

The mystery of the enormity

Tamsin Shaw is the philosopher who wrote two cogent articles for the *New York Review of Books* in early 2016 about the shameful participation of members of the American Psychological Association in Dick Cheney's torture regime. By including the indirect intellectual contribution of the bland utilitarians who have pushed the just-so story of evolutionary psychology, she consternated several of these high-profile sprinklers of academic fairy dust – Martin Seligman, Steven Pinker, and Jonathan Haidt, who responded in high dudgeon. Seligman continues to be in denial about his pivotal role in designing the torture program at Guantánamo by means of "reverse engineering." He claims that his contribution to the framework for "enhanced interrogation" was unwitting. His public statements after 9/11, however, indicated an overwrought reaction and implied a willingness to join Cheney in going to "the dark side." Pinker and Haidt are good liberals who convincingly argue that they never endorsed torture; but Shaw's point was that, as self-anointed "moral psychologists," they offer a viewpoint so shallow that it gives cover to the interrogators and provides no ground for the opponent of torture to stand on.

Shaw's articles were salutary in calling out these culprits. I had only one faint *caveat* about them – that her own moral stance was left to conjecture. In labeling

torture an unequivocal evil and a blot on the American escutcheon, she clearly leaned toward deontology and ethical intuitionism rather than the smug consequentialism of her opponents; but beyond that, it was not clear what her conceptual apparatus was. In "The Iago Problem," a review of a New York production of *Othello* written for the *New York Review of Books* on December 14, 2016, Shaw shows at least part of her hand.

The opening paragraph is straightforward:

The concept of evil has fallen out of favor in our disenchanted world. Its religious and superstitious connotations are permissible in horror movies, but otherwise often deemed embarrassing. Without some religious metaphysics it is hard to make sense of the idea that there are people who are intrinsically evil; it no longer seems plausible to many of us that people can be motivated by something that can be described as pure evil. Sustained cruelty is therefore often explained as sociopathy (the slick, psychopathic killers beloved of Hollywood), or a personality disorder stemming from some deep personal or social injury, or as some horribly warped conception of what is good. Even in the case of a mass murderer on the order of Joseph Stalin it has become part of his legend that he was emotionally scarred by having been a weak and sickly child with a brutally abusive father.

This paragraph certainly summarizes the modern viewpoint, but it is not a "legend" that Stalin was physically brutalized by both parents. In 1935, when he asked his mother, whom he had not seen for many years, "Why did you beat me so often?" she brashly replied, "You seem to have turned out all right." She was intensely religious and unworldly, apparently unaware of his position in the USSR, and had to be told that he was something like a czar. Her parting words – highly amusing to the staunchly atheistic dictator – were "All the same, it's a pity you didn't become a priest."

I am of the school that believes that such mistreatment is emotionally scarring by definition. It is a truism to say that not every child so treated grows up to be a mass

murderer; so childhood abuse, even of the cruelest kind, cannot be the sole cause – or in philosophical terms, both a necessary and sufficient cause – of evil. But it is no more illuminating to offer the concept of "intrinsic evil" or "pure evil" without an explanatory mechanism such as original sin. And nothing in Shaw's reflections suggests that she wants to go that theological route.

Iago, the greatest, perhaps, of Shakespeare's villains, and certainly the most inscrutable in his motivations, has long posed a special challenge. In recent productions he has been rendered modern (which is to say, not purely evil in the original, metaphysical sense) through complex psychological contrivances. Bob Peck has portrayed him as "a hate machine created by the slow, dehumanizing process of professional warfare"; David Suchet as a repressed homosexual, "deeply in love with Othello and manically jealous of Desdemona"; Anthony Sher as a man with "a severe sexual hang-up," whose uncontrollable, morbid jealousy is aroused by the belief that Othello has slept with his wife.

These directorial interpretations of Iago are maddeningly inane, albeit fashionable; but it is a mistake to see Iago's motivations as inscrutable. This idea originated with Coleridge, who surveyed the multiple explanations that Iago gives for his hatred of Othello and called them "the motive-hunting of motiveless malignancy." While I agree that Iago seems to go motive-hunting when he wonders if Othello has seduced his upright wife Emilia, the key to understanding that offhand remark is his concern that *others* may believe it. He is touchy, not really about his wife's reputation, as about his own. He has a primary motive, however, that is adequate to the hatred it engenders and about which he is supremely articulate, and it should strike every academic who has observed the competitive careerism of his or her colleagues as more than convincing – he has been passed over for promotion. This is itself galling enough, but

it is the more so as Cassio lacks seniority and is in Iago's opinion an "arithmetician" and a girly man. Not 30 seconds into the play, Iago lays out this grievance at length and in convincing detail, and I do not understand how as acute a reader of Shakespeare as W. H. Auden can say that there are "insuperable objections to taking these reasons, as some critics have done, at their face value."

Assessing the impact of the production she is reviewing, Shaw concentrates on the actor's performance and worries that it may tap into our own predilection for callousness:

In Sam Gold's subtly intelligent new *Othello* at the New York Theatre Workshop, however, we find a more disturbing interpretation, one that perhaps (and unfortunately) makes it the necessary production for our times. Daniel Craig's Iago is not a psychopath, or a victim of trauma, or a man deluded about right and wrong. He makes a choice. He chooses moral insensibility and viciousness. And Craig's commanding performance, his combination of charm, sexual charisma, and menacing masculinity, his ability to make the audience dread his actions and yet giggle childishly along with his sadistic delight, makes his choice seem not like one that is psychologically inexplicable but rather one that does not need any deeper psychological explanation. It is freedom, masculine vigor, conquest, pleasure, the laughter permitted by moral indifference.

Here she becomes contaminated by the enduring problem that afflicts the observers of evil-doing – she mixes up her phenomenology with Iago's. "He chooses moral insensibility and viciousness." That is what *she* sees, based upon what it would mean if *she* did what he does. Since she is morally sensible, moral insensibility could only be a conscious choice for her. What *Iago* sees is that he is the very instrument of justice, punishing *Othello's* moral insensibility in preferring Cassio, and acting on behalf of all the meritorious underlings who have ever been passed over by the powerful because of

favoritism. The viciousness of Iago's revenge is, in his mind, merely proportional to Othello's affront – it is a key ingredient in making the punishment fit the crime. Othello needs more than a biting letter of resignation – he needs a real comeuppance. That the retribution metastasizes in virulence to include the unoffending Desdemona is perhaps unfortunate – but the silly bitch should not have married out of her caste. That Iago actually achieves the promotion before the revenge is executed is frosting on the cake but does not slake his thirst for vengeance, for Othello's original offense in all its monstrosity still stands unpunished. This is what *Iago* sees – this is *his* phenomenology. We will never understand evil until we grasp that those who do it do not know that what they do is evil. They know that it is violent, and hurts those against whom it is directed, and sometimes takes out innocent bystanders, and is condemned by the faint-hearted; but in most cases of murder they believe that the killing is a form of retributive justice.

It is exactly right, then, to make Iago's choice "seem not like one that is psychologically inexplicable but rather one that does not need any deeper psychological explanation." Iago's blunt explanation is deep enough. As Hannah Arendt suggested, evil is shallow, although it may overspread the earth like a fungus. Evil is also commonplace enough in our experience to stand forth as something familiar and overt, and capable of analysis.

A paradox is hidden in Shaw's asseveration: if such evil as Iago's is psychologically *inexplicable*, then how can it require a deeper psychological *explanation*? Is Shaw suggesting that *any* interpretation will fail to honor what Herman Melville, taking the phrase from 2 Thessalonians 2:7, called "the mystery of iniquity"?

In *Billy Budd*, Melville discourses upon the concept of "natural depravity," emphasizing that the man who harbors it may evince many positive attributes and nurture his "lunacy" in secret. Presumably with Shaw's approval, as it captures her view of Iago as well, Melville tells us this about Claggart:

Now something such an one was Claggart, in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short "a depravity according to nature."

But whence cometh this depravity, which is unknown in all the species of life over 3.8 billion years of biological evolution until it erupts in *Homo sapiens* almost within historical memory? And if it is a mystery, how can Shaw make authoritative pronouncements about false conceptions of it?

Iago's loves and hates seem shallow. When Craig delivers the lines about hating the Moor, he conveys that Iago is quite serious, but that it is a willed hate, not an overwhelming passion.

But would an overwhelming passion make Iago less evil than a willed hate makes him? In either case, Iago would be responding to the stimulus of Othello's promotion of Cassio. If he is emotionally traumatized and lashes out at Othello from his welter of hurt feelings and outraged pride, is that somehow better than if he rationally assesses the exact degree of the offense and decides that it is a capital crime? We all agree that Iago fascinates us because of his disconcerting self-possession and his ability to coldly calculate and ingeniously improvise: this is the man who, having gotten Cassio drunk and cashiered, and Rodrigo cudged, and forwarded his plot to disturb Othello's peace

of mind about Desdemona's fidelity, sees the morning light and enthuses "Pleasure and action make the hours seem short." But morally, in a case of violence, I cannot make any distinction in favor of an overwhelming passion over a coldly implacable pursuit of revenge – indeed, professors of philosophy, who vaunt the life of the mind, might be expected to have a built-in bias in favor of the willed hate, if it can be rationally justified. And in the mind of the evildoer, it always is. But this much is certain: the distinction does not matter a whit to the victim.

As long as we are investigating evil through the medium of fictional characters, let us cast a wider net. There is nothing mysterious about Claggart's iniquity: he can't bear it that the sailors prefer Billy Budd to him. The insult to his self-esteem is the greater as he regards Billy with the same contempt that Iago feels toward Cassio. Claggart and Iago see their acts as retributive, addressing an injustice that, in the case of Claggart, is ontological as well as personal – why would Providence bestow such favors upon a fatuous baby-man instead of on him?

Even Milton's Satan falls easily under this rubric of hurt feelings – he can't get over God's preferential treatment of Jesus. Not that Milton did not intend something far more stupendous, imagining that with his slogan "Evil be thou my Good" Satan had become the embodiment of that Puritan bogeyman, Absolute Evil; but with schoolmarmish ineptitude, Milton merely portrayed a miserable teenager, stung by sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion into vandalizing Dad's garden. Milton's imagination was so impoverished that he considered disobedience to a righteous Father's arbitrary edicts to be the *ne plus ultra* of depravity. Even so, my point is that

the evildoer that Milton actually created is readily comprehensible when we adopt the same line that explicates Iago and Claggart – Satan must avenge the terrible injustice that was done to him, and the best he can do is despoil his powerful opponent's latest project. The cost to the innocent Adam and Eve is merely the unavoidable "collateral damage."

Let us amend "the mystery of iniquity" to read "the mystery of the enormity." It is the disparity – the chasm – between the crime and the punishment that is inexplicable to us; it is the disproportionate scale of the retributive act that boggles our minds. The motives aren't mysterious to me; but certainly I recognize how staggeringly excessive the revenges of Iago, Claggart, and Satan are – they are of a magnitude that is unfathomable in comparison with the offense. And in the cases of Claggart and Satan, they are actually directed more against the innocent than against the guilty. (After all, the real offenders against Claggart are his fellow sailors, not Billy, who is innocent of any malice toward any man.) What these revengers call "justice" we call monstrous; and how they can stay the course and continue to feel justified afterward is, to a normal mind, inexplicable indeed.

But sticking with literature, let us take a case beside which the enormity of all these aforementioned premeditated slaughters pales – that of Medea. She is outraged that Jason, whose career she has furthered by means of multiple crimes and whose six children she has borne, is severing their relationship so he can marry a sweet young princess and inherit her kingdom. Jason adds insult to injury by mansplaining his behavior to Medea in terms that are unctuous, smarmy, glib, insincere, and, needless to say, narcissistically blind. Medea sends a magic gown and tiara laced with poison to

her rival as duplicitous bridal gifts, which eats into the princess's skin and bursts into flames. Both she and her father, who tries ineffectually to help her and is painfully consumed by the same toxic agent, die horribly in front of Jason. When he comes to confront the murderess, he learns that she has also killed his two youngest sons – the fruit of her own womb.

It has been remarked by scholars that no other extant Greek tragedy allows a character who has shed the blood of kin to evade punishment. Euripides, however, goes out of his way to sanction Medea's escape – it is facilitated by the god Helios, who sends his chariot to fly Medea out of the district. This *deus ex machina* appears at the end, not to set things right by enforcing a guilty verdict upon a mass murderer, but to guarantee her safe departure.

Some readers have seen in this a younger dramatist's nihilistic mockery of the religious pieties of Aeschylus and Sophocles. But the Greek conception of Dikê, which we might call "cosmic justice," incorporates elements of karma and natural law that Euripides respected just as much as his predecessors. Having ridden this tiger, Jason assumes he can sing it to sleep with soothing reassurances and facile arguments. But the tiger acts according to her nature – she was always a wildly passionate creature, desperately in love with Jason, and he never minded her volatility and penchant for extreme violence as long as it served his ends. The takeaway from this play is not that we live in a godless world made dangerous by random, unpredictable outbreaks of irrationality and atrocity: it is that misjudgments as catastrophic as Jason's, driven by selfishness and callousness, cannot fail to have large consequences. Like all Greek tragedies, *Medea* is exemplary. Euripides treats this story not as a one-off about a

psychopath but as illustrating a universal law: each unholy act engenders an answering act, as Aeschylus says in *Agamemnon*. If your act is as heedless as Jason's, things cannot go well.

Critics have been praising the dramatic instinct of Euripides these 2400 years for his touch in having Medea decide to kill the children, then rescind her decision, but finally steel her resolve to carry out the deed. The audience is subsequently treated to the heartrending screams of the children emanating from the palace. Medea's hesitation is not a cheap theatrical effect. It tells us that Medea recognizes how unnatural her act is, and underscores a fact that she insists upon, that she loves these children and will miss them all her life. How, then, can she go through with it? Euripides convincingly dramatizes the righteousness of the perpetrator and thus illuminates the mystery of the enormity – in Medea's mind, *if she does not kill the children, her punishment of Jason will have fallen short of the requirements of justice.*

Justice, of course, according to her. But why would we search for her phenomenology in the mind of another?

So Medea strikes down four innocent parties, including two of her own small children, thus leaving the guilty party alive and physically unharmed, but emotionally devastated – like she is. This deed is prodigious, daemonic, at the extreme end of the bell curve, but not off the grid – we recognize Medea's feelings as lying on the continuum of our own. Does she go too far? *She* doesn't think so. She is the victim of grave mistreatment, and it is not "all in her mind": she has been scandalously abused by the man for whom she made numerous sacrifices – the pains of multiple childbirths not least among them, as she reminds the chorus.

Are you tempted to compare my four cases, and rank them as to culpability?

You are once again confusing yourself with the facts. The phenomenology is the same for all four perpetrators. They have administered justice, carried out the retributive sentence, and executed the proper punishment – one that is proportionate to the crime *according to them*; and if they are themselves eventually caught and punished by unjust judges, they will die satisfied with having done what had to be done. They regret nothing.

The argument from inexplicability ultimately levels out at some version of original sin, whether Augustinian, Freudian, pseudo-Darwinian, or Aristotelian. It cannot run to ground anywhere else. But often the commitment to this inborn propensity for evil is mentioned only glancingly, as below, where it breezes past the reader as "a basic drive" and as "our predilection for cruelty."

[Shakespeare's *Othello*] is not a simple morality tale, warning us against vice, from which we can exit smiling because we are assured of our own goodness. It is an exploration of moral psychology that should disturb us. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the most famous opponent of the dualism "good and evil," saw in human beings a basic drive to cruelty and wanted to replace the concept of "evil" with a naturalized understanding of this phenomenon. In his view, the entire spectacle of human life on this planet, the whole sadistic and masochistic history of bloodshed originating in the earliest human societies and continuing in more or less refined forms for millennia, was proof enough of our predilection for cruelty. He tells us:

It seems to me that the delicacy and even more the tartuffery of tame domestic animals (which is to say modern men, which is to say us) resists a really vivid comprehension of the degree to which cruelty constituted the great festival pleasure of more primitive men and was indeed an ingredient of almost every one of their pleasures; and how naively, how innocently their thirst for cruelty

manifested itself.

He describes the voluptuous "enjoyment of violation," the primitive man's "exalted sensation of being allowed to despise and mistreat someone as "beneath him," the elaborate ancient spectacles of suffering that were "an enchantment of the first order, a genuine seduction to life." As a scholar of ancient societies he had a visceral sense of the historical realities underlying these claims, the bloody amphitheater, the violent Dionysiac orgy, the prolonged agony of public crucifixions.

Nietzsche was certainly right to call attention to our predilection for cruelty; and it should go without saying that this trait demands a "naturalized understanding."

However, such a trait could still be culturally evolved rather than inborn; and in retailing the cruelties of primitive men – he means the men of the ancient world, not the mostly pacific hunter-gatherers of prehistoric times – Nietzsche does not endorse them. He does not say "Bring back gladiatorial combats!"

He laments the warriors' loss of self-confidence, and he thinks the men of 19th century Europe are effete and disastrously Christianized. The latter condition bothers him less on account of the theistic superstition and more because he suspects that all of the good rule-following sheep are displaying a reaction formation and harboring endless *ressentiment* and envy of their betters. He is a diagnostician of moral sickness, and sees that cruelty has merely moved its ground and become underhanded. He enjoys goading the ox of all the pious improvers of mankind, who are only too eager to gloss over such inconvenient facts.

During the Axial Age, the most revered spiritual guides in our history called out this cruelty, for the first time in human history. Prior to that era, all evil, including human evil, was regarded as "natural evil": your in-group was ever threatened by fire,

famine, pestilence, earthquake, flood, hurricane, and the rival tribal nation that would, if it could, kill all your men, rape the prettiest girls, and enslave the remaining women and children. *All* these disasters were regarded as manifestations of Nature, which included human nature. The marauders did no more to you than you and your group would have done to them had you won the battle. The enemy's behavior was not called evil – only your own unlucky fate. The Axial Age teachers invented the concept of human moral evil, and the concept was, in the course of time, universally adopted. Thereafter, the man who enjoys kicking sand in his opponent's face always has to believe that his victim "asked for it" and deserved it.

Now we live in the post-Axial Age, or what we might call ironically "The Moral Era." Cruelty must be morally justified; and so it has been, down to the present day. Those who do the crucifying now have to sincerely believe that the victims have earned it as a just retribution for misdeeds – and they do believe this. And even in ancient times, the horrific punishments, while justified on no higher principle than "We are the victors," nevertheless were thought to be fitting: the stronger party, as Nietzsche indicates, felt itself to be morally superior by definition; and a festival of torture vaunting that superiority was the appropriate celebration. The gods had blessed their favorites with divine sanction and help. Switching to more modern secular language, the *Übermenschen* had uncluttered the earth of the *Untermenschen*.

Having arrived at these German terms, we must remind ourselves that Nietzsche did not mean by his use of the term "Overman" what the Nazis and even many Nietzsche scholars think he meant – a prodigy who is "beyond good and evil" because of his superhuman attributes. Nietzsche pictured a man so disciplined and fully in

command of himself that he would voluntarily choose to live by a code far more stringent and ascetic than that which is attainable by the huge mass of incapables. As for the "good and evil" that the Overman would rise above, Nietzsche meant only that this avatar would transcend the debased notions of those two terms that were current in the decadent Europe of the 19th century. The Late Christian morality that characterized the respectable adults of the increasingly fractious nations was too syrupy and hypocritical to prevent the men of importance from sending 20 million of their children and grandchildren to die for their "values" in the Great War.

However we read the historical record, there has been evil aplenty, and it has persisted up to the present day. But are the perpetrators "intrinsically evil"? Accepting the postmodern tenet that a work of literature is nothing but its text, I am entitled to say flatly that Iago, Claggart, and Satan have no criminal records up until the occasions that are depicted by their authors. They are precipitated into evil by events.

Furthermore, their behaviors manifest a complex of motives that suggests a complete psychological break, not only with all their mammalian ancestors, but with even their human forebears who roamed the forests before they created the agrarian revolution at the end of the last Ice Age. All of these famous fictional malefactors are depicted as individuals who are nested in complex social hierarchies; all have attained a degree of status that constitutes virtually the whole of their self-identities; all endure overwhelming psychological distress over perceived insults to their personhoods. It is a fool's errand to try to assimilate such imaginary psychic dangers to the very real physical threats that mobilize animals, and to treat violence-prone humans as acting on

recognizable versions of Darwinistic self-defense. Modern human consciousness is the newest thing in the universe, and less than 10,000 years old. No Cro-Magnon hunter-gatherer had to cope with so many social stresses, instigated by multiple pecking orders and competing allegiances, and involving highly fallible interpretations of myriad behavioral cues coming from all directions. Those blessedly primitive nomads did not even have a "self" or "ego" to protect and defend: like the rest of the creatures in their world, they simply *were* their organisms. They did not inhabit fictive worlds of "honor" and "self-respect." They killed only to physically survive; and they never – *never* – engaged in cruelty for its own sake. When, then, did this purely human evil *become* intrinsic? In terms of mammalian evolution, the day before yesterday. The dead giveaway for the truth of my propositions is precisely the mystery of the enormity: Where in the whole record of life on earth can we find gratuitous slaughters like those of *Homo sapiens*? An animal's rage is defused the moment the animal is safe again – a human's is potentially everlasting, for the revenges activated by a slight may never have an end. But no other living entity on earth, not even our immediate ancestor of the last Ice Age, has possessed the cognitive constructs wherein the slight can take hold and the vengeance arise to become literally the meaning of a life. Iago has been passed over for promotion; Claggart is affronted by every playful slap on Billy's popular back; Satan, once among the brightest angels in Heaven, has been told that henceforth he will be playing second fiddle to the Son. The poison that gnaws at their innards did not exist before the great civilizations arose and created the conditions for language-based consciousness to develop in all its convolutions.

How would I describe *Homo civilis*? He is hypersocial and preposterously thin-

skinned. His chief temperamental characteristic, especially by comparison to his mammalian brethren, is touchiness. Animals may be on high alert for any possible danger, but all the threats that mobilize them are real. Humans are ever on guard against imaginary threats to their *amour-propre*. (It is indicative that Rousseau, who popularized the term, considered this self-regard to be the fount of many evils, and contrasted it with *amour de soi*, which can be given almost the same translation – "love of self." But *amour de soi*, rooted in mammalian self-preservation, carries no element of envy and hatred of others. The combats over status between rutting males are practical matters, and even if they lead to the death of one of the combatants, the winner does not boast over his rival's corpse like a warrior in the *Iliad*.) Once modern consciousness endowed us with egos, the covert religious principle operating in the psyches of most *Homo sapiens* became "Nobody played me for a chump." That motto is fully explanatory for Iago, Claggart, Medea, and Satan.

What should give Shaw pause – should give all of us pause – is how spectacularly we mis-formulate the nature of evil and then overlook its most florid manifestations. If we are looking for enormity, how did we come to locate it in Satan and not in God? If the mark of the most inexplicable evil is disproportion, how about God's sentence on Adam for the crime of trespassing and the theft of an apple? "He with his whole posterity must die." That's capital punishment for billions of people not yet born. The rationale comes in the very next line: "Die he or Justice must." Where have we heard *that* before? Mass murderers all sound alike.

Can Iago, Claggart, and Medea be expected to come up to a higher standard than God? But enough of this raillery. The serious point to make is that Milton could

create this little morality play and never once notice the irony. How contaminated by evil must Milton's mind have been for him to believe that his "great argument" would "assert Eternal Providence, and justify the ways of God to men"? What we had better mull over is how we readers found the evil in Satan and missed it in his author: we allowed Milton to impose upon us with a cartoon villain spouting a cartoon mantra – "Evil be thou my Good" – while we failed to notice that he created God in his own vengeful image.

Although Shaw is worried that the audience might find Iago too entertaining, ultimately she feels that the production picked up evil by the right end of the stick:

In this reading of *Othello*, Craig's Iago calls to mind above all the "honey badger" that has become the mascot for the white-supremacist far right. A popular YouTube video, "The Crazy, Nastyass Honey Badger," shows this small creature display a viciousness, fearlessness, and recklessness unparalleled in the animal kingdom, attacking a huge cobra, diving into a beehive to eat the larvae in spite of being stung all over. The video's narrator coined the phrase that Steve Bannon and Breitbart news have taken for their motto: "Honey badger don't give a shit." This is a choice, this not giving a shit. It is the voluptuous enjoyment that Nietzsche described. It is the freedom and exhilaration of moral insensibility.

In the final moments of the play, Craig's Iago sits surrounded by the carnage he has created, fighting back tears, small and human in his moment of defeat. Ludovico calls him a "Spartan dog," the most vicious breed of hunting dog. But as the other characters exit, he approaches the bodies of Othello, Desdemona, and Emilia, covered now by white sheets. Standing over them, reaching out tentatively to touch the sheets, his expression, as the lights go out, hints of regret. Perhaps. This possibility leaves us with an awareness that all the hideous destructiveness was something chosen. Hate was chosen. Hate will be chosen again.

No. If Iago gives any hint of regret, director and actor have dropped the ball. Even if he felt it – he doesn't – he wouldn't show it. Iago bears it out even to the edge of doom.

The comparison of the honey badger to Bannon is spot on. There is just one out-of-place word – once more, "moral *insensibility*." This, again, mixes up the writer's phenomenology and the subject's. *Shaw* understands Bannon as celebrating moral insensibility. *Bannon* sees himself as celebrating the triumph of genuine strong-father morality over the nauseating nurturant-mother morality of the sickly, envious liberals – those pus-bags of *ressentiment* who want to punish success even more than they want to avoid failure. Such is Ayn Rand's depiction of them in *Atlas Shrugged*, where they are caricatured as "looters" and diagnosed as so riven by hatred of their betters that they would prefer dying themselves to seeing the men of talent and industry live and prosper. (Rand scavenged these imbecilic concepts from her hasty misreading of a handful of Nietzsche's pages.) To Bannon, it is the Clintons and Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid and even Paul Ryan and Mitt Romney who are morally insensible, and Donald Trump who is the reincarnation of Cincinnatus and Churchill and the Spirit of '76. That this is preposterous to Shaw and to me does not mean that it is preposterous to Bannon or to tens of millions of Trump voters.

Why do I insist on the perpetrator's phenomenology? Because only there can an explanation be sought. Of course the evil act will remain "inexplicable" if we neither ask the perpetrator what he thought he was doing nor believe him when he tells us.