps away from this paradigm, introducing Nietzsche’s conception of virtue as a viable alternative to Aristotle. In her article “Outline of a Nietzschean Virtue Ethics,” she determines to answer two basic questions from a Nietzschean virtue perspective: 1.) What makes an action right? and 2.) What makes a trait of character a virtue? Before attempting to answer these questions, Swanton reminds us that, unlike Aristotle,

Nietzsche has a deeply pessimistic view of the human condition. As he suggests in his celebrated work *On the Genealogy of Morality*, sickness is the normal state of the human condition: “The more normal sickness becomes among men—and we cannot deny its normality—the higher should be the honor accorded the rare cases of great power of soul and body, man’s *lucky hits*” (Nietzsche qtd. in Swanton 29). We are, according to Nietzsche, very fragile beings with a predisposition to sickness: “For man is more sick, uncertain, changeable, indeterminate, than any other animal . . . he is *the* sick animal [. . .] the most imperiled, the most chronically and profoundly sick of all sick animals” (qtd. in Swanton 29). Quite unlike Aristotle, who believes that man’s very nature prepares him to be virtuous, Nietzsche insists that only those with “great power of soul and body” are constituted to receive the virtues. The rest of us feel inferior, impotent, discontented, and defeated. Naturally, such negative feelings give rise to self-loathing, which in turn leads to resentment and vengefulness.

Even Nietzsche’s exemplar of virtue—the man who somehow escapes the sickness and develops great power of soul and body—presents a pessimistic picture. In his *Genealogy of Morality* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche describes this ideal type not as one who is thriving and happy (*eudaimonistic*), but as a lonely and ultimately sad figure who cannot sustain healthy relationships with others. For this exemplar of virtue, “marriage is a calamity” and he usually follows “the path to unhappiness” due to his inability to get along as a normal member of society (Swanton 29). Furthermore, Nietzsche suggests, most of us should not aspire to become this “ideal type,” this paragon of virtue and strength, for we are—by our very nature—too enfeebled and weak to handle the wrongs and insults that are heaped upon the strong. A strong man can “shake off with

a single shrug many vermin that eat deep into others”); he can turn the other cheek to insults, saying “what are my parasites [and enemies] to me?” (qtd. in Swanton 30). The weak (i.e., “average”) man, however, is not equipped with the requisite strength of mind to shake off his detractors. He will therefore become angry and resentful of the masses; or, if he tries to turn the other cheek to insults, he will be trampled and crushed by the other weak and vengeful men. This explains why solitude, according to Nietzsche, is a virtue reserved for the strong. Only the truly virtuous can enjoy and appreciate the solitude that accompanies great strength of mind and spirit. Otherwise, as he argues in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, “it is loneliness: the escape of the sick as opposed to the escape from the sick” (qtd. in Swanton 30). The remedy as presented in *Zarathustra*, ch. 2, involves learning to love ourselves, for only when we learn to love ourselves will we be able to release our need to roam and finally appreciate our solitude.

With Nietzsche’s deeply pessimistic view of the human condition in mind, Swanton sets out to answer the two essential virtue questions stated previously. The first, as we recall, queries “What makes an action right?” For Nietzsche, the motive or origin of an action is the quintessential factor determining its value. Swanton clarifies the Nietzschean perspective as a “pure ethics of virtue, if by that is meant: the virtuousness of the motive is both a necessary and sufficient condition of the rightness of the action which flows from it” (31). Unlike Aristotle, whose consideration of motive in determining rightness of action is strictly conditional,¹⁵ Nietzsche isolates motive from all other factors. Swanton explains:

For Nietzsche, if the motivation of an altruistic act expresses self-hatred,

¹⁵ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that the motive for an action must be displayed under the right circumstances, at the right time, to the right people, and in the right way. Otherwise, the motive is not a viable consideration in the determination of right action.

and is therefore to be understood as expressing a deep motivation to escape into otherness, then the altruism displayed is disvaluable, even if lots of people are helped, the people helped are deserving, they are helped in ways which do not undermine their capacities for self-help, and so on and so forth. (31)

Here, Swanton clarifies an issue regarding Nietzsche's definition of the words *motive* and *origin*, for without clarification, one could easily misinterpret his position. Motive or Origin of action absolutely does not refer to an individual's *reason* for action; reasons, according to Nietzsche, tend to disguise deeper motivations that reveal a person's weaknesses, such as fear, neediness, and resentment. Reasons are merely the skin that a person dons to conceal his more deeply-rooted desires; these hidden desires are the real well-springs of his actions. As he explains in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "The decisive value of an action lies precisely in what is unintentional in it, while everything about it that can be seen, known, 'conscious' still belongs to its surface and skin—which, like every skin, betrays something but conceals even more" (qtd. in Swanton 32). The value, or rightness, of an action, then, can only be determined once the skin is pulled back and the deep desires revealed. An action can be "right" if and only if the desires at the heart of that action express some form of strength in the individual. Any action that betrays weakness as its ultimate source must be judged as disvaluable and lacking virtue.

Due to his pessimistic view of humanity and the world we inhabit, Nietzsche's response to question #2—What makes a trait of character a virtue?—also involves complex ontology. Swanton reminds us that Aristotelian theory addresses this question in a simple and direct manner: a trait of character is a virtue if it contributes to the personal

flourishing (*eudaimonia*) of the individual possessing it. Although Nietzsche's claim—that actions are right if the underlying motives reveal individual strength—seems to imply a philosophy that is *eudaimonistic*, Nietzsche actually demonstrates little concern for individual flourishing. Instead, the locus of concern for Nietzsche is society itself—and more particularly, society's slow but steady decline into mediocrity. Swanton summarizes Nietzsche's position on the crucial relationship between character traits, virtue, and a sick society:

It turns out that Nietzsche apparently admires traits which are arguably sick, such as narcissistic grandiosity. How can this be? The problem is the establishment of a virtue ethic for a very bad world. Patterns of behavior can exhibit both strength and weakness, and the combinations which are “virtuous” in *imperfect* worlds are those which, though not good bets for personal flourishing, may express or promote values which in our *actual* world are more important. Though in utopia, eudaimonism would be our virtue ethic, in actual bad worlds we need our virtue ethics to be driven by another value: the escape from mediocrity. Until society can be freed of the values of mediocrity, there is no hope for eudaimonia for most of us. In the actual world, most of us are sick with little prospect of full health, since there are too many sick people about from whom we haven't been able to insulate ourselves. (33)

In our sick world, therefore, we are beset with weaknesses that contribute to societal decline and degeneration. Through genuine strength of soul and body, an individual can endeavor to escape the terror of mediocrity. Since most of us are already too sick, weak,

or enfeebled to develop such strength, however, we can only hope that our weaknesses produce creative vigor. For Nietzsche, certain weaknesses can be tolerated more than others. The type of grandiose narcissism exhibited by Zarathustra, for example, is a weakness because it demonstrates a lack of self-knowledge; Zarathustra reached beyond his abilities and actual strength, and so failed. This weakness can also be interpreted as defiance, however, because Zarathustra refused to accept his human shortcomings; in this sense, “that weakness also exhibits strength as defiance and can be seen as a virtue in our actual world since it speaks [. . .] eloquently to the non-display of, and the halting of a slide into decadence” (34). For Nietzsche, then, a trait of character can only be a virtue if it displays some form of strength and works actively against society’s descent into mediocrity.

Like Nietzsche, neo-Aristotelian philosopher Michael Slote (University of Aukland) is also concerned with an agent’s motivation for moral action. His theory, however, hails back to Aristotle in a fascinating reformulation of Aristotle’s ethics which he calls “Agent-Based” virtue ethics. In order to understand his theory of agent-basing, we must first understand the points he makes regarding *agent-focused* and *act-focused* virtue. Since the virtues that Aristotle discusses in *Nicomachean Ethics* focus on the “inner traits and character of the virtuous individual” more than on what makes particular actions good or meritorious, the Aristotelian approach is, according to Slote, “agent-focused” rather than “act-focused” (Slote *Morals* 178). Regardless of Aristotle’s focus on the agent, however, his view is often interpreted as what Slote calls “act-based” because the moral rightness of particular *actions* is not dependent upon the motives or character of the agent. Instead, the virtuous individual is simply to be understood as intelligent and

sensitive enough to agnize the right and virtuous path in each circumstance without relying on specific moral rules. But Slote argues that moral action cannot be perceived as independent of the agent or her motives. Instead, he promotes what he calls a “radical” approach to understanding virtue:

A more radical kind of virtue ethics would say that the ethical character of actions is not thus independent of how and why and by whom the actions are done. Rather, what is independent and fundamental is our understanding and evaluation of human motives and habits; and the evaluation of actions is entirely derivative from and dependent on what we have to say ethically about (the inner life of) the agents who perform these actions. The more radical kind of virtue ethics is thus *agent-based*, not merely, like Aristotle’s views [. . .] agent-focused. (Slote *Morals* 178)

In essence, then, the *inner life* of the person performing the actions—not merely the overall virtuousness of the person’s character but, more importantly, that person’s particular *motives* for action—are central to a genuine understanding of that person’s morality. We must, in other words, tie action to character; we cannot do so, however, without first examining the agent’s motivations and acknowledging that action is entirely derived from the ethical assessment we can make about the agent’s inner life and motivation. The primacy of virtue in agent-based ethical theory, according to Slote, differentiates it from other ethical theories: “Many philosophers distinguish ethical theories by which of the main ethical concepts—the good, the right, and virtue—they make explanatorily primary, and only agent-based forms of virtue ethics *do* treat virtue (claims/ facts about what is admirable or morally good in people) as explanatorily

primary” (Slote *Morals* 7). Although virtue also holds a position of primacy in Aristotle’s theory, it is the overall virtue of the sensitive and intelligent agent that matters, not the motivation guiding the actions of the agent.

Slote further develops his agent-basing in what he classifies as “warm” theories because they emphasize compassion (or, more generally speaking, benevolence) as the highest secular motive. Influenced primarily by British moral sentimentalism, these warm views “build altruistic human concern explicitly into their aretaic foundations” (Slote *Morals* 20). According to Slote, a warm agent-based theory of ethics can be grounded in two different forms of benevolence: morality as universal benevolence and morality as caring. Essentially, Slote argues, an action can only be considered morally acceptable if it is motivated by good or virtuous intentions involving a sense of benevolence or caring about others, “or at least doesn’t come from bad or inferior motivation involving malice or indifference to humanity” (38). He clarifies an important distinction here, in that the motivation to act must be judged as entirely separate from any set of established rules or expected consequences concerning the action:

The emphasis on motivation will then be fundamental if the theory claims that certain forms of overall motivation are, intuitively, morally good and approvable in themselves and apart from their consequences or the possibility of grounding them in certain rules or principles. Every ethical theory has to start somewhere, and an agent-based morality will want to say that the moral goodness of (universal) benevolence or of caring about people is intuitively obvious and in need of no further moral grounding.

(38)

Desired or anticipated results of a particular motive are clearly irrelevant in Slote's agent-based theory. Motives are judged solely on "how well they approximate to the motive of universal benevolence, which is the highest and best of motives" (Athanasoulis "*Morals*").

After benevolence, Slote ranks the motive of care as essential in determining the morality of actions. Like benevolence, which must be universal and objective (as opposed to specifically directed only toward those we hold dear), we must demonstrate our love and care for all of humanity, not just those who are close to us. Implicit in this concept of virtue is also a care and concern for oneself. Anticipating the obvious criticism that we cannot be expected to love and care for all of humanity in the same way and to the same degree, however, Slote suggests a view that emphasizes a balance between "intimate caring (our concern for near and dear) and humanitarian caring (our concern for people in general)" (Slote *Morals* 66). Imagine a father who has two children in their twenties, Slote asserts. One of the children is healthy, successful, and independent, while the other is physically disabled and dependent. If he genuinely loves both children, the father will care for and pay attention to both children. However, if the disabled child requires more attention and financial resources in order to survive, and the independent child harbors no resentment toward the father, then it is natural for the father to dedicate more time, money, and attention to the child who needs it. In other words, the father will not do what will produce the most overall good for *both* children (i.e., their "aggregate well-being") because the disabled child simply requires more of the father's time and attention. A virtuous father, according to Slote, will intuitively recognize his disabled child's needs and act accordingly. This does not imply, however, that the virtuous father will never

spend time helping and caring for the healthy, independent child. Even if the disabled child clearly requires more attention and help, a virtuous father who truly loves both children will help and pay attention to the independent child at least some of the time despite the reality that the disabled child would benefit more from the father's undivided attention. A virtuous agent, in Slote's estimation, will strike a similar balance between intimate caring for those who are closest to him/ her and humanitarian caring for all people.

As Slote indicates in chapter seven of *Morals from Motives*, one important concern is glaringly absent from his agent-based theory of ethics as it stands thus far: the idea of self-interest or self-concern. Self-interest, Slote argues, is actually required by practical reason and serves as the foundation for all moral motivation. A lack of self-interest is, in other words, irrational, and we cannot hope to act from motives of benevolence or caring for others if we do not possess concern for ourselves. In this sense, the motive of care for others is directly derived from the motive of self-interest. To explicate, Slote clarifies his conception of self-interest as rooted in Aristotle's theory of *Eudaimonia*, or the good life. Like Aristotle, Slote believes that all people ultimately wish to be happy. However, we can only achieve ultimate happiness if we appreciate love and friendship as two of life's great gifts; without them, we cannot possibly experience true personal fulfillment. Assuming, then, that the love of friends is a requirement for happiness, Slote asserts that without the love of friends, we will naturally develop a sense of dysphoria. When we experience such feelings of joylessness, we will not be interested in helping others, and our actions will not likely be based on ideas of universal benevolence or care. By contrast, Slote explains, "The person who wants/seeks a good,

rich, full life for herself may also want/seek to be of substantial help to intimates and other people generally in *their* lives, and for our remaining purposes, I shall assume that *at least* this degree of self-concern is an agent-based requirement of practical reason” (184). In an effort to counter potential objections regarding the self-centeredness of such a theory (one that derives the motive of concern for others entirely from the motive of self-interest), Slote warns that “one’s concern for near and dear [should] not be *dwarfed* by (typical, strong) self-concern, or, to put things slightly differently, the person’s concern for friends and loved ones should motivationally *counterbalance* her concern for her own interests (as well as her humanitarianism)” (186). Again, the proper balancing of concern—between ourselves, our loved ones, and our extended community—(an ability that most adult rational beings intuitively possess) stands as a critical component of Slote’s theory.

It is easy to see how concern for oneself and others fits into a contemporary version of virtue ideology. We cannot develop genuine friendships, after all, if we have no concern or regard for others. And without real friendship, Aristotle reminds us, we are incapable of achieving the good life to which we all aspire. From this fundamental Aristotelian theory, however, arises yet another neo-Aristotelian theory that has been garnering a fair amount of recent critical attention. This new theory, commonly known as the “Ethics of Care,” boasts eminent philosophers such as Nel Noddings, Annette Baier, Michael Slote, and Virginia Held.¹⁶ The idea that inspired the concept of “care” as a

¹⁶ In their most recent books, Slote (*The Ethics of Care and Empathy*--2007) and Held (*The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*--2006) develop independent philosophies suggesting that the Ethics of Care should be understood and accepted as a stand-alone normative theory as opposed to a branch of virtue ethics. Since discussions of care ethics *originated* within the context of virtue ethics and since scholarly challenges to these claims have not yet been articulated, however, I have elected to treat care ethics as a development within the scholarly arena of virtue.

method of examining and assessing moral behavior, however, finds its origins *not* in philosophy but in the critically acclaimed work of psychologist Carol Gilligan. First published in 1982, Gilligan's seminal book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* articulates her theory that men and women understand, approach, and treat moral problems differently. Written in response to Kohlberg's theory on the various stages of children's moral development, which claims that boys generally achieve a higher level of moral development than girls do, Gilligan sets forth an extensive criticism of Kohlberg's study methodology and assessment tools. One of her main arguments concerns Kohlberg's scoring method, which Gilligan insists favors principle-based reasoning over relation-based reasoning. Kohlberg concludes that boys achieve higher moral development than girls; but Gilligan argues that the study is faulty since boys commonly concentrate on principles and girls on relations in the moral decision-making process. Women, she argues, "tend to think of moral issues in terms of emotionally involved caring for others and connection *to* others, whereas most men see things in terms of autonomy *from* others and the just and rational application of rules or principles to problem situations" (Slote *Ethics of Care* 1). Gilligan's work incited a firestorm of critical debate in psychology, sociology, and education theory that continues today. It also provided a scholarly context and fertile ground for the ontogenesis of contemporary philosophical theories on the ethics of care.

An esteemed philosopher and educational theorist, Nel Noddings (Ph.D. Stanford, 1975) has produced ground-breaking research in the ethics of care and its relationship to education, social welfare, and family life. In her first book, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), Noddings advances a view of ethics

that she terms “feminine in the deep classical sense—rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” as opposed to the more masculine principles of ethics such as “justification, fairness, and equity” (1). The voice of the mother, Noddings argues, the voice of “human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for, which [. . .] form the foundation of ethical response” has been, to a large extent, silent. Noddings argues that the real source, the very foundation of all ethical behavior is located in the “human affective response” (3). This view in no way suggests that the study of ethics should be maudlin, or that all consideration of logic should be abandoned during the process of moral reasoning. By advancing a view that for women, moral action begins with a longing for goodness, however, Noddings clearly departs from conventional masculine principles of ethics.

In her exhaustive analysis of care ethics, Noddings identifies the universal feminine—the “she”—as the “one-caring” and the universal masculine—the “he”—as the “cared-for.” This generic labeling does not indicate, however, that the one-caring is always the female and the cared-for always the male. On the contrary, Noddings explains:

When actual persons are substituted for “one-caring” and “cared-for” in the basic relation, they may be both male, both female, female-male, or male-female. Taking *relation* as ontologically basic simply means that we recognize human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence. (4)

Clearly, Noddings' theory posits "relation" as central to the ethic since *care*, as she views it, must be reciprocal in nature. The one-caring and the cared-for, in other words, must meet one another morally if the relationship is genuinely to be considered a caring one. When we engage in a relationship of ethical caring, Noddings suggests, the ethical aspect of care arises naturally out of love or the inclination of one-caring toward cared-for. Noddings identifies this purely human relation of caring as "the human condition that we, consciously or unconsciously, perceive as 'good.' It is that condition toward which we long and strive, and it is our longing and caring—to be in that special relation—that provides the motivation for us to be moral. We want to be moral in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring" (5). Clearly, the recognition of and desire for relatedness constitutes the heart of care ethics. This ideology differs significantly from purely logic-based theories of ethics that place the locus of value in the action or duty of an independent agent.

Philosophers certainly acknowledge the essentiality of desire for relatedness in care ethics; however, it alone does not provide the substance necessary for developing a successful ethic of care. On the contrary, care ethics requires that the one-caring be fully engaged in the relationship—fully *present* in her commitment to the cared-for. French existentialist Gabriel Marcel describes such presence in a relationship as "disposability (*disponibilité*), the readiness to bestow and spend oneself and make oneself available" (qtd. in Noddings 19). In such a relationship, the one-caring need not spend every moment with the cared-for:

Acts at a distance bear the sign of presence: engrossment in the other, regard, desire for the other's well-being. Caring is largely reactive and responsive.

Perhaps it is even better characterized as receptive. The one-caring is sufficiently engrossed in the other to listen to him and to take pleasure or pain in what he recounts” (Noddings 19).

Human beings possess an inherent ability to perceive when others are not *wholly present* (indisposible). When this occurs, the cared-for naturally feels unimportant and perhaps even non-existent. A long-distance “one-caring,” therefore, may quite plausibly provide much more effective care than someone who is physically present but emotionally unengaged.

The idea of “full presence” as explicated in the previous paragraph presents an excellent platform for the analysis of *genuine regard* in care ethics. In this sense, we again see how care as a feminine aspect of ethics distinguishes itself from deontological and consequentialist theories. Since there are no rigidly established rules to be followed in care ethics, the one-caring must *genuinely* care. In other words, the specific actions of one-caring—uncontrolled by fixed rule— will be various and might change from day to day. One-caring’s entire approach to care, in fact, must be tailored to a particular person (cared-for) in a concrete situation (Noddings 24). Behaviors that might please one person may actually irritate or anger another. And actions that might satisfy the cared-for under certain conditions might nettle him under different conditions. In order for care to succeed, then, the one-caring must constantly analyze specific situations—including the general disposition of the cared-for—and make careful, judicious decisions regarding which action (if any) to take. Despite the multifariousness of actions chosen by one-caring, however, her actions on a global level will be entirely predictable; if she genuinely cares, she will consistently act in a way that demonstrates her concern for the

other. Clearly, Noddings is moving away from the notion of objective morality (i.e., morality based on logical, rational, rule or consequence-based decision making) and toward the very personal heart of care: “the conviction that an irremovable subjective core, a longing for goodness, provides what universality and stability there is in what it means to be moral” (Noddings 27).

The longing for goodness in care ethics relates specifically to the concept of empathy, a term that, according to Noddings, has lost its real meaning in our rational western society. Noddings reminds us that the notion of empathy simply means “feeling with” another person; and this act is receptive in that I “receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other” (30). She argues that our contemporary understanding of empathy denotes a masculine *projection* of self into other instead of a more feminine reception of other into self. This notion of empathy as projection even finds confirmation in the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*: **empathy**—“The power of projecting one’s personality into, and so fully understanding, the object of contemplation” (qtd. in Noddings 30). Such a definition promotes the use of clichés such as “walking a mile in someone else’s shoes” to convey empathy, for I am projecting myself into another’s position and then examining the situation in order to understand. On the contrary, Noddings insists, real empathy requires no analysis or projection, only receptivity and feeling.

Michael Slote concurs that empathy should be a matter of reception rather than projection. Slote posits that empathy “involves having the feelings of another (involuntarily) aroused in ourselves, as when we see another person in pain. It is as if their pain invades us; there is a contagion between what one person feels and what

another comes to feel” (Slote *Ethics* 13). Furthermore, Slote insists that a direct connection exists between empathy and altruistic behavior. Someone who is in distress, in other words, has a much greater chance of receiving help from a person (even a complete stranger) who feels empathic distress when faced with the pain of others (14). Where one person might walk away, removing himself from the other person’s pain or distress, the empathic person will in all likelihood act altruistically toward the one in distress. Genuine caring, then, is empathic caring, according to Slote. And it is this type of empathic caring that offers us a plausible standard of moral assessment.

As previously mentioned, care ethics requires some degree of reciprocity. One-caring, in other words, must be met somewhere on the pathway by cared-for or the relation will break down. If cared-for never acknowledges the work done or time spent on his behalf, one-caring may begin to feel unappreciated and consequently less motivated to continue in her capacity as one-caring. At this point, she will generally embark upon one of two different courses of action: she will either stop caring entirely, or she will continue to care. Each of these options is accompanied by its own set of problematic circumstances. If the one-caring becomes completely disgusted by the other’s lack of appreciation, she may quite simply stop caring. Naturally, cared-for will notice the change in one-caring, and will most likely state the obvious: “You don’t care anymore!” Although we may think that such an accusation would not bother one-caring (since she, in fact, has stopped caring), psychologist Paul Tillich disagrees. Instead, he argues, such an accusation strikes one-caring with guilt. Despite rational attempts at justification (i.e. “He does not appreciate my efforts”; “He has never said thank you or attempted to reciprocate my kindness in any way” etc.), one-caring will begin to feel a deep sense

of guilt about her attitude shift. She did, after all, *want* to continue caring; she has merely found it impossible to do so. Tillich describes guilt as ontological:

It transcends the subjective and objective. It is a constant threat in caring. In caring, I am turned both outward (toward the other) and inward (my engrossment may be reflected upon); when caring fails, I feel its loss. I want to care, but I do not. I feel as though I ought to behave as though I care, but I do not want to do this. (qtd. in Noddings 38)

Once cared-for acknowledges her feelings of guilt, she can then determine an appropriate course of action (or inaction) to alleviate or learn to live with it.

But what happens when one-caring still *genuinely cares* despite cared-for's total lack of recognition, appreciation, or reciprocity in the relationship? The maintenance of care by one-caring under these circumstances becomes challenging in the extreme. Naturally, we want to be appreciated by those to whom we dedicate our care. As long as cared-for does not have a medical condition that completely prevents him from reciprocating,¹⁷ we expect some recognition of our efforts by cared-for. Even infants respond to their caregivers' love by looking into their eyes and smiling or giggling. This is enough reciprocity for one-caring, whose efforts at making the baby happy are so obviously satisfied. As we know, however, adults often surprise us with behaviors that we find difficult to explain or accept. One such behavior concerns cared-for's refusal, for whatever reason, to reciprocate or even acknowledge the efforts made in his behalf by

¹⁷ Noddings does not include the extremely mentally challenged or those suffering from incapacitating illness in her discussion of reciprocity. Obviously, these persons are less capable of engaging in (or sometimes even responding to) care relations.

one-caring. This is where the ethics of care shows its teeth, demonstrating that it is far from an insubstantial theory with no real power to guide our moral behavior. When cared-for declines to meet one-caring somewhere on the path, one-caring can either stop caring (as discussed above), or continue to care in a real and genuine fashion. The latter course of action—and it *is* action, as one-caring initiates and sustains effort in cared-for's behalf—is not for the faint of heart. Continuing a course of care for someone who does not appreciate it or even spurns it takes stamina and fortitude. The work required in this level of caring is taxing not only physically but also emotionally, as one-caring must persist in her care despite indifference or rejection by the cared-for.

A similar situation arises when conflict exists between what one perceives to be best for another and what that particular person desires; what the cared-for wants, in other words, and what one-caring sees as in his best interest. In care ethics, as we know, there is no law or governing principle guiding decision-making. “If I behave consistently and automatically by rule,” Noddings states, “I cannot be said to care. My interest instead seems to be focused on obtaining credit for caring. I want to be considered a “polite” person” (51). Conflict resolution in care ethics, then, must always involve analysis—of the particular situation, the individual person, and the specific nature of the conflict in question. We must remember that ethical caring stems from natural caring—what Noddings calls love or natural inclination. When conflict arises, then, Noddings suggests that we do not need overarching principles to guide our behavior. More effectively, she says, “We turn to our memories of caring and being cared for and a picture or ideal of ourselves as carers. [. . .] Ethical caring's great contribution is to guide action long enough for natural caring to be restored and for people once again to interact with mutual

and spontaneous regard” (187). We (consciously or unconsciously) perceive caring relations as “good”; and since we inherently have a desire or longing to be in such a special caring relation, we are motivated to be moral.

In this chapter, I have offered a summary and explanation of compelling neo-Aristotelian scholarly theories. I do not suggest for a moment that this chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of contemporary virtue theory, or that my discussion represents the philosophy of any particular scholar in its entirety. On the contrary, I have included only the theories that I believe will offer the most valuable insights into my examination of Shakespeare’s tragedies through a neo-Aristotelian lens. And so, to that end, the next chapter analyzes the various ways that contemporary virtue ethics theory may influence a reading of Shakespeare’s great tragedy of deception, revenge, and lost love—*Othello*.

4 *Othello*: “Chaos is come”

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian examinations of Shakespeare’s *Othello* offer viable and entirely new ways for us to read and understand three of the play’s main characters, Othello, Iago, and Emilia. First, I plan to reevaluate the title character, Othello, offering an analysis that calls into question the common interpretation of Othello as a sympathetic character. In order to do this, I will examine his actions and behaviors through an Aristotelian ethical lens. Next, I will analyze Iago’s motives and character from a neo-Aristotelian perspective, employing arguments by Swanton and Nietzsche concerning the important connection between motive and inner character. Here, I will offer justification for my argument that Iago is a classic example of Nietzsche’s “sick animal.” And finally, I will explore Emilia’s behaviors and character by employing neo-Aristotelian philosopher Michael Slote’s Agent-Based ethical theory. In this section, I will suggest that only this type of neo-Aristotelian reading of Emilia’s character sufficiently addresses the various complexities and seeming contradictions between her actions, motives, desires, and overall virtue.

The character of Othello has always intrigued me because of how sympathetically he seems to be portrayed by Shakespeare. Despite the very real fact that he murders Desdemona in cold blood, readers traditionally feel great pity for Othello. The victim of Iago’s evil machinations, Othello kills Desdemona in order to preserve his honor. Far from being an act of malicious vengeance, however, the very thought of murdering Desdemona causes Othello dire emotional pain; his feelings of ambivalence toward her and “the cause” he feels he must defend create tremendous inner conflict for him. Consider his angst as he approaches the sleeping Desdemona, knowing that he has come

to murder her: “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars, / It is the cause. Yet I’ll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster. / Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men. / [. . .] / [He kisses her.] O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade / Justice to break her sword”¹⁸ (V. i. 1-6; 16-17). Only a completely callous reader could fail to be moved by the pathos of this scene. We feel pity for Othello because we like him and know that he has been maliciously misled by Iago. Thoroughly convinced that he has been cuckolded by Desdemona and his first lieutenant, Othello feels that he must murder Desdemona in order to preserve his honor. And despite the trauma that we experience upon witnessing the rash and unjust murder of the innocent Desdemona, Othello remains a sympathetic figure. We do not judge Othello as malevolent or depraved; instead, we view him as witless and gullible—in the words of Emilia, a “dull Moor,” a “dolt, as ignorant as dirt” (V ii. 163; 188). As a mere dupe of Iago’s, Othello wins our sympathy. We know that his grief upon realizing his enormous folly is genuine; we believe his self-characterization as “one whose subdued eyes, / Albeit unused to the melting mood, / Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their med’cinable gum” (V ii. 347-50). There is no question that audiences assess Othello’s character as fully human, significantly flawed, and thoroughly likeable. An examination of this widely sympathetic character through the lens of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, reveals a man who completely lacks important moral and intellectual virtues and seems to possess no sense of moderation (i.e. the Golden Mean). Is this a character deserving of our loyalty and sympathy? I argue that Aristotle would answer definitively no.

¹⁸ All Shakespearian quotations are taken from *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*. Ed Sylvan Barnet. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

Let us begin with Aristotle's moral virtues, several of which Othello decidedly lacks. We learn in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the moral virtue Patience must be understood as an intermediate state between irascibility and lack of spirit:

The man who gets angry at the right things and with the right people, and also in the right way and at the right time and for the right length of time, is commended; so this person will be patient, inasmuch as patience is commendable, because a patient person tends to be unperturbed and not carried away by his feelings, but indignant only in the way and on the grounds and for the length of time that his principle prescribes [. . .] The patient man is not revengeful; he is more inclined to be forgiving. (v. 1125b 31-37)

Now let us examine Othello's temperament through the Nicomachean virtue lens. When we initially meet Othello, he is calm, rational, and unflappable—despite the fact that he has just secretly married Senator Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona. These qualities are essential to Othello's effectiveness as a general in the Venetian army, especially now that they are at war with the Ottoman Turks. Just moments after exchanging vows with Desdemona, Othello is called to the Duke's palace to discuss military strategy against the advance of the Turkish fleet. As soon as he arrives, however, Brabantio launches a verbal attack against Othello, laden with hostile accusations that Othello stole his daughter and practiced black magic upon her. Answering the barrage against him with equanimity, Othello explains that he "won" Brabantio's daughter with tales of his battles and dangerous travels in exotic lands, and suggests that they call upon her to speak for herself. Far from irascible, Othello counters Brabantio's hysteria with composure and

presence of mind. As readers, we admire his placid temperament and respect his ability to maintain control of a potentially volatile situation. It is important to note, however, that Othello's case is aided by Venetian law and protocol. Upon hearing the accusations against Othello, the Duke immediately calls upon the alleged victim, Desdemona, to provide evidence in the form of testimony. When she assures the senate that her love for Othello is genuine, the entire case against him is abruptly dismissed. As John Gronbeck-Tedesco suggests in "Morality, Ethics, and the Failure of Love in Shakespeare's *Othello*," "In the body of the Senate, moral principle and procedural ethics drive a wedge between what Brabantio wants and what he wills" (261). He *wants* Othello to be arrested for stealing his daughter and practicing black magic on her. As a member of the Senate, however, he knows that he must accept the evidence provided by Desdemona and accede to the decision of the ruling body. Thus, Othello is given the benefit of a fair and rational legal system; and it is precisely this system that allows Othello to respond to Brabantio's hysteria with patience and reason.

Despite his seemingly patient and rational persona, however, we soon begin to realize that Othello lacks both the education and the moral fortitude to withstand Iago's vicious entrapment. He is, as we recall, a Moor—an outsider to Venetian culture and education—who has spent most of his life as a soldier, fighting battles against Turks, barbarians, and savages. He has had the benefit of neither formal education in the arts and philosophy, which would have enabled him to develop sufficient intellectual virtue, nor the leisure time necessary to establish and practice good moral habits. In Book II of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states:

Virtue, then, is of two kinds, intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtue

owes both its inception and its growth chiefly to instruction, and for this very reason needs time and experience. Moral goodness, on the other hand, is the result of habit, from which it has actually got its name, being a slight modification of the word *ethos*. This fact makes it obvious that none of the moral virtues is engendered in us by nature, since nothing that is what it is by nature can be made to behave differently by habituation. For instance, a stone, which has a natural tendency downwards, cannot be habituated to rise, however often you try to train it by throwing it into the air; nor can you train fire to burn downwards; nor can anything else that has any other natural tendency be trained to depart from it. The moral virtues, then, are engendered in us neither *by* nor *contrary to* nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit. (i. 1103a 14-26)

Early in the play, Othello reminds us of his status as an outsider to Venetian manners and education: “Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace, / For since these arms of mine had seven years’ pith / Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used / Their dearest action in the tented field; / And little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broils and battle; / And therefore little shall I grace my cause / In speaking for myself” (I. iii. 81-89). Clearly, Othello has not been polishing his language skills, contemplating great works of art and literature, or developing mathematical theorems. Instead, he has been leading a life of excitement and adventure beyond the outer limits of civilization. We learn more about these escapades when Othello explains to the Duke how he began his courtship of Desdemona. Senator

Brabantio had often encouraged Othello to share the stories of his exciting life in the fields of battle: “Of hairbreadth scapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach, / Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence / And portance in my travel’s history, / [. . .] / And of the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Grew beneath their shoulders” (I. iii. 135-38; 42-44).

Desdemona’s unabashed interest in these stories served as the catalyst for their relationship. Othello is neither a polished intellectual nor a member of high society. Although he has won the love of a senator’s daughter, he possesses neither the education nor the culture necessary to understand the sophisticated world she inhabits. He is therefore unprepared both morally and intellectually to escape Iago’s cunning and malicious trammel.

From an Aristotelian moral perspective, Othello’s behavior in Acts III - V can be classified as excessive (and therefore lacking virtue) in two major spheres of action or feeling: rashness and irascibility. Since we have already begun our discussion of Othello’s “seeming” patience, we will begin there. The patient and rational Othello of Act I—surrounded by reasonable people (with the notable exception of Brabantio) who respect and abide by the Venetian law—descends quickly and irrevocably into a jealousy-induced madness in Acts III through V.

Othello’s initial lapse in patience occurs on his first night in Cyprus, after he is called by the alarm bell to quell Cassio’s bibulous assault on Governor Montano. Although he had been given a fair chance to explain his own actions to the Senate in Venice, Othello now has little interest in learning more than “How this foul rout began, who set it on” (II. iii. 207). Eager to get back to bed, where his new bride awaits his

return, Othello investigates the situation only enough to know that Cassio instigated the violence. Iago's report of events is entirely sufficient to have Cassio cashiered. "Unlike the Venetian Senate that finds ways to divine evidence even in the moment of deliberation, [. . .] Othello acts against Cassio by using Iago's reputation as the surrogate for evidence" (Gronbeck-Tedesco 264). Surely, if the Duke and senators had used the highly respected senator Brabantio's testimony against Othello as their only evidence, Othello would be in prison instead of being commissioned as general of the Venetian army in Cyprus. But Othello is not thinking about justice or due process for Cassio; on the contrary, he impatiently administers Cassio's harsh punishment—"Cassio, I love thee; / But never more be officer of mine"—so that he can return to the arms of his beautiful new bride (II. iii. 246-47).

In his discussion of the moral virtue Patience, Aristotle explains that "The patient man is not revengeful; he is more inclined to be forgiving" (IV. v. 1126a 38). Clearly, Othello loses every scintilla of patience, as well as all attendant rational behaviors, as Iago systematically and demonically works on his psyche throughout Acts III and IV. When Iago initially attempts to lure Othello into his trap by suggesting Desdemona's potential unfaithfulness, Othello still seems to be the calm and rational husband of Act I. In response to Iago's first insinuation about Desdemona's infidelity, Othello responds with composure and self-confidence: "'Tis not to make me jealous / To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company / Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances; / Where virtue is, these are more virtuous. / Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw / The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt, / For she had eyes and chose me. No, Iago; / I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove; / And on the proof there is no more but this: / Away

at once with love or jealousy!” (III. iii. 183-93). But this façade of self-assurance soon fades away, revealing Othello’s true character. In fact, just a few short moments after this beautiful testament to trust and fidelity, Othello is already beginning to question Desdemona’s faithfulness: “I do not think but Desdemona’s honest” (III. iii. 225). And only 40 lines later, Iago has completely convinced Othello that he has been cuckolded: “She’s gone. I am abused, and my relief / Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage!” (III. iii. 265-66). Clearly, Othello lacks the self-confidence that he feigned in his earlier conversation with Iago and his confrontation with Brabantio in Venice. Iago’s insidious manipulation of Othello certainly lies at the heart of Othello’s confusion and loss of trust in his wife. Instead of taking action that a patient person would, however, (starting with an essential discussion with Desdemona) Othello becomes irascible and revengeful. As Aristotle reminds us in his theory of the Golden Mean, patience is a virtue existing as the mean between two extremes: lack of spirit (a deficiency) and irascibility (an excess). “Irascible people get angry quickly and with the wrong people and at the wrong things and too violently, but they stop quickly, and this is the best thing about them” (Aristotle IV. v. 1126a 14-16). Othello behaves in an indisputably irascible fashion—directing his anger and violence toward the wrong people. Has Desdemona given Othello any reason at all to believe that she is unfaithful? The answer, of course, is no. Iago maliciously fabricates the entire affair, using only ridiculous stories of a handkerchief and a sleep-talking Cassio as evidence. Tragically, however, Othello lacks the moral fortitude to handle Iago’s pernicious assault against his character. His reaction is therefore visceral instead of rational, irascible rather than patient.

In Act III, scene iii, Othello's ire has been raised by Iago's accusation, but he has not yet decided to take violent action. Demanding "ocular proof" that Desdemona is unfaithful, warning Iago that—if he cannot provide such evidence, he "hadst been better have been born a dog / Than answer my waked wrath," Othello seems to be properly directing his anger at Iago (III. iii. 358-59). The cunning Iago immediately dismisses Othello's demand, however, suggesting that ocular proof would be impossible unless Othello were willing to "grossly gape on" and "behold her [Desdemona] topped" (III. iii. 391-92). This vulgar proposition naturally exacerbates Othello's fragile emotional state, adequately preparing him for Iago's fabricated story about Cassio: "In sleep I heard him [Cassio] say, 'Sweet Desdemona, / Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!' / [. . .] / Then kiss me hard, / As if he plucked up kisses by the roots / That grew upon my lips; laid his leg o'er my thigh / And sigh, and kiss, and then cry, 'Cursed fate / That gave thee to the Moor!' (III. iii. 413- 23). Surely, a rational individual would understand that this tale lacks the substance requisite to the kind of evidence Othello is seeking.

His irascibility also causes him to seek vengeance very quickly against his wife and Cassio; so, although his temper passes quickly and the Othello at the end of the play once again seems calm and deliberate, it is too late: for he has already "killed the sweetest innocent / That e'er did lift up eye" (V. ii. 298-99). Unlike Aristotle's "patient man," who—far from engaging his time and energy in vengeful causes—is more likely to forgive his wrong-doers, Othello plans a bloody course of revenge against Desdemona that very night: "I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me! / [. . .] / I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty / unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago!" (IV. i.

200; 205-6). Othello has easily shed all semblance of patience, and he is resolute about the rash and fatal plan he has devised.

According to Aristotle, the virtue of courage is the mean between the vices of rashness, which is an excess, and cowardice, which is a deficiency. He explains in Book III of *Nicomachean Ethics*:

The man who exceeds in confidence about things that are fearful is rash.

The rash man is considered to be both a boaster and a pretender to courage; at any rate he wishes to seem as the courageous man really is in his attitude towards fearful situations, and therefore imitates him where he can. Hence such people are usually cowardly as well as rash, because while they make a show of confidence when circumstances permit, they cannot face anything fearful. (vii. 1115b 28-33)

Othello's behavior is indisputably rash. By the end of the third scene in Act three, Iago has thoroughly deceived Othello into believing that Desdemona has cuckolded him. And he has accomplished this with absolutely no solid proof of her infidelity—only “imputation and strong circumstances” (III. iii. 404-405). If he were truly courageous, Othello would confront and question Desdemona about his suspicions. This would be the courageous approach because it would require that Othello face a fearful situation: the possibility that his new wife would admit her affair with Cassio. Othello chooses not to face this frightening possibility, however, precisely because he has rashly decided to murder her instead: “Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her! / Damn her! / Come [Iago], go with me apart. I will withdraw / To furnish me with some swift means of death / For the fair devil” (III. iii. 472-475). He rashly decides to murder Desdemona *that very night*

instead of trying to muster the courage to confront her with his suspicions. Othello's actions, according to Nicomachean standards, are rash because he makes a show of confidence but cannot actually face a fearful situation.

Once Othello has resolved to murder Desdemona, he rejects the possibility that he could be mistaken about her infidelity. Despite her impassioned protestations of innocence, Othello remains steadfast in his terrible mission, overconfidently approaching the murder as an honor killing. Examination of his behavior through an Aristotelian lens again suggests that Othello is rash because he "exceeds in confidence" about something that is fearful (III. vii. 1115b 28). The murder scene (Act V, scene ii) is painful precisely because the audience knows that Othello is about to perpetrate an egregious and completely unwarranted act, and that he is too committed to "the cause" to be stopped. Desdemona certainly does her best to save herself, but Othello is executing a plan of action from which he cannot be coaxed:

Desdemona: O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!

Othello: Down, strumpet!

Desdemona: Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight!

Othello: Nay, if you strive—

Desdemona: But half an hour!

Othello: Being done, there is no pause.

Desdemona: But while I say one prayer!

Othello: It is too late.

Smothers her.

Othello exhibits indisputably rash behavior, both because he lacks the courage to ask Desdemona in a calm and rational way whether or not she has been faithful to him, and because he becomes overconfident about the justice of what he considers a sacrificial murder.

Othello does not experience his tragic fall based solely on his lack of moral virtues, however; his gross deficiency of what Aristotle calls the Intellectual Virtues also greatly contributes to his fall. I begin with Prudence, or practical common sense (*phronēsis*), an intellectual virtue that is essential, according to Aristotle, in making decisions regarding how one's conduct will affect his or her primary objective—*eudaimonia* (the good life). In other words, since we seek the good life as our ultimate goal, the prudent person will make decisions that will most likely produce the good life for him or herself. Aristotle contends that

Prudence is concerned with human goods, i.e. things about which deliberation is possible; for we hold that it is the function of the prudent man to deliberate well; and nobody deliberates about things that cannot be otherwise, or that are not means to an end, and that end a practical good.¹⁹

And the man who is good at deliberation generally is the one who can aim, by the help of his calculation, at the best of the goods attainable by man.

(Aristotle VI. vii. 1141b 9-14)

Although Othello may indeed make prudent military decisions as general of the Venetian army, he unfortunately lacks prudence in his personal affairs. In fact, in a delicate situation that absolutely requires rational deliberation, Othello unthinkingly interprets every trifle that Iago invents as hard evidence against Desdemona. And, as we know from

¹⁹ i.e. one that can be attained in action. (Editor's note)

our discussion of Othello's rash behavior, his failure to deliberate before making the decision to murder Desdemona indicates that his primary concern at the time was revenge, not attainment of the good life (*eudaimonia*).

Othello actually has many opportunities to deliberate about the supposed (and highly unlikely) affair between Desdemona and Cassio. He is, after all, being spoon-fed "evidence" by one source—Iago—and that one source is able to provide only conjecture and wild tales, no substantive proof at all. Why would a man who exercises such a high degree of prudence in his professional life abandon that intellectual virtue when it really mattered? Had he sincerely deliberated about Iago's outrageous accusations, had he engaged in rigorous intellectual analysis of the situation, he would have realized that Iago's allegations were impossible. When would Desdemona have had the time for an affair? She and Othello are newly married; their wedding night is interrupted by a call from the Duke to attend a meeting that Cassio is attending as well. They all depart that very night for Cypress, and Cassio is not aboard Desdemona's ship. On the first night in Cypress, Othello is again called away from his bride to settle a dispute between Governor Montano and the drunken first lieutenant, Cassio. Had Othello thought this through, he would have understood that an affair between Cassio and Desdemona would have been extremely implausible, if not entirely impossible. Had he devoted some quality time to deliberating on Iago's charges, he would have realized that "trifles light as air" should never become "confirmations strong as proofs of Holy Writ" (III. iii. 319-21). But Othello does not deliberate, does not engage in intellectual analysis, does not pose rational investigative questions; instead, he allows himself to be manipulated, poisoned, and entrapped by Iago. His jealousy "burns like the mines of sulfur," causing him to fall

into trances and lose all semblance of self-control. If it is the mark of a prudent person to have “deliberated well,” as Aristotle suggests, then we cannot possibly attribute prudence to Othello.

In examining Othello’s dearth of Aristotelian intellectual virtue, we must consider three additional virtues, all of which relate in various ways to deliberation: Intuition, Resourcefulness, and Understanding. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that Intuition refers to “the immediate perception of truth” (VI. vi. 1141a note). Not only does Othello fail to perceive *immediately* that Iago is lying to him; he never perceives the truth at all! Although he has just married the beautiful, sweet, and pure Desdemona, Othello lacks the intuitive capabilities to see through Iago’s cruel verbal assaults against his new bride. This egregious lack of perceptiveness on Othello’s part corresponds directly with the total absence of another intellectual virtue, Resourcefulness. This particular virtue is a kind of deliberation that involves reason; as Aristotle explains, it concerns “correctness of thinking” and a “species of correctness of deliberation” (VI. ix. 1142b 12; 17).

Obviously, Othello exercises no correctness of thinking or deliberation. As noted above, Othello chooses not to engage in any level of serious deliberation on the matter, opting instead to crowd his mind with Iago’s outrageous tales of spousal deception. With Iago as his sole resource, and with no inclination toward reason or correct deliberation, Othello plunges head first into the demi-devil’s sinister trap. Because he refuses to exercise one iota of resourcefulness, he becomes very easy prey for the villainous Iago.

Neither while he is exposing himself to Iago’s abuse, nor after the enormity of his mistake is revealed does Othello understand the events that have transpired because his

failure to deliberate about Iago's accusations in a meaningful way prevents him from reaching a true understanding. Aristotle teaches that

Understanding is concerned not with things that are eternal and immutable, nor with any and every thing that comes into being, but with matters that may cause perplexity and call for deliberation. Hence its sphere is the same as prudence; but understanding and prudence are not the same, because prudence is imperative (since its end is what one should or should not do), and understanding only makes judgments.

Understanding, then, is neither the possession nor the acquisition of prudence; but just as the act of learning is called understanding when one exercises the faculty of opinion for the purpose of judging about another person's account of matters within the scope of prudence (and judging about it rightly because "well" is equivalent to "rightly"), the act of judging is called understanding. (VI. x. 1143a 4-16)

Surely Othello's predicament causes perplexity and calls for deliberation. As previously indicated, however, Othello's bewilderment does not spur him to deliberation as it should. Instead, it merely causes him to become increasingly unstable and vulnerable as he spirals toward the commission of his ultimately tragic actions. Even after murdering Desdemona and learning that she was indeed "the sweetest innocent / That e'er did lift up eye" (V. ii. 198-99), Othello still does not understand what has transpired. He asks Cassio: "Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?" He realizes that he was deceived by Iago, but he clearly has no conception of why or how Iago staged the deception. Nor does Iago provide him (or the audience) with

a satisfying answer. Choosing a stoic acceptance of his torture and execution without explaining his actions, Iago defiantly responds: “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word” (V. ii. 300-301; 302-303).

Unlike some of Shakespeare’s other notorious villains, Iago offers no apology or vaulting final speech.

Using Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* as a theoretical lens, therefore, we cannot possibly interpret Othello’s character as sympathetic. He is foolish and even pathetic, perhaps, but not sympathetic, as he lacks the moral and intellectual fortitude necessary to earn our sympathy. A brief examination of Othello’s character through the lens of the other two major systems of ethics (Deontology and Consequentialism²⁰) similarly condemns his actions, but for different reasons. From a deontological perspective, several main tenets of moral assessment must be considered: First, the locus of value of an act is in the act or type of act itself, not in the agent’s motivation for action or the prospective consequence of the action. Additionally, according to Immanuel Kant’s Supreme Principle of Morality, all morality is based on reason as opposed to emotion, feeling, sympathy, or self-interest. And finally, the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative states that for an action to have moral worth, the agent must be able to will that the action become a universal law. An assessment of Othello’s character through a deontological lens requires evaluation of three relevant factors: Othello’s gullible acceptance of Iago’s outrageous prevarications, his conspiracy with Iago to murder Cassio, and his murder of Desdemona. On all counts, a deontological analysis would condemn Othello’s actions. His naïve acceptance of Iago’s fabrications about Desdemona and Cassio lies in stark contrast to Kant’s Supreme Principle of Morality, which insists that objective reason

²⁰ See dissertation Introduction for a full explanation of Deontological and Consequentialist Ethics.

must be the basis for all moral action. As demonstrated through my Aristotelian analysis of Othello's actions, *reason* has nothing at all to do with Othello's decisions to believe Iago. Instead, emotion and self-interest (i.e., a desire to preserve his honor at all costs) serve as the foundation for his gullibility. Regarding Othello's other significant actions—conspiring to kill Cassio and murdering Desdemona: clearly, these actions in and of themselves must be condemned. If the locus of value of an act is indeed in the act or type of act itself (not the potential consequence), there can be no justification for conspiring to murder or for murdering in cold blood. Likewise, it is inconceivable that such acts could or should ever be universalized. We can conclude, then, that a deontological analysis would roundly and emphatically censure Othello's actions.

Although a Consequentialist moral examination of Othello's character may initially seem a bit more forgiving than its Deontological and Aristotelian counterparts, it is clear that even the strictest Utilitarians would ultimately fail to find justification for his actions. Teleological moral systems, as we recall, place the locus of an action's value in both the quantity and quality of benefit derived from it. How many people, in other words, have benefited from the action? Have people experienced a greater benefit from the action than if that action had not been performed at all? And have people benefited from this action more than they would have benefited from a different action? In fairness to Othello's (very wrong-headed and misguided) reasons for murdering Desdemona, a consequentialist examination would first look at Othello's intentions. Why did he decide to murder her? Was it out of spite, anger, or hatred? Clearly not. As we painfully observe in the murder scene, Othello passionately loves Desdemona. He smells her as she sleeps, kisses her, speaks of her beauty, cries, and shamelessly admits the agony he is

experiencing in carrying out this deed. Far from a murder born out of hatred or spite, this (to Othello) is a sacrifice—an honor killing. And regarding consequences, Othello firmly believes that by murdering Desdemona he will be sparing many more men the pain and dishonor of being cuckolded by her. In other words, her death—in Othello’s opinion—will benefit many people, whereas her continued life will cause only heartbreak and misery, not only to Othello, but to the many men she will undoubtedly cuckold in the future. Unlike deontological and Aristotelian analyses, consequentialism would certainly look at prospective outcome before passing judgment. An important element of the consequentialist theory, however, involves consideration of harm done vs. benefit received. Concerning this particular case, in other words, a consequentialist would weigh the harm done by Desdemona’s murder against the benefit received by Othello and the imaginary men of the future who will allegedly avoid victimization by her infidelity. Clearly, the harm caused by a murder would preponderate any potential damage caused by future infidelity.

Additionally, we must remember that in teleological ethical systems, intended or prospective outcomes are not as important as actual results. In the case of Desdemona’s murder, therefore—regardless of Othello’s reasons or desired consequences—the truth of the matter is that Othello’s basis for action was very flawed and he murdered an innocent person. In reality, therefore, her death could not possibly have benefited anyone. The same consequentialist reasoning can be applied to Othello’s involvement in the conspiracy to murder Cassio. Since Othello is basing his actions on wildly inaccurate information, no possible good can result from this innocent man’s murder. Ultimately,

then, Othello's actions would be entirely condemned by a teleological analysis, though for different reasons than the other moral systems.

Othello's character lends itself nicely to a variety of rich critical interpretations because Shakespeare strategically positions him as both a formidable military leader and a witless dupe; a doting husband and a man who is willing to kill to preserve his honor. Universally characterized as one of the great Shakespearian villains, on the other hand, Iago's character does not inspire critical debate about whether or not he is evil. Instead, scholars generally accede to Iago's iniquity, and focus their efforts either on how he employs his cunning in the service of ensnaring those he claims to love, or on what factors (psychological, practical, or otherwise) might motivate his actions. An introduction of neo-Aristotelian scholarship is therefore worthwhile at this point, as two of the movement's foremost scholars have developed theories that lend themselves quite effectively to an examination of Iago's character.

I begin with Christine Swanton, professor of philosophy at the University of Auckland, whose work with virtue ethics has been the focus of her scholarly endeavors for over twenty years. In examining virtue—or lack thereof—as a factor motivating behavior, Swanton argues that Aristotle should not be the sole paradigm from which we build current theories of virtue ethics. Other philosophers have, after all, concerned themselves in various ways with the idea of virtue. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, discusses right action and virtuous traits of character in three of his greatest philosophical works: *On the Genealogy of Morality*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Based on his examination of character and right action in these seminal works, Swanton has developed what she terms an “Outline of Nietzschean Virtue Ethics.”

If Nietzsche had been interested specifically in Virtue Ethics, in other words, Swanton claims that he would have had quite distinctive answers to the questions “What makes an action right?” and “What makes a trait of character a virtue?” (Swanton “Outline” 29). My present objective is to analyze Iago’s character through the Nietzschean virtue lens that Swanton has formulated.

Swanton begins her analysis with a reminder of Nietzsche’s deeply pessimistic view of the human condition, which finds its basis in the idea that mankind’s normal state is one of sickness. He says in *On the Genealogy of Morality*: “For man is more sick, uncertain, changeable, indeterminate, than any other animal . . . he is *the* sick animal. [. . .] The more normal sickness becomes among men—and we cannot deny its normality—the higher should be the honor accorded the rare cases of great power of soul and body, man’s lucky hits” (qtd. in Swanton “Outline” 29). A large majority of us are, in other words, very fragile and predisposed to sickness. This natural human condition, according to Nietzsche, stems from our feelings of general impotence. We have an insatiable desire to succeed, so we dare to try; but we invariably meet with obstacles and reverses that cause us to fail. A sense of self-loathing is born from this constant failure, and self-loathing breeds resentment and desire for revenge. This sick individual, as we can imagine, is a sad figure for whom successful marriage is impossible. He consistently follows “the path to unhappiness,” abandons the society of men, and “can’t go back to the pity of men” (Nietzsche qtd. in Swanton “Outline” 29). Only the few truly strong persons among us constitute the ideal type—the ones who can resist succumbing to sickness, failure, and self-loathing.

Recognizing our human limits, the rest of us should not even attempt to be virtuous beyond our ability. For example, when a strong person suffers an insult or injury, he is able to forget it and move on with his life; he can “shake off with a single shrug many vermin that eat deep into others” (Nietzsche *GM* I:11). When more enfeebled individuals attempt to forget an injury, however, they are really only capable of repressing their anger. Such repression causes them to harbor the anger deep within their subconscious until it ultimately surfaces, manifesting itself in some ugly or vicious behavior. Even if repression does not result in poisonous action, the weak should never attempt to turn the other cheek and forget the wrongs done to them. If they do, according to Nietzsche, other weak individuals will reward the gesture by exploiting their vulnerability—trampling on them and hurting them even more. Likewise, only the strong can acquire the virtue of lying well because it requires a true understanding of oneself and those to whom the lie will be told. A weak person who tells a lie is characteristically lazy, cowardly, and self-serving; as such, he is usually caught in the lie because he underestimates the intelligence or perceptiveness of those to whom he lies (Swanton 30). In essence, then, Nietzsche has developed a virtue ethic that pertains only to the select—the ideal type—the strong. The vast majority of society, however, should not hope to reach beyond their standard enfeebled positions to attain the virtues requisite to the strong. This is a far cry from the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia*, wherein we are all born completely prepared to receive the virtues.

Viewed from this perspective, Iago is a classic Nietzschean sick animal: uncertain, changeable, and indeterminate. Clearly predisposed to weakness and fragility, Iago neither sets his sights on an Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia* nor demonstrates any

level of preparation to receive the virtues. Instead, Iago's actions reveal his inner feelings of impotence and self-loathing. Through soliloquy and dialogue with Roderigo, we learn that Iago has failed to achieve career success via the promotion that he believes he deserved. In a decision that Iago interprets as both unwarranted and grossly unjust, Othello has promoted Cassio—an arithmetician from Florence—“That never set a squadron in the field, / Nor the division of a battle knows / More than a spinster” to the position of First Lieutenant over Iago (I. i. 19-21). Cassio's promotion has left Iago—who had demonstrated his skills on the battlefield for years—to serve as Othello's standard-bearer. There can be no mistaking Iago's bitterness here. Receiving a well-deserved promotion to First Lieutenant is obviously of exceptional importance to Iago. When he is passed over, therefore, and a man with virtually no military experience is chosen for the position, Iago becomes umbrageous.

We can, to a certain extent, understand Iago's sense of indignation. After all, who among us has not at one point or another been victimized by the often heartless people and processes of the professional world? Iago's outrage over Cassio's promotion, however, manifests itself in ways that not only prove Iago's villainy, but also establish him as the consummate Nietzschean sick animal. Refusing to accept the legitimacy of Othello's decision and move on with his life, Iago allows his resentment to fester inwardly until it develops into an unquenchable desire for revenge. It is worth noting at this point that Iago harbors additional resentment against both Othello and Cassio because he vaguely suspects (with absolutely no credible reason or semblance of proof) that his wife Emilia has cuckolded him with both men. Although Iago's casual references to the possibility of infidelity assure the audience that not even Iago believes it, he uses

the suspicion of such activity to further justify his own sick thirst for vengeance. Iago formulates his devious scheme almost spontaneously, as he cunningly builds the innocent gestures and normal daily behaviors of other characters into a case against them. Through Iago's soliloquies, we enter his disturbed mind and watch in horror as the pieces come together. We see the seeds of his truly villainous nature in the first soliloquy, when Iago reveals his genuine hatred of Othello and his plans to use the foolish Roderigo (who is hopelessly in love with Desdemona) in his plot against Othello and Cassio:

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse;
For I mine own gained knowledge should profane
If I would time expend with such a snipe
But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
H'as done my office. I know not if't be true,
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do, as if for surety. He holds me well;
The better shall my purpose work on him.
Cassio's a proper man. Let me see now:
To get his place, and to plume up my will
In double knavery. How? How? Let's see.
After some time, to abuse Othello's ears
That he is too familiar with his wife.
He hath a person and a smooth dispose
To be suspected—framed to make women false.

The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so;
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
As asses are.
I have't! It is engendered! Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light. (I. iii. 371-393)

Over the course of the nine soliloquies that follow, Iago develops the plan that he has engendered in this first soliloquy. Although there can be no question by his tenth and final soliloquy that “hell and night [have brought] this monstrous birth to the world’s light,” Iago invents the plan as he goes—spontaneously designing any material he can get his hands on into his project.

As a highly ironic addition to the plot, Iago has previously established a reputation as a genuinely honest man—so honest, in fact, that he is widely known by the nickname “Honest Iago.” And it comes as no surprise that he stands prepared to exploit that reputation at every possible turn, even acknowledging his plans to do so in an *Aside* to the audience. As he observes the love and passion that Othello and Desdemona demonstrate for one another upon reuniting in Cypress, Iago says: [*Aside*] “O, you are well tuned now! / But I’ll set down the pegs that make this music, / As honest as I am” (II. i. 196-98). Casually working his esteemed reputation for honesty into conversations with his victims as his plan takes shape, he successfully disallows any suspicion of his ulterior motives to develop. In his initial attempt to actuate Othello’s feelings of jealousy over the supposed intimacy between Desdemona and Cassio, for example, Iago responds to Othello’s request for frank disclosure of his thoughts with: “It were not for your quiet

nor your good, / Nor for my manhood, *honesty*,²¹ and wisdom, / To let you know my thoughts” (III. iii. 151-53). This response benefits Iago in two ways: it reminds Othello that he is honest, and it leads Othello to believe that Iago is trying to be a good friend. By this time, naturally, the audience knows that neither of these is the case. A short time later, Iago has effectively aroused Othello’s suspicions about Desdemona’s fidelity, despite Othello’s efforts to reject the accusations. Enraged by Iago’s temerity, Othello threatens: “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore! / Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof; / Or, by the worth of mine eternal soul, / Thou hadst been better have been born a dog / Than answer my waked wrath!” (III. iii. 356-59). Iago quickly manipulates the situation, however, by labeling himself as a fool for thinking that he should be honest with his friend Othello: “O wretched fool, / That lov’st to make thine honesty a vice! / O monstrous world! Take note, take note, O world, / To be direct and honest is not safe. / I thank you for this profit, and from hence / I’ll love no friend, sith love breeds such offense” (III. iii. 372-76). In this fashion, Iago successfully uses his well-established reputation to manipulate people and events as he contrives his diabolical revenge plot.

By the third soliloquy, Iago has decided that he is not only going to use Cassio as a pawn to “put the Moor / At least into a jealousy so strong / That judgment cannot cure,” but that he is also going to manage the situation in such a way that will “Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me / For making him egregiously an ass / And practicing on his peace and quiet, / Even to madness.” At the end of this soliloquy, Iago admits that he hasn’t yet figured out how to accomplish this; his plan is “yet confused” because “Knavery’s plain face is never seen till used” (II. i. 299-301; 307-311). By that very evening, however, he has conceived the first part of the revenge scheme: he will get

²¹ Italics mine.

Cassio drunk before his shift on the watch, and he will put Cassio “in some action / That may offend the isle” (II. i. 60-61). Iago pulls Roderigo into the plan by convincing him that Desdemona is in love with Cassio, and that Cassio must therefore be sent away from Cyprus so that Desdemona can be more easily persuaded to love Roderigo. The gullible Roderigo, willing to risk any dangers for the love of Desdemona, agrees to start a fight with the drunken Cassio during his shift on the watch. By the time Cassio sobers up and regains his senses several hours later, he has already been fired by Othello—not only for engaging in drunk and disorderly fighting, but also for assaulting Governor Montano when he attempted to break up the fight.

In Iago’s fifth soliloquy, he reveals a thirst for revenge so insatiable that it must destroy everyone in its path:

Divinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now. For whiles this honest fool [Cassio]
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear:
That she repeals him for her body’s lust;
And by how much she strives to do him good,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net

That shall enmesh them all. (II. iii. 347-59)

Indeed, nobody escapes Iago's all-consuming vengeance. By the end of the play, Iago has orchestrated a plan so bloody that it is hard to believe he is human: Othello has murdered Desdemona and killed himself; Iago has slain his wife Emilia and mortally wounded Roderigo, and Roderigo has severely injured Cassio. Naturally, the maestro engineering the devastation finds immense satisfaction in the fact that so many innocent souls are destroyed. As more and more people are unwittingly drawn into his evil quest for revenge, he takes a moment to glory in his success: "Work on. / My med'cine works! Thus credulous fools are caught, / And many worthy and chaste dames even thus, / All guiltless, meet reproach" (IV. i. 45-48). There can be no question that Iago—whom Roderigo ultimately recognizes as a "murd'rous slave" and "inhuman dog"—presents an accurate picture of the Nietzschean sick animal.

Nietzsche also differs vastly from Aristotle in his insistence on the purity of motive in determining virtuous action. As we recall, Aristotelian theory holds that an action can be considered a "right" action if the *intention* of that action is displayed at the right time, to the right people, in the right circumstances, to the right degree, and in the right way. The actual quality of motive is not at issue—only the way the motive is displayed and carried out. Conversely, Nietzsche looked *only* at quality of motive in determining right action; the origin of an action is what determines its value. For example, Swanton explains, "If the motivation of an altruistic act expresses self-hatred, and is therefore to be understood as expressing a deep motivation to escape into otherness, then the altruism displayed is disvaluable, even if lots of people are

helped, the people helped are deserving, [and] they are helped in ways which do not undermine their capacities for self-help” (“Outline” 31). It is essential to clarify, however, that by “origin” of action, Nietzsche does not mean “reason” for action. According to Nietzsche, people offer myriad reasons for their actions, many of which seem on the surface to be noble and righteous. Often, however, these superficial reasons are merely covering and attempting to sanitize deeper, less adulatory motivations such as “resentments, fear, and neediness: in short, weakness” (32). “Origin” of action for Nietzsche, therefore, refers not to “the reasons which the agent rehearses to herself and to others, but [to] the nature of the deeper *desires* expressing strength or weakness which are the real springs of her actions” (32). Viewed from this perspective, it then becomes clear that the action itself cannot be separated from its origin since the action (the “external performance”) can only be properly understood once we know exactly what deeper motive the action is expressing. As Nietzsche explains in Book I of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, “Just as the popular mind separates the lightning from the flash and takes the latter for an *action*, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength” (13). An action can only be judged as right, Nietzsche says, if it expresses a strength in the agent.

Iago willingly provides the *reasons* for his actions, both in his conversations with Roderigo and his more private moments of soliloquy: he wants to punish Othello for neglecting to promote him; he wants to punish Cassio for receiving the promotion over him; and he wants to punish both men for his unwarranted suspicion that they have slept with his wife. These are the *only reasons* that Iago discloses in order to justify his desire for revenge. Surely, being passed over for a promotion could never provide sufficient

justification for a stable, rational individual to plot murder! But we must remember that Iago is neither stable nor rational; he is, conversely, the Nietzschean sick animal—far from balanced or well-adjusted. Even if his reasons were rational, though, Nietzsche argues that they would be quite useless in understanding Iago’s actions since reasons themselves are superficial, merely covering deeper motivations (such as resentment, fear, and neediness) based in human weakness. What, then, are Iago’s deeper motivations—the well-springs of his actions? Unfortunately, Shakespeare does not grace us with an explicit answer on this point. His boastful self-description in his initial conversation with Roderigo, however, offers some suggestion of the weakness that may be the genuine motivator of his actions: “O, sir, content you. / I follow him [Othello] to serve my turn upon him. / [. . .] / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end; / For when my outward action doth demonstrate / The native act and figure of my heart / In complement extern, ’tis not long after / But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at; I am not what I am (I. i. 38-62). Here, he touts his duplicitous and conniving nature—obviously quite proud of his skillful deception. It does not take a mental health specialist, however, to recognize the gross insecurity underlying this kind of unhealthy exterior attitude. A weak, insecure, and ineffectual man, employee, and husband, Iago compensates for his extreme feelings of inadequacy by creating an entirely different persona—one that is strong, cunning, and decisive. Iago transforms this weakness—a debilitating insecurity that has cost him an important promotion and made him suspect that his wife is unfaithful—into a powerful, bloodthirsty, vengeful “other” that nobody (except the unfortunate dupe, Roderigo) recognizes or suspects. From a Nietzschean perspective, then, Iago’s *reasons* for action are not only insubstantial, but

more importantly, they are inconsequential since they merely mask his deep-seated weaknesses.

Like Nietzsche, neo-Aristotelian philosopher Michael Slote's virtue ethics theory considers an agent's motivation for moral action to be of primary importance. According to his "agent-based" theory of ethics,²² moral action cannot be perceived as independent of the agent or her motives. In this sense, Slote rejects Aristotle's position that the moral rightness of an action depends *not* upon the motives of the agent, but upon the intelligence of the virtuous individual who is sensitive enough to recognize the right and virtuous path in each circumstance without relying on specific moral rules. Instead, Slote maintains that our "evaluation of human motives, habits, [. . .] and actions is entirely derivative from and dependent on what we have to say ethically about (the inner life of) the agents who perform these actions (Slote "Virtue" 178). In essence, then, the *inner life* of the person performing the actions—not merely the overall virtuousness of the person's character, but also that person's particular motives for action—are central to a genuine understanding of that person's morality. Although we must tie action to character, we cannot do so without examining the agent's motivations and acknowledging that action is entirely derived from the ethical assessment we make about the agent's inner life and motivation. Agent-based views, then, "clearly allow for agents to be subject to moral requirements or constraints or standards governing their actions. But those requirements, standards, and constraints operate and bind, as it were, *from within* (Slote "Agent" 87). The primacy of virtue in agent-based ethical theory, according to Slote, differentiates it from other ethical theories because "only agent-based forms of virtue ethics [. . .] treat virtue (claims/ facts about what is admirable or morally good in people) as explanatorily

²² See chapter two for a comprehensive explanation of Slote's Agent-Based theory of virtue ethics.

primary” (Slote *Morals* 7). Although virtue also holds a position of primacy in Aristotle’s theory, it is the overall virtue of the sensitive and intelligent agent that matters, not the motivation guiding the actions of the agent.

If agent-based virtue theory requires an acknowledgment of the causal relationship between motivation and action *as well as* the direct connection between action and character, how then would such a theory assess Shakespeare’s Emilia? As Desdemona’s attendant and Iago’s wife, Emilia’s part in the first half of the play seems rather inconsequential. Between Act III, scene iii and the end of the play, however, Emilia’s role becomes pivotal. Using an agent-based approach to examining this character’s virtue, we will treat her actions as causally connected to her motivations for those actions. Once we understand how these particular relationships operate in the play, we should be able to make an agent-based determination about Emilia’s overall virtue.

The first time that we see any consequential action by Emilia occurs in Act III when she finds Desdemona’s handkerchief on the floor of Desdemona’s bedroom.²³ Prior to this scene, Emilia’s infrequent dialogue has been strictly limited to her role as Desdemona’s assistant. Her theft of Desdemona’s cherished handkerchief, however, marks a turning point in the significance of her role in the play’s action. Emilia knows that the handkerchief was Desdemona’s first gift from Othello—a gift that Desdemona treasures and keeps with her always. As she reveals in her only soliloquy, however, Iago has frequently asked her to steal it from Desdemona, despite the fact that “she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to” (III. iii. 292-93). Emilia decides to indulge her

²³ In this scene, Othello has told Desdemona that he is suffering from a pain upon his forehead (a reference to being cuckolded). Failing to understand his implication, Desdemona has offered to bind Othello’s head with her handkerchief to stop the pain. He pushes the handkerchief away, and it falls on the floor. Upset and distracted by his sudden anger, Desdemona does not notice that the handkerchief drops onto the floor. She exits the room with him, leaving the handkerchief behind.

husband's fantasy by having the work taken out and giving it to him. She admits, however, that "Heaven knows, not I" what he will do with it (96). In this short but revealing soliloquy, we are given our first glimpse into Emilia's character—a character that could easily (but wrongfully, I will argue) be interpreted at this point as devious, unkind, and disloyal to Desdemona. She has, after all, stolen a handkerchief that means a great deal to Desdemona—solely to please her husband's fantasy; and she does not necessarily trust that there were noble intentions motivating her "wayward husband's" request that she abscond with it. But immediately after she surprises Iago with the handkerchief, Emilia begins to have second thoughts about her deceptive action. Inquiring about Iago's plans for the handkerchief, she reminds him that it is Desdemona's prized possession: "If it be not for some purpose of import, / Give't me again. Poor lady, she'll run mad / When she shall lack it" (III. iii. 314-16). Naturally, however, Iago has no intention of returning the handkerchief or revealing his plans to Emilia. Instead, he admonishes: "Be not acknown on't. / I have use for it. Go, leave me" (III. iii. 317-18). The moment that Emilia exits, Iago uses his seventh soliloquy to disclose his plans for the handkerchief: "I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin / And let him find it. Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of Holy Writ. This may do something" (III. iii. 319-322). We glean from this passage that Emilia's suspicion of her husband's intentions was valid. What, then, has motivated her to filch the handkerchief from Desdemona and give it to a husband who has obviously earned her distrust? Furthermore, what motivates her to remain silent in response to Desdemona's claim upon realizing that the handkerchief is missing: "Believe me, I had rather have lost

my purse / Full of crusadoes” (III. iv. 25-26) —and even more critically—when Othello demands that she provide it?

Here, Emilia’s inaction seems rather cruel as she watches with stoic silence while Othello becomes increasingly agitated and threatening toward Desdemona. He even relates a tale concerning the magic qualities of the handkerchief, which was apparently made by an Egyptian charmer. As long as Desdemona keeps it with her, “ ’Twould make her amiable and subdue [Othello] / Entirely to her love.” But if she loses it or gives it as a gift, she would experience “such perdition / As nothing else could match” (III. iv. 59-60; 67-68). Despite Desdemona’s obvious dismay over the loss of the handkerchief and her shock over Othello’s rash and frightening response, Emilia remains silent. By the time Othello storms away from Desdemona, he has worked himself into quite a fury.²⁴ Stunned, Desdemona claims, “I nev’r saw this before. / Sure there’s some wonder in this handkerchief; / I am most unhappy in the loss of it” (III. iv. 99-101). Rather than taking moral action by confessing her theft to her dismayed friend, however, Emilia opts to use Othello’s behavior as a platform for her unfavorable assessment of all men: “ ’Tis not a year or two shows us a man. / They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, / They belch us” (III. iv. 102-105). This harsh judgment against men may be emotionally therapeutic for Emilia, but it serves no healing purpose for Desdemona. Emilia’s continued silence on the matter of the handkerchief, conversely, seems to demonstrate her fundamental lack of concern about Desdemona’s emotional and marital health. If she genuinely cared about Desdemona,

²⁴ In this scene, Othello’s anger is unintentionally exacerbated by Desdemona’s persistent pleas on Cassio’s behalf. Believing that his demand that she produce the handkerchief is merely a “trick to put me from my suit” (line 87), Desdemona insists that Othello reinstate Cassio as his lieutenant. Naturally, since Othello is now convinced that Desdemona is engaged in an illicit affair with Cassio, Desdemona’s protestations on Cassio’s behalf severely aggravate Othello’s precarious emotional state.

Emilia would feel a natural sense of guilt and remorse, thereby instigating a confession. But alas, this confession does not materialize until after Desdemona has been murdered.

In Act IV, Emilia becomes more vocal and assertive than she has been previously. No longer a mere shadow to Desdemona with an occasional snide remark about men and a willingness to comply with her husband's requests, Emilia demonstrates that—in significant matters such as spousal abuse and injustice—she can be a fierce advocate for the wronged. After the intensely painful “brothel” scene wherein Othello labels Desdemona “that cunning whore of Venice,” Desdemona is understandably crestfallen and Emilia is enraged. Explaining the incident to Iago—thoroughly convinced that a third party with ill intentions has aroused Othello's suspicions against Desdemona—Emilia finds her voice and fearlessly expresses her moral conviction in defense of Desdemona: “I will be hanged if some eternal villain, / Some busy and insinuating rogue, / Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office / Have not devised this slander. I will be hanged else (IV. ii. 129-32). And when Desdemona suggests that such a man should be pardoned by heaven, Emilia passionately disagrees: “A halter pardon him! And hell gnaw his bones! / Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her / Company? / What place? What time? What form? What likelihood? / The Moor's abused by some most villainous knave, / Some base, notorious knave, some scurvy fellow (IV. ii. 135-40). Clearly, Othello's unjust accusations against Desdemona have infuriated Emilia, and she is not prepared to suppress her anger about it. The irony, naturally, is that Emilia never for a moment suspects that her own husband could be the “villainous knave” that poured such pestilence into Othello's ear. Nor does she imagine that her theft of Desdemona's handkerchief could have played such a critical role in the evolution of Iago's sinister

plan. At any rate, deciding that the wrongs suffered by Desdemona are too egregious and painful to be endured patiently, Emilia moves from silence to moral action. In Act V, as we shall now see, Emilia's actions develop gravity and bear tremendous consequence to the tragedy.

As Act V opens, Iago's two murder plots have been set into action. Roderigo will murder Cassio²⁵ and Othello will murder his own unfaithful wife. When Roderigo attacks Cassio, however, the two men merely wound each other. Observing the attack from the shadows, Iago sees that neither combatant has been dealt a mortal wound. This does not bode well for Iago, as he has a vested interest in both men's deaths: "Live Roderigo, / He calls me to a restitution large / Of gold and jewels that I bobbed from him / As gifts to Desdemona. / It must not be. If Cassio do remain, / He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly; and besides, the Moor / May unfold me to him; there stand I in much peril. / No, he must die" (V. i. 14-22). Seizing his only opportunity before the watch is called up, therefore, Iago stabs Roderigo, who accurately identifies him as an "inhuman dog" (V. i. 62).

As the dark streets of Cypress devolve into chaos, Othello calmly and almost ritualistically smothers Desdemona in her bed. Moments later, Emilia rushes to Othello's room to report the attack on Cassio. To her dismay, however, she learns something much more horrifying: that Desdemona lies in her bed near death—absolving Othello of his crime with her last breath:

Desdemona: O, falsely, falsely murdered!

[. . .] A guiltless death I die.

²⁵ Iago has promised Othello that, as a demonstration of his loyalty, he will kill Cassio to avenge the wrongs done to Othello by Cassio. In actuality, however, Iago has convinced Roderigo to murder Cassio in order to eliminate the competition for Desdemona's love.

Emilia: O, who hath done this deed?

Desdemona: Nobody—I myself. Farewell.

Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!

[*she dies.*] (V. ii. 116; 123-25)

In the ensuing action of the play, Emilia acquires tragic stature as she learns the truth about Desdemona's murder and boldly confronts Othello with the enormity of his heinous action:

Othello: She's like a liar gone to burning hell!

'Twas I that killed her.

Emilia: O, the more angel she,

And you the blacker devil!

Othello: She turned to folly, and she was a whore.

Emilia: Thou dost belie her, and thou art a devil.

Othello: She was false as water.

Emilia: Thou art rash as fire to say

That she was false. O, she was heavenly true!

(V. ii. 128-35)

And when Othello reveals that Iago has been the source of his information about Desdemona, Emilia continues her courageous defense of Desdemona—risking her own life when she wakes Othello's wrath:

Emilia: O mistress, villainy hath made mocks with love!

My husband [said] she was false?

[. . .]. If he say so, may his pernicious soul

Rot half a grain a day! He lies to th' heart.

She was too fond of her most filthy bargain.

Othello: Hah?

Emilia: Do thy worst.

This deed of thine is no more worthy heaven

Than thou wast worthy her.

Othello: Peace, you were best.

Emilia: Thou hast not half that pow'r to do me harm

As I have to be hurt. O gull! O dolt!

As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed—

[*Othello moves to draw his sword.*]

I care not for thy sword; I'll make thee known,

Thou I lost twenty lives. Help! Help! Ho! Help!

The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder! Murder!

(V. ii. 152- 167)

Gratiano, Governor Montano, and Iago all rush into the room upon hearing Emilia's cry for help. And before this room filled with witnesses, Emilia demands that Iago admit his involvement. When he reveals the truth—that he told Othello Desdemona was false to wedlock with Cassio—Emilia fearlessly calls him on this devastating lie: “You told a lie, an odious, damned lie! / Upon my soul, a lie! A wicked lie!” (V. ii. 180-81). Despite Iago's orders that she charm her tongue and go home, Emilia stands firmly in her commitment to speak the truth. And the truly revelatory part occurs when Othello recounts the story of Iago seeing Cassio with the handkerchief—“that recognizance and

pledge of love, / Which I first gave her” (V. ii. 213-14). Here, we see a completely different Emilia from the woman of Act III who stole the handkerchief; here, we see a woman who recognizes the far-reaching and annihilative consequences of that action:

Emilia: O God! O heavenly God!

Iago: Zounds, hold your peace!

Emilia: ’Twill out, ’twill out! I peace?

No, I will speak as liberal as the north.

Let heaven and men and devils, let them all,

All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak.

Iago: Be wise, and get you home.

Emilia: I will not.

[Iago *draws and threatens* Emilia.]

Gratiano: Fie! Your sword upon a woman?

Emilia: O thou dull Moor, that handkerchief thou speak’st of

I found by fortune, and did give my husband;

For often with a solemn earnestness—

More than indeed belonged to such a trifle—

He begged of me to steal’t.

Iago: Villainous whore!

Emilia: She give it Cassio? No, alas, I found it,

And I did give’t my husband.

Iago: Filth, thou liest!

Emilia: By heaven, I do not, I do not, gentlemen.

O murd'rous coxcomb! What should such a fool
Do with so good a wife?

Othello: Are there no stones in heaven

But what serves for the thunder? Precious villain!

[Othello runs at Iago, but is disarmed by Montano.
Iago kills his wife.]

Emilia: Ay, ay. Lay me by my mistress' side. (V. ii. 218- 36)

In conducting an agent-based ethical analysis of Emilia's actions, we must explore the relationship between the motivation for her actions and the actions themselves *as well as* the connection between her actions and her character. Emilia's *inner life*, then, is central to a genuine understanding of her morality.

Most moral theorists would read Emilia's first significant action—the theft of Desdemona's handkerchief—as an immoral act. She understood its import to Desdemona, knew that Desdemona would “run mad” at the loss of it, and stole it anyway. From a deontological perspective, wherein the locus of value of an act is in the act itself—not in the agent's motive or desired consequence—there can be no moral justification for this action. According to deontologist Immanuel Kant's first formulation of the Categorical Imperative, an act can only be considered moral if it can be universalized. In the case of Emilia's theft, then, we would need to ask if everyone should steal handkerchiefs all the time. Since the answer to this query is a most definite no, then Emilia's action must be regarded as immoral. Consequentialists and Utilitarians, on the other hand, would reserve judgment about the morality of the act until they had considered the consequences of the action. In the case of Emilia's theft, did the theft of the handkerchief bring about positive consequences? Did it bring about the most

happiness (or the greatest good) for the most people? Since the theft of the handkerchief only made one person (Iago) temporarily happy; and since it indirectly caused great pain—and arguably even death—to Othello, Desdemona, and Emilia, we can determine unequivocally that consequentialists would assess the theft as an immoral and unjustifiable action.

The matter of the stolen handkerchief is not quite this simple to Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, however. From a purely virtue ethical perspective, Aristotle would insist that a virtuous person intuitively knows which actions are moral and avoids those actions that are immoral. The moral rightness of Emilia's action, then, depends neither upon the action itself, nor her motives, nor even the possible consequences of her action, but upon whether she is a virtuous individual—one with the intelligence and sensitivity to recognize the right path in each circumstance without relying on specific moral rules. Since Aristotle's assessment of individual actions depends entirely on an agent's overall virtuous character, however, and since we cannot pretend to know enough about Emilia's character when she steals the handkerchief in Act III to make a determination about her overall virtue, it is safe to suggest that there can be no Aristotelian ethical judgment about Emilia's action this early in the play. A neo-Aristotelian agent-based analysis of Emilia's action yields similar results, for it requires that we examine the action as entirely derivative of Emilia's *inner life*—her desires and motives—as well as the general virtuousness of her character. In Act III of the play, we know very little about Emilia's inner life. All we can say at this point is that, although she seems to be an attentive assistant to Desdemona, she does not (initially) experience any moral angst about stealing the handkerchief. Conversely, she says, "I am glad I have

found this napkin” and immediately decides to give it to Iago, despite her total lack of knowledge regarding his plans for it. “What he will do with it, / Heaven knows, not I,” she admits. But her desire—her motivation—as we see in her next words, is “to please his / fantasy” (III. iii. 289; 295-97). We know, therefore, only that Emilia is an attentive servant who does not mind filching her employer’s handkerchief to please her husband. Since agent-basing determines the moral worth of actions as derivative of the agent’s inner life (desires and motives) and the overall virtuousness of the agent’s character; and since (as argued above) we know precious little about Emilia’s inner life and overall virtue at this point, it is impossible to draw a responsible ethical conclusion about Emilia’s actions in Act III.

By Act V, however, when Emilia’s character has been more thoroughly developed, an agent-based analysis of her actions becomes possible. Emilia develops stature as a tragic heroine in Act V, due in large part to the moral strength of word and deed that she exhibits upon learning of Desdemona’s untimely death. As previously discussed, Emilia bravely confronts Othello, forcing him to acknowledge the stupidity of his barbaric actions. Even when he threatens to draw his sword upon her, Emilia courageously stands against him: “I care not for thy sword; I’ll make thee known, / Though I lost twenty lives. Help! Help! Ho! Help! / The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder! Murder!” (V. ii. 165-67). Moments later, she demonstrates similar fortitude in her investigation of Iago’s role in the murder. Despite his repeated admonishments and demands that she hold her peace, Emilia persists: “No, I will speak as liberal as the north. / Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak” (V. ii. 219-21). Even after Iago has drawn his sword to threaten Emilia, she holds

her moral ground, focusing her attention not on Iago's sword but upon clarifying the true sequence of events for Othello: She had found the handkerchief by chance and had given it to Iago because he had often begged her—"with a solemn earnestness--/ More than indeed belonged to such a trifle"—to steal it (V. ii. 227-28). Iago continues to threaten Emilia, calling her a filthy liar and villainous whore, yet she insists that Othello, Montano, Gratiano, and of course Iago hear her. Emilia's final words before Iago stabs her are directed toward Othello: "O murd'rous coxcomb! What should such a fool / Do with so good a wife?" (V. ii. 233-34). In this scene, Emilia reveals herself as one of Shakespeare's great heroines, a voice of truth and justice for Desdemona.

Could this woman—this pillar of moral strength and fortitude who willingly places her own life in jeopardy to reveal the heinous crimes committed by Othello and her own husband—possibly be the same woman who filched the handkerchief in the first place? According to an Agent-Based ethical system, the answer is a resounding yes. When we examine an action (such as Emilia's theft of the handkerchief) in isolation, as we attempted above, agent-basing yields no definitive response. When we view her character as a whole, however, (a requirement of agent-basing that cannot be done responsibly until Act V), a clear picture of Emilia emerges. An agent-based analysis of Emilia begins by developing an understanding of her entire character—including her motives and desires (her *inner life*) and her overall virtuousness. In Act V, Emilia's virtue is beyond question. The strength and courage she exhibits are clearly indicative of and derived from her morality. Her rejection of Othello's mendacious accusations against Desdemona illustrates Emilia's honest and forthright nature. Upon discovering her husband's treacherous involvement and her own unwitting contribution to the tragedy,

she continues to hold her moral ground—revealing truths even as Iago’s sword runs through her breast. Clearly, Emilia’s primary motivating factors are justice, benevolence, and loyalty, all in the service of honesty. Her inner desire is that the entire company understand the truth, regardless of the potential consequences to her personally. In light of her moral fortitude in Act V, then, as Emilia’s *actions* fall directly in line with her virtuous character, we must interpret her one bad act (the theft of the handkerchief) as exactly that: one unethical action, one indiscretion, committed by an otherwise moral individual. We may, according to agent-basing, even interpret the theft of the handkerchief as essentially deriving from Emilia’s sense of loyalty to her husband (a virtue) and her desire to please him—both of which speak to the goodness of her character. Despite the fact that Emilia’s action (the theft of the handkerchief) ultimately plays a critical role in Iago’s villainous plan of destruction, an agent-based approach rejects the notion that any one action can be judged in isolation. Every action must be viewed in terms of its connection with the agent’s inner life (motives and desires) and overall character. Her unfortunate peccadillo, then, does not alter or minimize an agent-based assessment of Emilia’s character as decidedly virtuous.

A brief analysis of Emilia’s character through the lens of Aristotelian virtue theory yields a similar general conclusion despite its concern with different value structures. Like the neo-Aristotelian approach, strict Aristotelian examination of Emilia’s character is impossible prior to Act V because we simply do not know enough about her as a whole person to make responsible character assessments. As Act V progresses, however, we clearly see that Emilia possesses several virtues of great import in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethic*: courage, truthfulness, patience, and righteous

indignation. As I argue at the beginning of this chapter, Othello behaves rashly, which is a vice of excess (the deficiency being cowardice). The Golden Mean for this particular sphere of emotion (fear / confidence), however, is courage—the mean between the vices of rashness and cowardice. Emilia is indisputably courageous as she unfolds critical truths to Othello and the island’s officials, such as Montano and Gratiano. Both Othello and Iago threaten to slay her if she does not silence her tongue, yet she courageously stays her course until the entire truth is revealed.

Under these circumstances, Emilia’s virtue of courage is tied closely to the three other virtues previously mentioned: truthfulness, patience, and righteous indignation. In the realm of self-expression, Aristotle states that the vices of excess and deficiency are boastfulness and understatement, respectively, and the virtuous Golden Mean is truthfulness. As previously indicated, Emilia insists on revealing the horrible truths about both Othello’s and Iago’s actions. She discloses these truths courageously and heroically but certainly not boastfully, as she knows very well that her marriage, her husband’s life, and even her own life are at stake. Regarding the emotions of anger and indignation, Emilia again avoids both excess and deficiency (irascibility and lack of spirit as the vices related to anger, and envy and malicious enjoyment as the vices related to indignation, respectively). Instead, she hits squarely upon the virtues of patience and righteous indignation. Despite her shock and outrage at learning that Othello has murdered Desdemona, Emilia patiently and logically questions Othello’s reasons for committing such a deed. She does not become irascible (as Othello had earlier), but she is certainly angry as she sets things straight for Othello. According to Aristotle, it is quite alright to become angry for the right reason, at the right person (or people), and to the right

degree—especially if the anger is due to an injustice that has occurred. This particular form of anger, known as righteous indignation, can occur either when one suffers an injustice or when one receives an entirely undeserved benefit. In Emilia’s case, the righteous indignation she experiences stems from Othello’s completely unjustifiable murder of Desdemona and his conspiracy with Iago to stage Cassio’s murder. As we see, then, an examination of Emilia’s character through an Aristotelian virtue lens supports and validates the neo-Aristotelian agent-based reading of Emilia as an indisputably virtuous tragic heroine.

I have herein attempted to offer a new approach for examining three of the primary characters in Shakespeare’s masterpiece *Othello, The Moor of Venice*. Through a standard Aristotelian virtue ethics lens, I have analyzed the title character, determining that an Aristotelian reading disallows sympathy for Othello. Although most audiences feel tremendous sympathy for Othello, concluding that he was victimized by the villainous Iago and therefore faultless, an Aristotelian interpretation rejects this notion entirely. Instead, from an Aristotelian perspective, Othello not only lacks virtuous character traits, but actively exhibits several dangerous vices, such as rashness, irascibility, and jealousy. These behavioral excesses allow him to become blinded to obvious truths and reality and cause him to commit the unforgivable sin of murdering his chaste and innocent wife. Using a neo-Aristotelian ethical strategy developed by Christine Swanton, I have also altered the generally accepted interpretation of Iago as the evil genius—the mastermind of villainy and destruction in the play. Instead, according to Swanton’s Nietzschean application of virtue, Iago must be understood as the Nietzschean “sick animal”—insecure, self-loathing, and pathetic. And finally, I have explored

Emilia's character through Michael Slote's neo-Aristotelian theory of agent-basing. In so doing, I have concluded that Emilia is more than merely an expedient dramatic device, more than Shakespeare's convenient method of getting the handkerchief into Iago's insidious hands in Act III and revealing the truth in Act V. Instead, an agent-based analysis of Emilia's character—unlike either a deontological or consequentialist analysis—lends itself to a complete investigation of her actions (and inaction) in Acts III through V as connected to and deriving from both her *inner life* (i.e., her desires and motives) and her overall virtue. And from this thorough exploration, we can conclude that—despite Emilia's commission of a transgression with egregious consequences—she must certainly be viewed as a pillar of virtue and moral fortitude.

5 “Bring some covering for this naked soul”:
The Ethics of Care in *King Lear*

This chapter examines three female and three male characters in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*—specifically Cordelia, Goneril, Regan, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool—from the theoretical perspective of neo-Aristotelian Care Ethics. As we recall from chapter two, “The New Aristotelians: 21st Century Virtue,” the Ethics of Care as moral theory has gained recent critical attention as a viable and important contribution to the renewed study of virtue.²⁶ As a newly introduced branch of Neo-Aristotelian Ethics, the Ethics of Care maintains that the *philosophical* idea of caring is essential to our moral development and ethical behavior. Although the concept of Care has always been integral to fields such as psychology and human services, ethicists have never before launched a concerted scholarly effort to develop a Theory of Care focusing on how Care operates from a moral and philosophical perspective in our lives.²⁷ In the 18th century, philosophers moved away from Aristotle’s focus on Virtue and toward newer aspects of normative ethics—Deontology and Teleology. With their focus on rules (Deontology) and consequences (Teleology), these moral systems obviously emphasize concerns other than Caring. The return to a consideration of Aristotle’s Virtue in the 1990’s and the 21st century, however, has inspired the development of an entire branch of philosophy that locates the very essence of morality in human caring. This notion of Caring as *philosophically necessary* to human morality is a scholarly innovation that impacts both the philosophical and the literary communities, as it offers an avenue for us to gain greater insight and a

²⁶ Chapter two offers a detailed examination of the history and development of the Ethics of Care as moral theory.

²⁷ A notable exception to this claim is the medical ethics focus on care in end-of-life decision-making.

deeper appreciation of literature from a new and significant philosophical perspective. Not even Aristotle, with his focus on virtuous character, concerned himself with what contemporary Care Ethicists call a genuine focus on Care as a guide to moral development.

In this chapter, I employ the philosophical lens of Care Ethics to demonstrate the important ways in which Care operates in moral decision-making. I chose *King Lear* precisely because the characters are undeniably either good or evil. My application of Care Ethics to their moral decision-making is not intended, therefore, to offer alternative interpretations of their characters, as I did in the previous chapter. Instead, I offer a reading of the characters' actions and decisions that is informed specifically by Care Ethics in order to demonstrate how the philosophy of care operates in a work of literature wherein Care is foundational. Lear and Gloucester, the tragic heroes of the plot and subplot, both find themselves in positions requiring others to care for them. Cordelia, Kent, the fool, and Edgar embrace their loved ones' needs—immediately engaging various approaches, strategies, and degrees of care for the play's heroes. Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, on the other hand, not only reject their roles as care-givers but also engage in overtly hostile behaviors toward their supposed loved ones. Using Care Ethics as a lens, we see that decisions regarding how we care about others are not only influenced by our existing morality but also motivate the ways in which we conduct the other aspects of our lives. Decisions regarding if, how, and to what degree we care, in other words, are influenced by who we already are, and they also play an important role in determining who we become.

In recent years, eminent scholars such as Nel Noddings, Virginia Held, and Michael Slote have reengaged with Aristotle's theory that benevolence—or altruistic human concern—is the highest secular motive. Originating with psychologist Carol Gilligan's seminal work on gender and morality, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982), the Ethics of Care explores the various ways that human beings express caring attitudes and respond to situations that call for benevolence. Michael Slote argues that action can only be considered moral if it is motivated by good or virtuous intentions involving a sense of benevolence or caring about others, "or at least doesn't come from bad or inferior motivation involving malice or indifference to humanity" (*Morals* 38). He clarifies an important distinction though, in that the motivation to act must be judged as entirely separate from any set of established rules or expected consequences concerning the action. Desired or anticipated results of an action, according to Slote, are clearly irrelevant. Likewise, motives for action are judged solely on how closely they approximate the motive of universal benevolence, which must be understood as the highest of human motives.

In a discussion of universal benevolence as ultimate motivator, the very idea of self-interest may seem out of place. Chapter seven of Slote's *Morals from Motives*, however, clarifies the important relationship between moral motivation and concern for self. Slote argues that self-interest is not only required by practical reason but actually serves as the foundation for all moral motivation. A lack of self-interest is, in other words, irrational, and we cannot hope to act from motives of benevolence or caring for others if we do not possess concern for ourselves. In this sense, the motive of care for others is directly derived from the motive of self-interest. Rooted in Aristotle's theory of

Eudaimonia (the good life), Slote's conception of self-interest relies on the generally accepted principle that people ultimately wish to be happy. We can only achieve ultimate happiness, however, if we appreciate love and friendship as two of life's great gifts; without them, we cannot possibly experience true personal fulfillment. Assuming, then, that the love of friends and family is a requirement for happiness, Slote asserts that without such love, we will naturally develop a sense of dysphoria. When we experience such feelings of joylessness, we will not be interested in helping others, and our actions will not likely be based on ideas of universal benevolence or care. By contrast, Slote explains, "The person who wants/seek[s] a good, rich, full life for herself may also want/seek to be of substantial help to intimates and other people generally in *their* lives" (184). In an effort to counter potential objections regarding the self-centeredness of such a theory (one that derives the motive of concern for others entirely from the motive of self-interest), Slote warns that "one's concern for near and dear [should] not be *dwarfed* by (typical, strong) self-concern, or, to put things slightly differently, the person's concern for friends and loved ones should motivationally *counterbalance* her concern for her own interests" (186). This proper balancing of concern—between ourselves, our loved ones, and our extended community—stands as a critical component of Slote's theory, without which we are incapable of achieving the good life to which we aspire.

The idea of counterbalance as the cornerstone for an ethics of care serves as an excellent point of departure for our discussion of *King Lear*. Genuine ethical caring, as outlined by neo-Aristotelian philosophers Nel Noddings, Virginia Held, and Michael Slote, operates in three distinct ways in *Lear*. Employing vastly different methods and strategies, Cordelia, Edgar, Kent, and the Fool effectively demonstrate sincere concern

for their loved ones. We will begin with King Lear's daughter, Cordelia, who is generally considered one of Shakespeare's most pure and selfless heroines. As the play opens, the elderly king has gathered his three daughters together for the purpose of dividing his kingdom among them, thereby divesting himself of the cares of state. In a vain and self-aggrandizing gesture that everyone except the king recognizes as dangerous, Lear decides to ration the kingdom according to which daughter can profess to love him the most. This behavior is typical of the aged king who has been fawned over all of his life and thoroughly enjoys the flattery. The two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, play immediately into their father's childish whim—pleasing the foolish old king with their grandiloquent and unctuous declarations of love. When the time comes for Cordelia (Lear's youngest and favorite daughter) to profess her love, however, she finds herself incapable of the inflated, false, and degrading flattery proclaimed by her sisters. Instead, Cordelia speaks simply and honestly, claiming that she loves Lear as a child should love a parent: "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty/ According to my bond, no more nor less" (I. i. 91-93). Naturally, this response enrages the king, who had been expecting Cordelia's protestation of love to be even "more opulent" than the others. When she refuses to revise her claim of duty, Lear reacts explosively, ultimately disowning his youngest daughter entirely, despite the Earl of Kent's heartfelt pleas on her behalf.

Suddenly dowerless, the virtuous Cordelia is rejected by the Duke of Burgundy, who had come to Lear's castle seeking Cordelia's hand in marriage. Fortunately, however, the King of France—Burgundy's rival for Cordelia's hand—recognizes her virtue and takes her as his wife: "Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor, / Most

choice forsaken, and most loved despised, / Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon. Be it lawful I take up what's cast away" (I. i. 250-54). With a rich and powerful husband who loves her and appreciates her worth, Cordelia now has an ethical decision to make. Should she leave with France and obey her father's command to terminate all contact and communication with him? It certainly would be the easy choice; she is now the Queen of France, after all, and could certainly busy herself with the demands of her new title and position. But Cordelia has already established herself as good, kind, and honest. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that despite her father's rash and cruel behavior toward her, she remains steadfast in her love and devotion to him. In fact, Cordelia beautifully exemplifies the virtues intrinsic to neo-Aristotelian care ethics.

After Cordelia is disowned by Lear, she leaves for France with her intended husband and she disappears from the immediate action of the play for a long period of time. The reader does not see Cordelia again until Act IV, scene iv, when she has arrived in Dover with the French army. Although the reader has not been directly privy to Cordelia's actions during the previous three Acts, the Earl of Kent (disguised as a servant to the king) reveals in Act II, scene ii and again in Act III, scene i, that he and Cordelia have been in correspondence regarding the spiteful actions of her sisters against her father, and that she is gathering the French forces to rescue Lear. Cordelia genuinely loves and cares about her father, and she realizes that he has begun to make some very poor decisions in his old age. His decision to disown Cordelia, divide his kingdom between Goneril and Regan, and take turns living with each of them for one month at a time, for example, is rash and ill-considered. All three daughters understand this and realize that no good can possibly come of it. The two older sisters are selfish, false, and

cold-hearted—incapable of giving their father the care and attention that he requires in his old age. Only Cordelia possesses the love, patience, and kindness that Lear will require now that he has abdicated his power. As Cordelia bids farewell to her sisters, she issues a warning that “Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides, / Who covers faults, at last shame them derides” (I. i. 280-281). Upon Cordelia’s departure, Goneril and Regan unfold their concern about their father’s failing judgment to one another. They know that the burden of caring for their father now rests entirely on their shoulders, and the thought of dealing with his erratic disposition and poor judgment unsettles them. Goneril says, “You see how full of changes his age is. The / observation we have made of it hath not been little. / He always loved our sister most, and with what poor / judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.” Regan’s response: “ ’Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself” (I. i. 288- 292) indicates their understanding that Lear’s lack of self-knowledge—a condition arising from naively believing his subjects’ false flattery for so long—will only be exacerbated as his mental faculties further decline with old age.

As indicated previously, Cordelia’s absence does not prevent her from monitoring the dramatic events transpiring between her father and sisters through correspondence with Kent and strategically-placed spies (disguised as servants) in Goneril and Regan’s households. As Lear moves with his rowdy train of 100 knights from one sister’s palace to the other’s, each reduces the number of attendants they will allow in his train until Goneril heartlessly suggests that Lear needs not even one knight to attend him. Cordelia knows through her contacts in England that her sisters have viciously allowed Lear to depart from their homes in a rage, with nowhere to take refuge from an approaching

storm. By the time Cordelia has assembled the French army and led them to Dover to rescue Lear, however, Lear has lost his sanity. Having experienced a dramatic and heart-wrenching emotional breakdown on the barren heath—with a wild storm raging all around him—the old king cannot sustain his connection with reality. Cordelia learns that he has been spotted wandering aimlessly in the fields after his breakdown, draped in flowers and weeds and singing to himself. Crestfallen by his degenerated condition, Cordelia's only concern lies with helping her father.

Once Lear is found and brought to the French camp at Dover, he collapses into a deep and long sleep. After sufficient time has passed, the doctor advises that Cordelia wake him gently to see if his wits are restored. Although it takes him a few moments to understand that he is alive—and has not been brought back from the grave—Lear's senses slowly return. In this very moving scene, he recognizes his loving daughter Cordelia and acknowledges the great wrong he has committed against her:

Lear: I am a very foolish fond old man,
 Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
 And, to deal plainly,
 I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
 [. . .]. Do not laugh at me,
 For, as I am a man, I think this lady
 To be my child Cordelia.

Cordelia: And so I am, I am.

Lear: Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not.
 If you have poison for me, I will drink it.

I know you do not love me; for your sisters

Have, as I remember, done me wrong.

You have some cause, they have not.

Cordelia: No cause, no cause. (IV. vii. 60 – 75)

Cordelia has been watching over her father from afar, and now that they have been reunited, she wants him to know that she has forgiven him and loves him unconditionally.

The story of Cordelia's care for her father beautifully illustrates some of the critical theories outlined in Nel Noddings' book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984). In this book, Noddings advances the philosophies introduced by psychologist Carol Gilligan in her seminal work *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982). As suggested in chapter two of this dissertation, Gilligan's work articulates her theory that men and women understand and treat moral problems differently. Initially written in response to Kohlberg's theory on the various stages of children's moral development, which claims that boys generally achieve a higher level of moral development than girls do, Gilligan's work sets forth an extensive criticism of Kohlberg's study methodology and assessment tools. One of her main arguments concerns Kohlberg's scoring method, which Gilligan insists favors principle-based reasoning over relation-based reasoning. Kohlberg concludes that boys achieve higher moral development than girls; but Gilligan argues that the study is faulty since boys commonly concentrate on principles and girls on relations in the moral decision-making process. Women, she argues, "tend to think of moral issues in terms of emotionally involved caring for others and connection *to* others, whereas most men see things in terms of autonomy *from* others and the just and rational application of rules or principles to problem situations" (Slote *Ethics of Care* 1). Gilligan's work provided a

scholarly context and fertile ground for the development of contemporary philosophical theories on the ethics of care.

Dr. Nel Noddings, philosopher and educational theorist, has produced groundbreaking research in the ethics of care and its relationship to education, social welfare, and family life. In *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), Noddings advances a view of ethics that she terms “feminine in the deep classical sense—rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” as opposed to the more masculine principles of ethics such as “justification, fairness, and equity” (1). The voice of the mother, Noddings argues, the voice of “human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for, which [. . .] form the foundation of ethical response” has been, to a large extent, silent. Whereas the field of ethics has primarily been guided by “Logos, the masculine spirit,” Noddings suggests that the more appropriate approach would be through “Eros, the feminine spirit” (1). Noddings argues that the real source, the very foundation of all ethical behavior is located in the “human affective response” (3). This view in no way suggests that all consideration of logic should be abandoned during the process of moral reasoning. By advancing a view that for women, moral action begins with a longing for goodness, however, Noddings clearly departs from conventional masculine principles of ethics.

Cordelia operates as a beautiful representation of Noddings’ feminine principle of ethics. From the very beginning, she demonstrates her honest and genuine love for her father and acknowledges her duty to him for the care he has provided: “You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I / Return those duties back as are right fit, / Obey you, love you, and most honor you” (I. i. 96-98). Failing to understand the sincerity and love inherent in

this response, Lear interprets Cordelia's words as harsh and "untender." But Lear is far off the mark here, for Cordelia understands the importance of care in a loving relationship. Her father has given her the gift of care all of her life; and she so cherishes this gift that she refuses to minimize its worth by "heaving [her] heart into [her] mouth" and showering Lear with false flattery (I. i. 93). Here, Cordelia's voice is that which Noddings calls the voice of "human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for, which [. . .] form the foundation of ethical response" (1). Clearly, Cordelia's moral action—stating her love for her father honestly—begins with a longing for goodness, which, according to Noddings, is a predominantly feminine approach to ethics.

Although Lear rashly disinherits Cordelia, her genuine love and care for her father is immediately evidenced by her efforts on his behalf behind the scenes. As discussed in Chapter Two, an essential requirement of care ethics is that the one-caring be fully engaged in the relationship—fully *present* in her commitment to the cared-for. Presence in this respect, however, does not necessitate constant *physical* presence; clearly, "acts at a distance bear the signs of presence: engrossment in the other, regard, desire for the other's well-being" (Noddings 19). Despite Cordelia's physical absence from Lear after Act I, scene I, she works feverishly on his behalf (without his knowledge)—mobilizing French troops under her new husband's command to save her father. As Noddings posits, human beings can usually perceive when others are not *wholly present* in their caring commitment, and when this occurs, the cared-for naturally feels unimportant and perhaps even non-existent. Cordelia irrefutably provides more effective care from a distance than her sisters Goneril and Regan, who use their physical presence as a weapon against their father.

Cordelia's care for Lear reflects her purely natural and genuine love for him. She recognizes and affirms the importance of "relatedness" in her family crisis; and such recognition and desire for relatedness, according to Noddings, constitutes the heart of care ethics. She is fully present as "one-caring" (despite her physical absence) and exhibits *genuine regard* for her father's plight. In this sense, we again see how care as a feminine aspect of ethics distinguishes itself from deontological and consequentialist theories. Since there are no rigidly established rules to be followed in care ethics, the care-giver must *genuinely* care. Cordelia's actions, in this instance, are not controlled by fixed rule and may therefore change from day to day. Despite the potential multifariousness of actions chosen by Cordelia, however, her actions on a global level are entirely predictable from a care ethics standpoint: since she genuinely cares, she consistently acts in a way that demonstrates her concern for Lear. Cordelia's actions clearly demonstrate Noddings' movement away from the notion of objective morality (i.e., morality based on logical, rational, rule or consequence-based decision making) and toward the very personal heart of care: "the conviction that an irremovable subjective core, a longing for goodness, provides what universality and stability there is in what it means to be moral" (Noddings 27). Cordelia beautifully illustrates this natural longing for goodness that Noddings insists rests at the heart of morality.

The longing for goodness in care ethics relates specifically to the concept of empathy, a term that, according to Noddings, has lost its real meaning in our rational western society. Noddings reminds us that the notion of empathy simply means "feeling with" another person; and this act is receptive in that I "receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other" (30). She argues that our contemporary understanding of

empathy denotes a masculine *projection* of self into other instead of a more feminine reception of other into self. This notion of empathy as projection even finds confirmation in the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*: **empathy**—“The power of projecting one’s personality into, and so fully understanding, the object of contemplation” (qtd. in Noddings 30). Such a definition promotes the use of clichés such as “walking a mile in someone else’s shoes” to convey empathy, for I am projecting myself into another’s position and then examining the situation in order to understand. On the contrary, Noddings insists, real empathy requires no analysis or projection, only receptivity and feeling.

Michael Slote concurs that empathy should be a matter of reception rather than projection. Slote posits that empathy “involves having the feelings of another (involuntarily) aroused in ourselves, as when we see another person in pain. It is as if their pain invades us; there is a contagion between what one person feels and what another comes to feel” (Slote *Ethics of Care* 13). Furthermore, Slote insists that a direct connection exists between empathy and altruistic behavior. Someone who is in distress, in other words, has a much greater chance of receiving help from a person (even a complete stranger) who feels empathic distress when faced with the pain of others (14). Where one person might walk away, removing himself from the other person’s pain or distress, the empathic person will in all likelihood act altruistically toward the one in distress. Genuine caring, then, is empathic caring, according to Slote. And it is this type of empathic caring that offers us a plausible standard of moral assessment.

From the beginning of the play, Cordelia, the Earl of Kent, and Lear’s Fool demonstrate the kind of empathic caring that Noddings and Slote discuss. These

characters exhibit no degree of self-interest in their initial efforts to guide Lear in the decision-making process or to protect him once he has stubbornly pursued a wrong-headed course of action. Kent works diligently to convince Lear that he should neither disinherit Cordelia nor divide his kingdom between the two selfish, manipulative daughters. His empathic caring manifests itself in his pleas on Cordelia's behalf in Act I— immediately after Lear has disowned Cordelia. Before Kent can articulate his concerns about Lear's rash decision, Lear warns him that "The bow is bent and drawn," and that he should avoid becoming the arrow's next victim (I. i. 143). Clearly, Lear has worked himself into a heightened state of anxiety, and he is warning Kent that one wrong word may result in his own banishment. But Kent is not worried about his own well-being; his empathic concern is for Cordelia only, whom he recognizes as Lear's only sincere and honest daughter. In a bold stand against Lear's irrational decision, Kent defends Cordelia: "What wouldst thou do, old man? / Thinkst thou that duty shall have dread to speak / When power to flattery bows? To plainness honor's / bound / When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state, / And in thy best consideration check / This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgment, / Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least, / Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness" (I. i. 146-153). Despite Lear's increasing fury, Kent persists in Cordelia's defense: "Revoke thy gift, / Or whilst I can vent clamor from my throat, / I'll tell thee thou dost evil" (I. i. 164-166). Kent fully understands his own precarious position in the court of this imprudent king, yet he has become so indignant about Lear's injustice toward Cordelia that he remains steadfast in her cause. Even after Lear follows through with his threat and banishes Kent, the good earl's parting words to Cordelia demonstrate his selfless,

empathic concern for her: “The gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid, / That justly think’st, and hast most rightly said” (I. i. 183- 84). In this scene, Kent demonstrates the kind of connection between empathy and altruism that Slote views as essential to genuine caring. Openly receptive to Cordelia’s feelings of loss and betrayal, Kent works altruistically on her behalf— risking dire consequence and ultimately suffering a similar proscription.

Despite his banishment, Kent silently vows his continued loyalty to the king. This action does not arise from a sense of blind allegiance, however. Instead, Kent’s determination to continue his service to Lear stems from his genuine love for the king and his desire to protect him not only from his own poor judgment but also from his vicious daughters. Disguising his appearance and accent, therefore, Kent determines to secure employment as a servant to Lear. He contemplates this course of action as he prepares to approach Lear: “Now, banished Kent, / If thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemned, / So may it come, thy master whom thou lov’st / Shall find thee full of labors” (I. iv. 4-7). Kent so loves the aged and foolhardy king that he rejects the possibility of leaving at a time when he believes Lear needs him most. Genuine empathic care motivates Kent’s decision here. Disregarding an order of banishment from the king and pursuing a more difficult course of action than if he had obeyed the order and remained independent, Kent anticipates Lear’s needs and remains receptive to his feelings.

Despite King Lear’s rash and foolish behavior, Kent remains loyal by serving the king in disguise, and Cordelia remains true by gathering the French army to rescue her father. But Lear also has the good fortune of having his kind-hearted Fool by his side: a

court jester who employs witticisms in an attempt to guide Lear's decision-making in the beginning of the play, and offers his comfort and support as Lear's situation progressively worsens. Naturally, since he is the court jester, his remarks are cleverly disguised as jokes and riddles; but the fool's cheeky comments fail to conceal his genuine concern for the foolish old king. Soon after Lear has divided his kingdom between Goneril and Regan, for example, the fool says, "Nuncle, give me an egg, and I'll give thee two crowns." Lear asks, "What two crowns shall they be?" And the fool responds: "Why, after I have cut the egg i' th' middle and / Eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou / Clovest thy crown I' th' middle and gav'st away both / Parts, thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt. / Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou / Gav'st thy golden one away (I. iv. 158-165). Lear's fool, who is always close by, offers a plethora of such admonishments, most of which the king bears patiently as the random musings of a fool. But Kent understands that the fool is demonstrating real insight into Lear's misguided decision-making. After reciting a rhyme in which the fool suggests that Lear should be the one wearing motley, Lear asks, "Dost thou call me fool, boy?" When the fool responds, "All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with," Kent immediately observes: "This is not altogether fool, my lord" (I. iv. 150-153). But at this point in Act I, Lear is yet unconvinced of the egregious error he has made. That fact does not become clear to him until his two vicious daughters have, individually and as a team, abused, berated, and degraded him throughout the entirety of Act II.

Act II concludes at Gloucester's castle, where Goneril and Regan have met to demonstrate their solidarity against their father. The daughters have reduced Lear's

retinue from one hundred to fifty knights, to twenty-five— ultimately suggesting that he really needs not even *one* attendant with him. Unable to endure the cruelty of this last humiliation, Lear finally accepts the enormity of his folly. As the tempests outside and within Lear's mind begin to rage, Lear storms out of the castle. Turning to his loyal fool, Lear admits his tenuous grasp of reality: "O Fool, I shall go mad!" (II. iv. 283). In the subsequent scenes, the fool's actions reveal a loyalty that is rooted in genuine compassion and increasing empathy for the king. Although we never learn what becomes of the knights in Lear's train, we assume that they disperse and go their own ways when they realize that Lear can no longer support their high-maintenance lifestyle. Lear's fool, however, stays by his side—even as Lear rages at the gods and the elements in the wild storm on the heath. The fool makes a valiant effort to protect the king by coaxing him out of the storm and into shelter, even suggesting that Lear swallow his pride by returning to Gloucester's castle: "O nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is / better than this rain water out o' door. Good nuncle, / in; ask thy daughters blessing. Here's a night pities / neither wise man nor fools" (III. ii. 10-13). But Lear's dramatic break with reality prevents any engagement with common-sense decisions. And when he refuses to take shelter, his fool (who has not lost his sanity) demonstrates true empathy by allowing himself to be battered by the tempest right alongside Lear. The fool's empathic concern for Lear manifests itself in a very explicit sense here, as he literally opens his heart and body to receive the anguish and physical punishment that Lear is experiencing. Scholars still debate the significance of the fool's final lines at the end of this scene: "And I'll go to bed at noon" (III. iv. 84). Some suggest that, since these are the last lines he speaks—and they are in the middle of the play—that is merely Shakespeare's way of writing the

fool out of the play “at noon”—i.e., half-way through the play. Others argue that the storm has been too much for him and these are the fool’s dying words. He is, in other words, dying in the noon-time of his life—i.e., half-way through his life. If we interpret the fool’s last words as a death-bed statement, then we must understand his loyalty on the heath as heroically self-sacrificing.

As previously discussed, care ethics requires some degree of reciprocity. One-caring, Noddings posits, must be met somewhere on the pathway by cared-for or the relation will break down.²⁸ But what happens when one-caring still *genuinely cares* despite cared-for’s lack of recognition or reciprocity in the relationship? The maintenance of care by one-caring under these circumstances becomes challenging in the extreme. Naturally, we want to be recognized and appreciated by those to whom we dedicate our care. Even infants respond to their caregivers’ love by looking into their eyes and smiling or giggling. This is enough reciprocity for one-caring, whose efforts at making the baby happy are so obviously satisfied. As we know, however, adults often surprise us with behaviors that we find difficult to explain or accept. One such behavior concerns cared-for’s refusal, for whatever reason, to reciprocate or even acknowledge the efforts made in his behalf by one-caring. When cared-for declines to meet one-caring somewhere on the path, one-caring can either stop caring or continue to care in a real and genuine fashion (Noddings 69-74). The latter course of action—and it *is* action, as one-caring initiates and sustains effort in cared-for’s behalf—is taxing both physically and emotionally.

In *King Lear*, non-reciprocity of care manifests itself through both the title character (Lear) and the tragic hero of the subplot, Gloucester. Since the king has no idea

²⁸ See Chapter 2 for a complete discussion of reciprocity in Care Ethics.

that Cordelia is working feverishly on his behalf from afar, he cannot possibly reciprocate by acknowledging or appreciating her as one-caring. Although she is “fully present” in her long distance role as one-caring, she does not reveal her plan to Lear; he cannot, therefore, be expected to meet her half-way as cared-for. Likewise, Gloucester does not know that his faithful son Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, a Bedlam beggar, is the one caring for him after his eyes are gouged out by the evil Duke of Cornwall. Gloucester accepts the assistance of his two loyal servants who bandage his bleeding eyes after he is blinded and thrust out of his own castle. But when an old man (Gloucester’s long-time tenant) tries to serve as his guide, Gloucester begs to be left alone: “Away, get thee away; good friend, be gone: / Thy comforts can do me no good at all” (IV. i. 15-16). When they take shelter in the hovel and find Poor Tom hiding there, Gloucester eagerly requests that Tom become his guide because, as he says, “ ’Tis the time’s plague, when madmen lead the blind” (IV. i. 46). Giving Tom the entire contents of his purse, Gloucester asks Tom to lead him to the very edge of one of the high cliffs of Dover. “From that place,” Gloucester says, “I shall no leading need” (IV. i. 77-78). Demonstrating gratitude by verbal affirmation and the gift of money to Poor Tom, Gloucester proves his willingness to participate in the ethical give-and-take of caring offered by Poor Tom. But is he, according to the philosophical standards of neo-Aristotelian Care Ethics, truly receptive of the care offered by his son Edgar? And more importantly, can the relationship between Edgar and his father be characterized as one of caring? I would argue that the answer to both questions is a definite no.

Nel Noddings offers excellent support for this position in what she calls a “logical analysis of the caring relation” (68). Noddings argues that two factors must be present in

order for a caring relationship to exist: 1.) The cared-for must understand that the one-caring truly has an attitude of caring for him, and 2.) This attitude of caring must successfully impact the cared-for. Furthermore, if X (cared-for) does not recognize that Y (one-caring) actually cares, we must accept the fact that a caring relation does not exist. Noddings fully realizes that it may seem paradoxical that one-caring must rely on the cooperation of cared-for (via recognition and understanding) in order for the caring relation to exist. She therefore expounds the theory:

Caring involves two parties: the one-caring and the cared-for. It is complete when it is fulfilled in both. [. . .] Suppose I claim to care for X, but X does not believe that I care for him. If I meet the first-person requirements of caring for X, I am tempted to insist that I do care—that there is something wrong with X that he does not appreciate my caring. But if you are looking at this relationship, you would have to report, however reluctantly, that something is missing. X does not feel that I care. Therefore, sadly, I must admit that, while I feel that I care, X does not perceive that I care and, hence, the relationship cannot be characterized as one of caring. This result does not necessarily signify a negligence on my part. There are limits in caring. X may be paranoid or otherwise pathological. There may be no way for my caring to reach him. But, then, caring has been only partly actualized. (68)

The act of caring, then, can only be completed when cared-for recognizes and receives the care. Certainly, one-caring can choose to continue her care despite cared-for's lack of

receptivity. One-caring, however, must then accept the fact that she is working in an incomplete relation.

When the blinded Gloucester encounters Poor Tom in the hovel and solicits his assistance in climbing to the top of one of the cliffs, he fully believes that he is being aided by a madman who will allow him to fall to his death. In reality, of course, he is being led by his loyal son Edgar, who would never allow his beloved father to jump off the cliff. In this scene, there can be no question that Edgar is fully engaged as one-caring. In the hovel prior to their departure for Dover, Gloucester confesses his previous blindness and consequent wrong-doing to his loyal son, whom he believes he has lost forever: "I have no way and therefore want no eyes; / I stumbled when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen, / Our means secure us, and our mere defects / Prove our commodities. O dear son Edgar, / The food of thy abusèd father's wrath! / Might I but live to see thee in my touch, / I'd say I had eyes again!" (IV. i. 17-22). In this scene, of course, Gloucester is speaking to the Old Man (his tenant) and Poor Tom, fearing that he will never have an opportunity to beg forgiveness of Edgar. But Edgar has heard the confession and is crestfallen at the sight of his father's degradation; he therefore resolves to guide his father and protect him from further injury. A logical question at this particular juncture might be: Why does Edgar choose not to disclose his real identity to Gloucester at this time? After all, one would think that the knowledge that he is now under the care of his beloved son instead of a madman would have to provide great joy and comfort to the blinded old duke. But Edgar decides not to reveal his identity, instead allowing his father to believe that he is being led to a location suitable for his suicidal intentions. What could possibly motivate

this seemingly irrational decision? A sufficient answer may be found in three varieties of Care Ethics: non-rational care, natural care, and ethical care.

Nel Noddings suggests that genuine caring—the kind that springs from the very heart of the care-giver—is, in a very basic sense, non-rational. In order to explain her position, Noddings calls upon a theory provided by child development psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner: “In order to develop, a child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with the child.” When asked to clarify his use of the term “irrational,” Bronfenbrenner explains, “Somebody has got to be crazy about that kid!” (qtd. in Noddings 61). Noddings believes the same must be true in caring situations between adults. The attitude of the care-giver, in other words, “is a total conveyance of self to other, a continual transformation of individual to duality to new individual to new duality. Neither the engrossment of the one-caring nor the perception of attitude by the cared-for is rational; that is, neither is reasoned” (61). The basic relationship in genuine caring, then, is not rational; the care-giver, quite simply, is crazy about the cared-for. In exploring the Edgar-Gloucester relationship, it is clear that Edgar loves and respects his father unconditionally; he is crazy about him. Edgar loves his father the same when he is the noble son Edgar as he does when he becomes Poor Tom the beggar, or a country peasant (the accent he adopts after Gloucester thinks he has fallen from the cliff and survived by some miracle). His love for his father is unrelenting whether Gloucester is a noble and kind Duke, a rash and wrathful father, or a repentant, humbled old man. Regardless of their individual identities, the new dualities they form together, or the decisions they make, Edgar’s love for Gloucester is steadfast and his caring assured.

The next type of care we can associate with Edgar is what Noddings calls “natural caring.” Natural caring, as we shall see, shares a close connection with ethical caring. Noddings argues, however, that natural caring holds a position of primacy, as it exists as a precondition for ethical caring. She explains that “morality as an ‘active virtue’ requires two feelings and not just one. The first is the sentiment of natural caring. There can be no ethical sentiment without the initial, enabling sentiment. In situations where we act on behalf of the other because we want to do so, we are acting in accord with natural caring” (79). Edgar’s natural desire to care for his father is incontestable. But his method and approach to caring for the lost and blinded Gloucester reveal an ethical complexity far beyond mere natural caring. Noddings argues that ethical caring requires a certain effort that is not necessary to natural caring. The one-caring, in other words, experiences a conflict between his own personal desires and whatever he feels must be done for the other. He feels that he “must” do something for the other despite his strong desire not to. This type of ethical caring, according to Noddings, occurs in response to our fondest memories of receiving and giving care:

The memory of our own best moments of caring and being cared for sweeps over us as a feeling— as an “I must”— in response to the plight of the other and our conflicting desire to serve our own interests. [. . .] When I encounter an other and feel the natural pang conflicted with my own desires—“I must— I do not want to”— I recognize the feeling and remember what has followed it in my own best moments. I have a picture of those moments in which I was cared for and in which I cared, and I may

reach toward this memory and guide my conduct by it if I wish to do so.

(80)

Edgar's decision not to reveal his true identity to his father may be understood through this lens of ethical caring. Upon seeing the tragedy of his own father— blinded and bandaged— Edgar's natural inclination would surely be to reach out to his father, tell him that all is forgiven, that his loving son is there to care for him now, and that all will be well. But Edgar resists the personal desire to reveal this emotionally-charged information to a man in such a fragile, vulnerable state. The pain and humiliation Gloucester has experienced has devastated him, and Edgar does not know if his father would be able to handle the additional stress of confronting the son he has wronged. But it pains Edgar to keep his identity undisclosed. Although he never explains his reasoning explicitly, Edgar's *Asides* reveal how difficult this decision is for him. In Act IV, scene I, for example, when Edgar (as Poor Tom) has agreed to lead Gloucester to Dover, Edgar says [*Aside*]: I cannot daub it further. / [. . .] / And yet I must.—Bless thy sweet eyes, they bleed" (53-54). And when they arrive at what Gloucester believes to be the top of a cliff, he bids Poor Tom farewell, asking him to leave: "Go thou further off; / Bid me farewell, and let me hear thee going." Edgar responds, "Now fare ye well, good sir. [*Aside*] Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (IV. vi. 30-33). Here, Edgar indicates that his intention in playing along with Gloucester's desire to end his life is to somehow bring his father back to his senses. It is a difficult role to play, but Edgar feels strongly that this is the only way to cure Gloucester's despair.

As the play winds toward conclusion, the French army has lost the battle, Lear and Cordelia have been imprisoned, and Edgar has defeated Edmund in a duel. Edgar

relates his entire experience as Poor Tom to Albany, who has asked where he had hidden and how he had known what happened to his father. After telling the tale, Edgar explains that he finally revealed his true identity to his father half an hour earlier: “I asked his blessing, and from first to last / Told him our pilgrimage. But his flawed heart--/ Alack too weak the conflict to support--/ ’Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, / Burst smilingly” (V. iii. 196-200). Clearly, Edgar had made the right ethical decision in not divulging his identity to his emotionally over-wrought father earlier. He believed, however, that Gloucester—who was no longer despairing and suicidal—would now be capable of handling the emotional reunion with his loyal son. Unfortunately, Edgar misjudged his father’s physical strength; the knowledge of his tender son’s ministrations was just too much for Gloucester’s fragile heart. Despite his father’s death, however, Edgar clearly engages in both natural and ethical caring for Gloucester throughout the play. He does not need overarching principles to guide his behavior. Instead, as Noddings, suggests, Edgar simply calls upon his best memories of caring and being cared for in order to motivate him beyond natural caring and into the more challenging realm of ethical caring.

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, my intention is to examine both good and evil characters in *King Lear* through the lens of neo-Aristotelian Care Ethics in order to determine the role or significance of gender in the characters’ ethical decision-making processes. Noddings and Gilligan have both concluded that the essential concept of “care” as a motivator to ethical decision-making is guided more by the feminine spirit (Eros)— the approach of the mother, than by the masculine spirit (Logos)— the approach of the detached one. Neither scholar suggests, of course, that care cannot be embraced

and practiced by men, only that care is rooted in ideals that they consider more feminine than masculine— “receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” (Noddings 2). Gilligan argues that men tend to focus on principles and logic while women concentrate on relations in the moral decision-making process. Women commonly assess moral issues in terms of caring for others and becoming emotionally connected to others, whereas men generally look at how rules and existing rational principles can be used to solve moral problems. In Gilligan’s article titled “Woman’s Place in Man’s Life Cycle” (*Harvard Educational Review*), Gilligan says, “Women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Woman’s place in man’s life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies” (440). What, then, can be said about the good characters in *Lear*? Three of the four truly virtuous characters in the play are men (Kent, Edgar, and the Fool) and only one (Cordelia) is a woman. Certainly, all four of these characters serve as nurturers, caretakers, and helpmates. Kent, Edgar, and the Fool demonstrate high degrees of caring in their relationships with others— certainly comparable to the level of care exhibited by Cordelia . Furthermore, as I shall discuss momentarily, two of the exceedingly wicked characters in the play are Lear’s own daughters, Goneril and Regan. Standing in diametric opposition to the positions advanced by Noddings and Gilligan, the behavior of Lear’s evil daughters calls into question the theory that women care primarily about relationships and emotional connection to others in the moral decision-making process. I will discuss the unethical behaviors of Goneril and Regan simultaneously since they present a unified front against their father. Granted, the relationship between the sisters becomes increasingly contentious as the play

progresses— with each sister vying for the attentions of the cunning Edmund. Ultimately, in a grand act of jealousy, revenge, and self-loathing, Goneril poisons Regan and kills herself.²⁹ The sisters do not turn against each other, however, until they have acted in vicious solidarity against Lear. It is precisely this cruelty toward their aged father that I will focus on here.

In order to appreciate the full extent of their evil, it is important to understand how maliciously Goneril and Regan deceive Lear at the beginning of the play. Remember that Lear has decided to divest himself of all cares of state by dividing his territories among his daughters. In determining who shall receive the largest parcel, Lear vainly decides to make his gifts dependent on each daughter's protestation of love for him: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge" (I. i. 51-53). Both daughters immediately offer oleaginous declarations, Goneril first: "Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter; / Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty; / Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare; / No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor; / As much as child e'er loved, or father found; / A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable: / Beyond all manner of so much I love you" (55-61). Next, Regan assures her father that she is made of that "self mettle as my sister," but that Goneril's declaration of love actually falls short of her own. In fact, she insists, "I profess / Myself an enemy to all other joys / Which the most precious square of sense professes, / And find I am alone felicitate / In your dear

²⁹ Goneril and Regan both fall in love with Edmund, who deceitfully pledges his love to both women. Regan's husband Cornwall is fatally wounded by a servant at the end of Act III. Goneril's jealousy is inflamed by the knowledge that her sister, now a widow, will legally be able to pursue her relationship with Edmund. She therefore enlists Edmund's service in planning to murder her husband Albany, and she poisons Regan. When her plot against Albany is discovered and Edmund confesses his involvement, Goneril kills herself. Shortly thereafter, Edmund dies from the mortal injury he received at Edgar's hands.

highness' love" (72-76). Lear is extremely pleased with these false and hyperbolic testimonies, and he looks to Cordelia for a "third more opulent than your sisters" (86). When she expresses her love simply and sincerely—"I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more or less" (93-94)—Lear becomes incensed at what he interprets as her "untender" speech. As previously discussed, he disinherits Cordelia entirely, dividing all of his territory between the two fulsome sisters. We learn quickly from Kent, Cordelia, and even Goneril and Regan themselves that their exaggerated protestations of love were offered in the spirit of greed, not truth. The cunning sisters acknowledge Lear's poor judgment in casting Cordelia off so rashly, and they vow to work together in their dealings with the old king. Goneril says, "Pray you, let's hit / together; if our father carry authority with such / disposition as he bears, this last surrender of his will / but offend us. [. . .] We must do something, and i' th' heat" (I. i. 302-305). Thus, we learn at the very beginning that these two deceitful sisters are willing to work as a team to ensure that Lear's ill-considered decisions do not begin to inconvenience them. They are not thinking of ways to care for their father in his old age—how to help him, make him feel welcome and comfortable in their homes, show their gratitude for everything he has given them. Instead, they are thinking only of themselves, selfishly planning how to prevent Lear's interference in their lives.

One of Lear's conditions upon abdication of his crown is that he and his retinue of one hundred knights will take up residence at each of his daughter's castles for one month intervals. Naturally, the daughters agree to the conditions at the time, as Lear is bestowing authority, wealth, and property upon them. As soon as Lear and his train move in with Goneril, however, the eldest daughter's true nature is revealed and the problems

begin. Goneril's harsh ingratitude and disrespect for her father are first displayed in Act I, scene iii, when she encourages Oswald (her steward) to be negligent of Lear's needs and demands. She claims that Lear's attendants are too riotous, that Lear himself is behaving like a child, and that the situation must be brought under control. "If he distaste it," Goneril says to Oswald, "let him to my sister, / Whose mind and mine I know in that are one, / Not to be overruled. Idle old man, / That still would manage those authorities / That he hath given away. Now, by my life, / Old fools are babes again, and must be used / With checks and flatteries, when they are seen abused" (I. iii. 15-21). We must remember that Lear has just handed tremendous power over to Goneril, as well as half of his property. It is certainly within her authority and financial means to provide adequate space and provisions for Lear and his retinue. But these are not actually the issues at the heart of Goneril's displeasure; in reality, Goneril and her sister want to shed themselves entirely of the responsibility of their aged father. Their unspoken but obvious intention, therefore, is to create living conditions that prove undesirable and unacceptable to Lear. Goneril makes the first move by reducing his retinue by fifty knights, a cruel and insulting action that greatly offends Lear. When Goneril presents a weak and unconvincing case suggesting that she fears for the safety of her own household members in the presence of this rowdy train of knights, her husband Albany responds that she "fears too far" (I. iv. 329). Here, Goneril essentially admits that her fears are unfounded by telling Albany that she'd rather fear too far than "trust too far" (330). She chides her husband for his "milky gentleness" in refusing to support her actions against Lear, to which he responds: "How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell; / Striving to better, oft we mar what's well" (I. iv. 347-48). This comment reveals two important truths: Albany

understands his wife's potential for evil, and he knows that there is no justifiable cause to "mar what's well" by reducing Lear's retinue.

Far from being "fully present" as ones-caring, Goneril and Regan strive consciously to be as absent as possible to avoid the responsibility of caring for their aged father. In fact, when Regan receives word that Lear is on his way to her castle, she and her husband Cornwall purposefully leave their estate so they will not be home to receive him. Upon finally arriving at Gloucester's castle, where he assumes he will find his daughter Regan, Lear is mortified by yet another indignity: Regan and Cornwall have put Lear's messenger (Kent) in the stocks! In sheer disbelief over this scandalous action, Lear denies that it could be true: "They durst not do't; / They could not, would not do't. 'Tis worse than murder / To do upon respect such violent outrage" (II. iii. 22-24). Obviously, Regan is keeping her promise to operate in league with her sister, heaping insults and indignities upon Lear's heart and mind until he breaks.

It is worth noting here that despite Lear's often rash, petulant, and highly explosive temperament, he is actually just "a very foolish fond old man"—extremely sensitive and easily wounded by word and deed (IV. vii. 60). Unable (and perhaps unwilling) to find a healthy balance between states of devastation and fury, Lear reacts to his daughters' unkind actions by moving seamlessly between rage and heart-break. When Goneril reduces his retinue by half, for instance, Lear simultaneously cries, yells, and curses his daughter: "Life and death, I am ashamed / That thou has power to shake my manhood thus! / That these hot tears, which break from me perforce, / Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon thee! / Th' untented woundings of a father's curse / Pierce every sense about thee!" (I. iv. 298-303). Never one to conceal his emotions, Lear

makes sure that everyone around him knows exactly how he is feeling at all times. Exhibiting wild and erratic moods swings between despair and rage throughout the play, Lear heaps curses upon others one moment and finds himself weeping inconsolably the next.

Perhaps the most reasonable explanation for Lear's tenuous emotional state is simply his advanced age. Because he is "Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less," he has decided to "shake all cares and business from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths, while we / Unburthened crawl toward death" (IV. vii. 61; I. i. 39-41). He just wants his life to be easy now that he is old, and he believes that his daughters and their husbands will take care of him. He has, after all, given them everything— power, authority, all of his material wealth— not to mention a lifetime of fatherly care, education, and love (as Cordelia graciously indicates in the first scene). But Goneril has no intention of showing gratitude for her many gifts. After she has reduced his retinue and Lear has stormed off to live with Regan instead, Lear clearly states that he wants, needs, and expects Regan to keep her end of the bargain— to care for him, respect his needs and wishes, behave like a grateful daughter: " 'Tis not in thee / To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my train, / To bandy hasty words, to scant my sizes, / And, in conclusion, to oppose the bolt / Against my coming in. Thou better know'st / The offices of nature, bond of childhood, / Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude. / Thy half o' th' kingdom hast thou not forgot, / Wherein I thee endowed" (II. iv. 170-77). In discussing the plight of the blinded Gloucester, who is cared for by his disguised son Edgar, and Lear, who is cared for by the disguised Earl of Kent, we saw that the "cared-for" has an important role in the caring relationship. If the "cared-for" does not acknowledge the

efforts of the care-giver or does not reciprocate by meeting the one-caring somewhere on the road, the relationship cannot be characterized as truly caring because it is incomplete, only partly actualized. In the case of Lear and his two daughters, however, Lear most certainly does his part to meet his care-givers half-way. He hands everything over to them in exchange for their care. The conditions are clearly established from the beginning; everyone involved understands and accepts them, and all that is left to do is abide by those conditions as Lear crawls toward death.

Goneril and Regan, however, prove quite unwilling to complete the caring relationship. Nel Noddings explains such a relationship through the lens of Gabriel Marcel's existentialist theory of "indisposability." According to Marcel, one who is "disposable" demonstrates a readiness to "spend oneself and make oneself available. [. . .] She does not identify herself with her objects and possessions. She is present to the cared-for" (qtd. in Noddings 19). Goneril and Regan, on the contrary, display an attitude of "indisposability." Such persons come across "even to one physically present as absent, as elsewhere. When I am with someone who is indisposable, I am conscious of being with someone for whom I do not exist; I am thrown back on myself" (Marcel qtd. in Noddings 19). In a relationship wherein the care-giver is indisposable, the cared-for feels no warmth, comfort, or engrossment from the one-caring. Quite simply, the one-caring does not truly care. This is the devastating truth that Lear learns about his daughters as they degrade and humiliate him throughout Act II. Despite Lear's hearted pleas to what he hopes is Regan's nobler spirit, she remains steadfast in her allegiance to Goneril. Entirely indisposable, absent in her role as care-giver, Regan not only turns Lear's retinue away but also tells Lear that he must apologize to Goneril, finish the month with her, and

then come back when she is ready for him: “I looked not for you yet,” she says, “nor am provided / For your fit welcome” (II. iv. 229-30). Both daughters reject Lear’s efforts to receive the care he needs, instead taking turns reducing his retinue further and further until Regan viciously suggests that he needs not even one attendant. We must remember that neither daughter refuses to care for Lear himself; they merely reject the original terms of Lear’s abdication— that he and his one hundred knights would live with each daughter for one month intervals. As he reminds them, “I made you my guardians, my depositaries, / But kept a reservation to be followed / With such a number” (II. iv. 248-50). Lear quite correctly views their refusal to accommodate his full retinue as a breach of contract— one that both daughters eagerly accepted when Lear was in the process of dividing his kingdom.

Act II, scene iv, wherein Goneril and Regan take turns reducing Lear’s train until they have eradicated it entirely, reveals the truly heartless nature of both women. They can clearly see how distraught their father is becoming over their harsh, unreasonable demands, but his outbursts of sorrow and ire merely fuel their ruthlessness. When Regan suggests that she will accommodate no more than twenty-five knights with Lear, he reminds her: “I gave you all.” Far from grateful, however, Regan responds with hostile ingratitude: “And in good time you gave it” (II. iv. 246-47). Faced with the offensive reality of keeping only twenty-five knights, Lear turns back to Goneril, concluding that she must love him twice as much as Regan since she is allowing him to keep fifty knights. But this idea is quickly dismissed when Goneril asks, “What need you five-and-twenty? ten? or five?” And showing no whit of mercy, Regan deals the final blow: “What need one?” (II. iv. 58-60). Lear’s “reason not the need!” response is one of the most well-

known and heart-wrenching passages in the play. In it, Lear realizes that he has fallen from great heights to miserable depths. A powerful, respected king of England only days ago, Lear has been effectively reduced to nothing. What he has not voluntarily given to his daughters, they have viciously stripped from him, and now— unable to mentally and emotionally process this stupefying ordeal— the old king fears (rightly) that he will lose his mind:

O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's. [. . .]
You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age, wretched in both.
If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water drops,
Stain my man's cheeks. [. . .].
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep. O Fool, I shall go mad! (II. iv. 262-80)

This scene poignantly illustrates the power that care-givers can wield over the cared-for if they so desire. Literally at the mercy of his daughters, Lear must either dismiss all of his loyal attendants and resign himself to a sad and lonely existence, or reject his daughters' harsh edict, leave the castle with his train, and face the approaching tempest.

Noddings addresses this type of abusive behavior, suggesting that real danger exists when the care-giver lacks the love required by natural caring or the sense of justice required by ethical caring. When this occurs, the cared-for finds himself at the mercy of a potentially cruel “other.” The cared-for has no immediate power or authority, and can only hope that his care-giver “will care, will receive, will extend a hand to help.” If this does not happen, Noddings posits, “every depravity conceived and yet to be conceived is a real possibility” (107). Unfortunately, we see such depravity at the end of Act II, as Lear flies from Gloucester’s castle in high rage. Instead of mustering one iota of justice or compassion for their aged father, the wicked daughters command Gloucester to shut up his doors against the oncoming storm—and against Lear’s re-entry. When Gloucester expresses deep concern for his dear old friend’s safety in such a wild tempest, the daughters reveal their true depravity; “My lord, entreat him by no means to stay,” Goneril commands Gloucester. And Regan’s moral degeneracy even allows her to feel justified in blaming Lear for any injuries that may befall him: “O, sir, to willful men / The injuries that they themselves procure / Must be their schoolmasters. Shut up your doors” (II. iv. 299-301). This traumatic scenario illustrates the potential for depravity to which Noddings refers when the care-giver does not possess the capacity for natural or ethical caring.

It seems, however, that in examining such reprehensible behaviors, we must look beyond the ideals of natural and ethical caring; we must inquire into the role of justice in an ethic of care. Philosopher Virginia Held extensively discusses the relationship between justice and care in her book *The Ethics of Care As Moral Theory*. Held explains that some care ethics scholars believe that an ethic of justice contrasts so sharply with ideas of

care that the two ethics cannot co-exist within the same moral theory. The reason for this perceived division lies in the focus of the two ethics:

An ethic of justice focuses on questions of fairness, equality, individual rights, abstract principles, and the consistent application of them. An ethic of care focuses on attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations. Whereas an ethic of justice seeks a fair solution between competing individual interests and rights, an ethic of care sees the interests of carers and cared-for as importantly intertwined rather than as simply competing. Whereas justice protects equality and freedom, care fosters social bonds and cooperation. (Held 15)

Ideas of justice and care undoubtedly emphasize very different aspects of ethics, which has motivated moral theorists to view them as mutually exclusive. But such a division has become increasingly unacceptable to care ethicists such as Virginia Held, who argues that since justice and care both hold great moral importance, they should be seen in tandem with one another. Furthermore, as the most deeply fundamental value, care actually “provides the wider and deeper ethics within which justice should be sought” (Held 17). According to Held, in other words, if we understand the ethics of care properly, we see that justice is an important part of the practice of care. This does not mean, of course, that the ethics of care is superior to justice ethics— only that it provides a sufficient framework within which considerations of justice may be made. Held posits that “Equitable caring is not necessarily better caring, it is fairer caring. And humane justice is not necessarily better justice, it is more caring justice” (16). Although it is possible to

administer care without considering how justice is specifically served in each situation, values such as fairness and individual rights certainly enhance the ethics of caring.

Unfortunately, ideals associated with justice are not a part of the program that Goneril and Regan have mapped out for their father. Their care involves no level of humane justice, no consideration of what might be fair or right or equitable to Lear. Instead, they mask their unjust treatment of the old king with irrelevant arguments about his age, his unreasonable demands, and the potential problems that Lear's attendants might pose. Goneril and Regan physically demonstrate their solidarity, for instance, by taking one another by the hand. When Lear inquires why Regan would take Goneril (who has at this point reduced his train to fifty men) by the hand, Regan chooses to ignore Lear's concern about her sister's harsh decision. Instead, she allows Goneril the pleasure of responding: "Why not by th' hand, sir? How have I offended? / All's not offense that indiscretion finds / And dotage terms so" (II. iv. 191-91). This smug reply is merely a strategy of diversion—meant to distract Lear from the issue of his retinue and make him feel enfeebled and incompetent. Regan strengthens the impact of this offense with a direct suggestion: "I pray you, father, being weak, seem so" and a moment later: "Give ear, sir, to my sister, / For those that mingle reason with your passion / Must be content to think you old" (II. iv. 198; 231-33). Once they have sufficiently abused him for being old, they attempt to persuade him that their decision to reduce his numbers is founded in logic and reason. Regan insists that having so many followers is dangerous and expensive: "Both charge and danger / speak 'gainst so great a number. How in one house / Should many people, under two commands, / Hold amity? 'Tis hard, almost impossible" (II. iv. 236-39). Goneril further insists that if Lear would content himself with the

existing servants in the daughters' castles, Goneril and Regan themselves could control them if they slacked in their service to Lear. Although these suggestions indeed sound reasonable and logical, we must remember Lear's original condition: that one hundred knights would accompany him on his sojourns at each daughter's home. Regardless of how sensible it seems to reduce the numbers of his attendants, therefore, the act itself smacks of injustice and selfish corruption.

In exploring the deplorable actions of Goneril and Regan in this play, I have framed the discussion in some of the rational ideologies of care ethics: natural and ethical caring, empathy, reciprocity, and justice. In so doing, I am working under the assumption that these daughters— like so many other selfish, greedy, ungrateful children of privilege— possess the capacity for rational thought and the ability to make ethical decisions. The choices they make, in other words, are conscious and deliberate, and do not arise from any diminished mental capacity. If we accept this premise, there is only one reasonable conclusion: Goneril and Regan are, in the purest philosophical sense, evil. Like Jean-Paul Sartre, Noddings believes that real evil cannot be redeemed: “When one intentionally rejects the impulse to care and deliberately turns her back on the ethical, she is evil, and this evil cannot be redeemed” (115). One who is evil, in other words, has chosen to be so—like one who chooses to be good has made a conscious decision in that direction. Evil, then, is not a state from which someone can be rescued by another. Instead, the one who has chosen evil must decide to reject it, to terminate it unconditionally. But Goneril and Regan have no intention of rejecting their evil choices and turning toward the light. In fact, Regan “tops the lot” of Shakespeare's most evil characters, according to contemporary philosopher Colin McGinn, for her part in the

blinding of Gloucester. She so thoroughly enjoys her husband Cornwall's vicious act of stamping Gloucester's first eye out that she encourages him to take the other as well: "One side will mock another. Th' other too" (III. vii. 73). When a loyal servant tries to stop this barbarity, Regan stabs him in the back; and she derives pleasure from assuring Gloucester that it was his own son Edmund who betrayed him. After both of Gloucester's eyes have been gouged out, Regan delivers what many consider the cruelest line in all of Shakespeare: "Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell / His way to Dover" (95-96). McGinn says, "Regan revels in the direct cruelty of violent acts, accompanied by verbal viciousness— no pity, no compassion, no justice. Regan spits villainy" (127). By the time poor Gloucester and Lear realize that their offspring are irrevocably corrupt, the damage has been done. Lear believes that he has lost his one loyal daughter Cordelia, and he now feels "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child" (I. iv. 290-91). Noddings claims that we are often completely lost because we learn too late that we are dealing with evil. This, she explains, is an "unavoidable danger of acting under the guidance of an ethic of care" (116). Lear possesses many personal flaws: he is vainglorious, prideful, petulant, and often a terrible judge of character. But with a good heart and a trusting disposition, he is most certainly "a man / More sinned against than sinning" (III. ii. 59-60).

Earlier in this chapter, I explained the Ethics of Care as "feminine in the deep classical sense—rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" as opposed to the more masculine principles of ethics such as "justification, fairness, and equity" (Noddings 1). This in no way indicates, however, that care ethics as a moral theory should be viewed as gender-specific to women only. Philosophers and psychologists have

dedicated a great deal of time and study to the discussion of how women and men differ in their approach to morality and their search for the ethical in human relationships. As Noddings posits, women certainly have reasons for their moral decisions, but “the reasons point to feelings, needs, situational conditions, and their sense of personal ideal rather than universal principles and their application” (96). The notion that women and men often approach ethical decision-making from different perspectives, however, should not be interpreted as evidence that the ethics of care is more appropriately suited to women than to men. After all, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, three of the four truly caring characters in *King Lear* are men, and only one is a woman. And by the same token, the two most uncaring and vicious characters in the play are Lear’s own daughters. We must recognize, therefore, that both men and women are fully capable of embracing or rejecting care as a guide to moral living. As Michael Slote optimistically suggests in *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (2007), a fully developed ethics of care has the potential to serve as a “total or systematic human morality, one that may be able to give us a better understanding of the whole range of moral issues that concern both men and women” (3). Shakespeare’s masterpiece *King Lear* serves as a rich and edifying illustration of the various ways that Care Ethics may not only bear upon our individual ethical decisions, but may also deepen our understanding of the universal human moral condition.

The analysis of literature through various philosophical lenses has become a burgeoning field of study in recent years, capturing the interest and attention of scholars in both disciplines. Over the past thirty or so years, we have gained beneficial insights from examinations of literature through every possible value system and moral theory, including deontological and utilitarian ethics, moral relativism, virtue theory, ethical

egoism and idealism, existentialism, intuitionism, and moral luck, just to name a few. The introduction of Care Ethics— a completely new moral theory that we may now add to our arsenal of philosophical tools for the exploration of literature— is very exciting. A significant branch of Neo-Aristotelian Ethics, the Ethics of Care establishes the philosophical idea of genuine caring as essential to our moral development, maintaining that the very essence of our morality is to be found in human caring. The philosophical necessity of caring for others and using care as a guide to moral decision-making may now inform our readings and open the door to exciting new possibilities in literary analysis, as I have herein modeled with my analysis of *Lear*.

Conclusion

Neo-Aristotelian Virtue: Opening New Doors for Interdisciplinary Study

Renowned psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross said, “People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.” This insightful glimpse into human nature has been the lodestar for my dissertation research. It is so easy for us to appear radiant when the sun is shining: when life is good, friends are genuine, and those who profess to love us actually do. Who could fail to glimmer in the brilliant light of the sun? Such effulgence, however, merits neither accolade nor commendation; it is natural, easy, and therefore unimpressive. In this dissertation, I am more concerned with two other types of people: those whose inner light reveals true beauty even in the darkest hour, and those whose blackened souls deaden all light, all joy, all goodness.

Shakespeare’s tragedies offer bountiful examples of both virtue and vice, as contemporary philosopher Colin McGinn explains in *Shakespeare’s Philosophy* (2006): “Shakespeare’s characters are, above all, ethical beings. They are *defined* by their moral qualities, their virtues and vices, their propensities toward good and bad. They make an ethical impression on the audience, from the moment of their introduction. We cannot see them as anything other than morally constituted beings, living embodiments of vice and virtue” (178). My objective in this dissertation has been to explore various ways that virtue and vice operate in two of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies, *Othello* and *King Lear*, through the lens of contemporary virtue ethics theory.

For as long as the scholarly field of literary analysis has existed, literati have been investigating the moral fortitude of Shakespeare’s characters. There is certainly no dearth

of literary scholarship (both older and current) employing various moral philosophies as a lens for analyzing Shakespeare's plays. Important critical work of this kind has been advanced by esteemed scholars such as John Andrews, David Beauregard, Catherine Belsey, Colin McGinn, John Gronbeck-Tedesco, Jean Lepley, Grace Tiffany, and Lewis Walker.³⁰ A smaller and more concentrated body of scholarship commits itself specifically to an Aristotelian virtue ethics reading of Shakespeare, focusing on how various characters embody or otherwise exemplify virtues and vices as presented in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. W.R. Elton, Leon Golden, Agnes Heller, Irving Massey, Rodney Poisson, and Leah Scragg³¹ are among the scholars who have published important critical analyses in this area. None of these works, however, has established a connection between contemporary virtue theory and Shakespeare's plays. This dissertation provides the essential foundational elements for a connection of that nature, and illustrates how shifts in ethical analysis may impact our readings of *Othello* and *King Lear*. It is important scholarship in that it provides a burgeoning new field of philosophical analysis from which literary scholars may now draw for their own examinations of literature. And although my particular analysis deals exclusively with Shakespeare's characters, Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics easily lends itself to analysis of

³⁰ John Andrews "Ethical and Theological Questions in Shakespeare's Dramatic Works" and "'Dearly bought revenge': *Samson Agonistes*, *Hamlet*, and Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy"; David Beauregard "Justice: Virtue on Trial in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*"; Catherine Belsey "The Case of Hamlet's Conscience"; Colin McGinn *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*; John Gronbeck-Tedesco "Morality, Ethics, and the Failure of Love in Shakespeare's *Othello*"; Jean Lepley "Should Rome Burn? The Morality of Vengeance in *Coriolanus* (and Beyond)" and "Shakespeare and the Good Life: Ethics and Politics in Dramatic Form"; Grace Tiffany "Hamlet, Reconciliation, and the Just State"; Lewis Walker "*Timon of Athens* and the Morality Tradition."

³¹ W.R. Elton "Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*"; Leon Golden "*Othello*, *Hamlet*, and Aristotelian Tragedy,"; Agnes Heller "Virtues and Vices: Guilt, Good, and Evil"; Irving Massey "Find You the Virtue: Ethics, Image, and Desire in Literature"; Rodney Poisson "Coriolanus as Aristotle's Magnanimous Man"; Leah Scragg "Iago—Vice or Devil?"

many types of literature. Those who are interested in the connections between ethics and literature, therefore, now have an entirely new reservoir of excellent source material.

Some of the prominent ethicists who have embraced neo-Aristotelian ideologies include Martha Nussbaum, Roger Crisp, Julia Annas, Michael Slote, Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, Thomas Hurka, Christine Swanton, Justin Oakley, Virginia Held, Nel Noddings, and Nafsika Athanassoulis.³² For the purposes of this dissertation, however, I have focused primarily on the works of those whose virtue theories most effectively lend themselves to Shakespearian literary analysis: Christine Swanton, Michael Slote, Virginia Held, and Nel Noddings.³³ In determining which tragedies to explore through the virtue lens, Colin McGinn's book *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays* (2006) proved to be nothing less than inspirational. In it, he ranks the virtues and vices as presented in Shakespeare's plays, arguing that deception is the principal vice and honesty the primary virtue: "The chief weapon of the villainous Shakespearean characters is always deception, and not, say, outright brutality. [. . .] Deception is not just a necessary means to nefarious ends, but an evil end in its own right. It is a basic form of power over other people, an assertion of individual will" (181). Likewise, McGinn asserts, morally excellent Shakespearean characters are always completely honest, forthright, and plainspoken—even when they realize that their candor may be disadvantageous to them (182). Upon reading this passage in McGinn's book, I knew instantly that *Othello* and *King Lear* would become the analytical focal points of my dissertation. Iago, Goneril, Regan, and

³² This is not a comprehensive list of contemporary virtue scholars; I have named only those who seem to be the most prolific in this field of specialization.

³³ In Chapter Two, I also explain how neo-Aristotelian ethics has developed through the publication of important scholarship by Rosalind Hursthouse, Philippa Foot, Justin Oakley, and Nafsika Athanassoulis.

Edmund all use deception as a weapon— as a means of power over others. And as for the moral exemplars, Desdemona’s completely innocent pleas on Cassio’s behalf and Cordelia’s refusal to inflate her protestations of filial love beautifully demonstrate the qualities that make honesty the primary virtue in Shakespeare’s plays.

How, then, might we formulate a neo-Aristotelian reading of *Othello* and *Lear*, starting with honesty and deception as the fundamental ethical touch points? I begin, in chapter three, with a discussion of the most tragic dupe in all of Shakespeare, Othello. Generally regarded as a victim of Iago’s deceptive machinations, Othello is usually interpreted as a tragic and pitiful character— one deserving of our sympathy. Although he murders his beautiful and innocent wife Desdemona, it almost breaks his heart to commit this “honor killing.” He has been maliciously deceived by Iago, so we do not judge him as malevolent or depraved— only as witless and gullible. I demonstrate, however, that an examination of this widely sympathetic character through the lens of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* reveals a foolish and pathetic man who lacks the moral and intellectual fortitude necessary to earn the reader’s sympathy.

I treat Iago next, analyzing his character through the Nietzschean virtue lens presented by neo-Aristotelian philosopher Christine Swanton. Nietzsche’s deeply pessimistic view of the human condition includes his argument that mankind’s normal state is one of fragility, weakness, and predisposition to sickness. Viewed from this philosophical perspective, I argue that Iago is a classic Nietzschean sick animal; his actions reveal his inner feelings of impotence and self-loathing, both professionally and personally. One of the reasons he is able to manipulate others and weave his malicious web of deceit so successfully is because he has previously established a reputation as

“Honest Iago.” Colin McGinn posits that “there is no greater villain in Shakespeare than someone who has a reputation for honesty but is actually anything but. [. . .] That is an inversion of the greatest vice for the greatest virtue, and it shows that the detection of moral qualities is by no means easy” (182). Throughout the course of the play, Iago compensates for his extreme feelings of inadequacy by creating a different persona: a powerful, vengeful, bloodthirsty “other” that nobody recognizes or suspects.

The rise of Emilia from unobtrusive handmaid to tragic heroine comprises the remainder of my analysis of *Othello*. Using neo-Aristotelian philosopher Michael Slote’s “agent-based” theory of ethics as a lens, I trace Emilia’s evolution from one whose devotion to her husband unwittingly causes her to play a part in Iago’s devastating plan of deception—to one whose commitment to truth and goodness inspires her to stand defiantly against him. She moves from silence in Acts I - III to moral action in Acts IV and V— staunchly defending Desdemona’s character at every turn and even placing her own welfare in jeopardy by censuring Othello and incriminating Iago. I argue that an agent-based analysis of Emilia’s character is impossible in the first three acts of the play because we do not know enough about her inner life and overall virtue to judge her actions responsibly. By Act V, however, her moral fortitude is beyond question. Despite the fact that Emilia’s theft of Desdemona’s handkerchief ultimately plays a critical role in Iago’s villainous plan of destruction, an agent-based approach rejects the notion that any one action can be judged in isolation. Every action must be viewed in terms of its connection with the agent’s inner life (motives and desires) and overall character. Her one unfortunate transgression, then, does not alter or minimize an agent-based assessment of Emilia as a pillar of virtue and moral fortitude.

Chapter four employs various theoretical perspectives integral to neo-Aristotelian Care Ethics as a vehicle for analyzing good and evil characters in *King Lear*. The Ethics of Care examines the ways that we care for each other and respond to various situations that call for benevolence. Based on theories advanced by Care Ethics scholars such as Nel Noddings, Michael Slote, and Virginia Held, I examine the primary characters in *Lear* to determine how care operates and motivates ethical decision-making in the play. The first character that I analyze from a care ethics perspective is Cordelia, one of Shakespeare's most pure and selfless heroines. Lear misinterprets Cordelia's genuine declaration of sincere love and appreciation as harsh and untender—a sign that she does not really love him—and he rashly disinherits her. Despite this castigation, however, she beautifully exemplifies the virtues intrinsic to neo-Aristotelian care ethics by monitoring her aged father from afar. She keeps tabs on her father and sisters through various sources in the sisters' households, and works feverishly to mobilize the French Army to save Lear from the vicious claws of her two sisters. Fully present as “one caring,” Cordelia exemplifies the very personal heart of care ethics: “the conviction that an irremovable subjective core, a longing for goodness, provides what universality and stability there is in what it means to be moral” (Noddings 27).

Next, I discuss the Earl of Kent and Lear's fool as truly empathic characters, according to the revised care ethics definition of empathy. Although empathy has come to mean projecting oneself into another's position in order to fully understand, care ethicists claim that empathy requires no projection, only receptivity and feeling. Slote and Noddings posit that a direct connection exists between empathy and altruistic behavior; and since altruistic behavior is a sign of genuine caring, then empathic caring offers a

plausible standard of moral assessment. Both Kent and the fool act upon their feelings of empathy for Lear. Although Lear has banished Kent, he disguises himself and gains employment as Lear's servant. Kent's only motivation for continuing his service to Lear is his desire to protect Lear from his two malicious daughters and his own poor decisions. As one of Lear's oldest and dearest friends, Kent's actions are inspired by the genuine love and empathy he feels for the aged king. Likewise, Lear's fool demonstrates empathic concern for him on various levels. A kind and caring soul, the fool remains by Lear's side, attempting to make him recognize the error of his decisions, and offering his comfort and support as Lear's situation progressively worsens.

The idea of reciprocity holds tremendous importance in Care Ethics, as the caregiver must be met somewhere on the pathway by the cared-for if the relation is going to succeed. In a truly caring relationship, the person receiving the care must recognize and appreciate the benefit he is receiving, or the relation cannot be said to be fully actualized. I posit that an incomplete relationship exists in *King Lear*, between Edgar and his father, the Duke of Gloucester. Edgar engages in both natural and ethical caring for Gloucester, and there can be no question that he loves his father unconditionally. Because Edgar is not truthful about his identity, however, his caring relationship with Gloucester cannot be considered complete by neo-Aristotelian care ethics standards. Gloucester does not play a reciprocal role in the relationship—receiving, acknowledging, and appreciating the care offered by his son—so the caring relation is never actualized.

As a final order of business in chapter four, I discuss those “unnatural hags,” Goneril and Regan, whose contemptible treatment of their aged father flies in the face of accepted care ethics principles. Noddings and Gilligan argue that women care primarily

about relationships and emotional connection to others in the moral decision-making process, whereas men use rules and rational principles to solve moral problems. But these two cunning daughters have developed no sense of regard for emotional connection or relationships that do not directly benefit them. On the contrary, they hyperbolically profess their love for Lear when he is dividing his kingdom, but they immediately fear the inconvenience that will accompany his total divestiture. Instead of caring for their father in his old age—making him feel welcome in their homes and showing gratitude for all he has given them—the two vile sisters work in solidarity to make his living conditions unacceptable. In abdicating the throne, divesting himself of the cares of state, and dividing his kingdom between Goneril and Regan, Lear demonstrates that he just wants his last years of life to be easy. He has given his daughters all of his power, authority, and material wealth—as well as a lifetime of fatherly love—and he is now hoping that they will care for him. Far from making themselves available and fully present for their father, however, these vicious daughters strive to be absent from their homes and otherwise unavailable for Lear in order to avoid their responsibilities toward him. As the supposed cared-for, Lear does everything in his power to complete the caring relationship; he recognizes that he is now at the mercy of their kindness and generosity, and he is ready to receive and appreciate their care. But the care never materializes, and in its place Goneril and Regan display harsh attitudes of “indisposability.” I conclude my discussion of these wicked characters by arguing that they are evil in the purest philosophical sense— a type of evil that cannot be redeemed.

I certainly accept the theory that men and women approach ethical decision-making from different perspectives. I can also see clearly how the Ethics of Care may be

“feminine in the deep classical sense—rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” as opposed to the more traditional masculine principles of ethics, such as “justification, fairness, and equity” (Noddings 1). This does not indicate, however, that care ethics as a moral theory should be understood as gender-specific to women only. As I demonstrate in chapter four, the ethics of care is no more appropriately suited to the female characters in *King Lear* than to the males. Men comprise three-quarters of the truly caring characters in *King Lear*, and only one of the caring souls is a woman. Likewise, the two most loathsome, malevolent, and uncaring characters in the play are Lear’s daughters. Both men and women, therefore, must surely be capable of embracing or rejecting care as a guide to moral living.

This dissertation presents a scholarly framework for the application of neo-Aristotelian ethics in literary analysis and points the way to further scholarship in this field. Christine Swanton’s pluralistic theory of virtue, for example, would certainly impact a reading of Hamlet’s struggle between action and non-action. And Judith Jarvis Thomson’s utilitarian re-classification of the virtues into “moral” virtues and “all purpose” virtues (which can as easily be used for evil as for good) will undoubtedly yield a fascinating new perspective on Hamlet’s character and decision-making processes. *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* also present promising areas for further application of neo-Aristotelian ethics in Shakespeare’s tragedies, especially as they pertain to the virtues of friendship and loyalty, and the Aristotelian theory of the relationship between individual happiness and the health of the state. Neo-Aristotelian philosophers Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot have developed fascinating

contemporary theories about friendship, loyalty, love, self-love, and community health that will serve as enlightening lenses for analysis of these plays.

Shakespeare said, “Virtue and genuine graces in themselves speak what no words can utter.” While this is surely a nugget of truth and wisdom worth keeping, we must acknowledge that poets, playwrights, and philosophers throughout the ages have dedicated themselves to the study, discussion, evaluation, assessment, and glorification of virtue. So, although virtue in itself may speak what no words can utter, countless words have nevertheless been uttered on virtue’s behalf. With this dissertation, I enthusiastically contribute to both the philosophical and the literary study of virtue, and I hope that my work here inspires others to continue the discussion. Aristotle cautioned that finding the Golden Mean between the vices of deficiency and excess is difficult because there are so many ways to be evil and only one way to be good. Since this continues to be true in our world— since we still contend with murderers, liars, and wicked characters who would steal our souls— we must respond by developing ethical systems appropriate to the times. Although still in its infancy as a moral system, neo-Aristotelian Ethics holds great potential to become a viable guide to human behavior in our contemporary world. And as long as we continue to produce splendid exemplars of virtue among us—those whose inner light shines even in the darkest hours—we will walk confidently in the knowledge that our human connection to Shakespeare, history’s preeminent literary philosopher, remains strong.

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