ETHICS IN A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

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PREAMBLE

I want to begin with some comments on what led me to the topic of ethics and A Man for All Seasons. I had been looking at some fairly heated exchanges in the late 1990s in the journal Philosophy and Literature between Richard Posner and Martha Nussbaum on the possibility of ethical criticism (Posner 1997, 1998; Nussbaum 1998). Briefly, Posner takes up what he believes to be an aestheticist stance that ethics has nothing to do with literature, so that ethical criticism is ruled out, whereas Nussbaum argues that literature can be ethical and ethical categories legitimately be applied to it. In the background is Nussbaum’s view that certain works of literature may be necessary for ethics (Nussbaum 1990). Neither position seemed entirely satisfactory. It appeared evident to me, as against Posner, that literature could provide ethical insights, but Nussbaum’s suggestion that ethics is dependent on literature seemed too strong. But whatever the merits of the latter thesis, the weaker thesis that literature can be ethically revealing is worth defending. At some level a great work of literature represents a form of human existence, to which we may respond as human beings. That there is a moral dimension to human existence I assume. Hence, it seems clear that literature may represent that dimension.

Robert Bolt’s 1960 play can serve as an instance of how literature can stimulate ethical reflection. And, at the same time, it is not the kind of text where ethical themes are only marginally present; to the contrary, they are quite central and accessible. In this paper, my goal is to illustrate the potential of literature to stimulate ethical reflection by analyzing Bolt’s play. I will focus for the most part on three ethical themes: self and society, moral heroism, and worldliness versus unworldliness. Finally, I suggest that one must have reservations about the moral self being proposed, notwithstanding how impressive Bolt’s More is.
DISCLAIMERS

But to begin with I must make a couple of disclaimers. First, I am not trying to prove anything about the historical Thomas More. Many of the positive traits picked up on by Bolt do seem to have some legitimate historical basis, but More is a controversial figure, and my interest here is really limited to demonstrating the ethical interest of Bolt’s characterization of More. I do not propose to comment on the historical accuracy of the depiction, except where it has a bearing on the persuasiveness of the presentation of More’s ethical positions.

My second disclaimer follows from what I said at the beginning. I do not mean to suggest that literature per se must be morally edifying or encourage right conduct, or that it must in all cases yield moral insight. Not all great literature need be morally edifying, and I do not propose that nonedifying works should be weeded out of the literary canon. All I am claiming is that some literature is ethically thought-provoking and that when it provokes ethical reflection it can do so in a very rewarding manner. Moreover, I am in no way claiming that one must agree with the ethical judgments of such authors whose works are ethically thought-provoking.

BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

A few words about the background to the play’s action are in order. The plot takes place at a critical moment in the 16th-century conflict between Henry VIII and the Roman Church that led to the English Reformation. Henry brings down the English medieval church because the pope will not sanction his wish to divorce his wife Catherine of Aragon. Henry had originally needed a papal dispensation to marry Catherine, because she had previously been married to Henry’s brother. At the request of Christian Spain and Christian England, the pope dispensed with the Christian law forbidding a man to marry his brother’s widow, and Catherine became queen. Henry wished to divorce Catherine because of his love affair with Anne Boleyn, because Catherine was unable to bear him a son to continue the Tudor line, and because of religious scruples over the legitimacy of the marriage with Catherine. But this time the pope, influenced by Spain, would not acquiesce. Desperately wanting out of the “sinful” marriage to Catherine, Henry came to deny that the pope could be the Vicar of Christ. He found a bishop to agree with him in Thomas Cranmer, and he duly appointed him archbishop of
Canterbury, divorced Catherine, married Anne, and England was no longer part of Catholic Christendom. The play centers on Henry’s chancellor and sometime friend Thomas More, who refuses to either endorse or explicitly denounce Henry’s desire to divorce Catherine. It reaches a climax when More refuses to swear an oath to Henry’s spiritual supremacy over the church of England, and he is eventually beheaded.

**SELF AND SOCIETY**

It is clear from Bolt’s preface to the play that he was largely motivated by opposition to what he saw as an erosion of authentic individuality in modern society. Bolt complains about a corrosive tendency to lose personal identity. We tend to define ourselves in terms of social class, job, educational attainments, possessions, and so on (x). Bolt shares the existentialist critique of a society where we tend to lose ourselves in the mass and see ourselves in the third person (xi). But we must be careful to realize that Bolt is not here offering an indiscriminate critique of any society and an unbridled recommendation of individualism for its own sake. What he is claiming is that our current society is preventing us from achieving authentic selfhood.

But what does he mean by selfhood? He argues that the kind of individuality he wants was served in past societies by a “picture of individual Man (Stoic Philosopher, Christian Religious, Rational Gentleman)” (xi). His idea seems to be that there were socially accredited models of individuality in terms of which we could recognize and measure ourselves. Far from being opposed to society, individuality is made possible by society. There is a symbiotic relationship between individual and society. But the problem, according to Bolt, is that our present society fails to present us with any coherent ideal of what genuine individuality amounts to.

Insofar as we get any guidance from this society, he claims, it is just to “get and spend” (xi). To use the language of More’s Platonism rather than Bolt, when we lose the guidance of our higher self, we are dominated by our lower appetites. In other terms, genuine individuality involves self-shaping according to a coherent, socially relevant ideal, and this is just what contemporary society does not afford us. By leaving it completely open who and what we are, it deprives us of guidance in our more substantial aspirations as to how to live. And without such guidance, the self is a commodity—Bolt echoes Marx here—and, as the character Richard Rich says, everyone has his price (2). In Marxian terms, we
are alienated from our selves. Moreover, we are led to think that any self-formation is a diminution of our absolute freedom to be whatever we desire, whereas the suspension of self-commitment is equivalent to being nothing—because nothing is definite. Ethically, a lack of self-definition means that there are no boundaries to what we may or may not do. So Bolt’s characterization of More suggests, with more than a hint of existentialism, that a deeper freedom and individualization flows from genuine commitment.

However, there is undeniably a strong element of individualism in the portrayal of selfhood. In a marvelous passage from his preface, Bolt tells us how he imagined More as “a man with an adamantine sense of his own self. He knew where he began and left off, what area of himself he could yield to the encroachments of his enemies, and what to the encroachments of those he loved. . . . Since he was a clever man and a great lawyer he was able to retire from those areas in wonderfully good order, but at length he was asked to retreat from the final area where he located his self. And there this supple, humorous, unassuming, and sophisticated person set like metal, was overtaken by an absolutely primitive rigor, and could no more be budged than a cliff” (xii).

The image is clear, and it contradicts the truism that no man is an island. More’s self is bounded by a kind of coastline. Seas may wash up against its beaches, but its cliff-like borders remain secure. Bolt values More’s sense of distinctness and how that distinctness does not lie in “external” aspects. Even his relations with loved ones and enemies seem to be “external” to this core and sovereign self; they are like the action of the sea on the coast. The core self is one that only God can have authority over; it is independent even of the authority of the king. It is what he calls that little area where he must rule himself.

The self to which More retreats is obviously not his body. At one point he tells his friend Norfolk to distinguish himself from his appetites (73). We cannot be just a bundle of appetites. Norfolk is told to “give some exercise” to that part of him that the appetites are supposed to serve. Later, More insists that his self is distinct from his pride or spleen also. The distinction between self and physical and emotional existence is evident too from the fact that More can suffer insult, loss of office, threat, imprisonment, impoverishment, being deprived of family and friends, and death itself without, as he sees it, losing his self. The true self seems to be radically nonrelational in the sense that it is excluded from the encroachments of enemies or friends, and it is clearly conceived as immortal.
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More’s refusal to take the oath seems to confirm this isolationism. The refusal visibly dramatizes what Bolt means by the fixity of selfhood. To take an oath, as Bolt understands it, is to commit oneself in an exceptional way to a statement (xiii). In the case of a loan, one offers something as security on the loan, but in the case of an oath one offers one’s own self as the security. More likens the taking of an oath to holding one’s self like water in cupped hands—to break one’s oath is to let one’s self fall through one’s hands never to be recovered (83). The implication is that one must be something definite to be able to offer oneself as a guarantee for one’s word; if one cannot back up one’s word with one’s self, then one’s word is worthless, and one has no essential value. There is no mention of others here.

But it is important to repeat that More’s sticking at the oath does not mean that he regards himself as a pure individualist in opposition to society. More resists the attempt by others to impose authority on his spiritual life, but he continues to be committed to using the institutions of the state, particularly the letter of the law, to protect his sovereign self. Moreover, he also has a conception of society that is much broader than the Henrician dispensation; he conceives the English Kingdom as subservient to the larger community of the Church of Christ, extending over past and future, the living and the dead, and ruled from heaven (xv). Such a society would presumably be a community of authentic selves.

Bolt recognizes all this explicitly in the preface, but he does not refer to it in the play. Instead, he offers what he takes to be a modern analogue for More’s position, whereby the unrestricted church becomes the terrifying cosmos from which the sensible man retreats into the more human and restricted society. By eliminating some of the medieval certainty, Bolt presents us with a genuinely modern hero. However, it could be argued that Bolt’s attempt to make More’s position more palatable to a modern audience empties it of some of its rational coherence.

Given More’s alienated view of the cosmos, and the absence of explicit reference to More’s belief in a spiritual community, it is hard to make sense of his willingness to suffer martyrdom. We never get to evaluate openly the content of More’s commitment. The difficulty here parallels a standard objection to an existentialist ethics (although it could apply to classical liberalism too). It appears that what counts is not the content of one’s commitment and whether it is well founded but the commitment itself. More would then simply represent an absolute commitment to what he has committed himself to. In living out that freedom to the point of death, he is free in a Sartrean sense. This then begs the obvious ques-
tion of whether any hero of selfhood would be a moral hero. Perhaps Hitler was true to himself. Or is there something intrinsic to the particular selfhood that More keeps sacrosanct that makes him quintessentially moral? It seems that we must know something of the content of that selfhood—of its principles—before we could regard it as genuinely moral.

Often cited in this connection is a controversial passage where More says to Norfolk that “what matters to me is not whether [the Apostolic Succession of the Pope] is true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather not that I believe it, but that I believe it” (53). It seems to condemn More as a hopeless subjectivist. The “I” here is conscience in the sense that at the point of action we should always obey our conscience, so that even to act rightly against our conscience would be to act wrongly. This conscience is, for More, the self before God, and this is the self to which he must be true. It is this self that speaks in the experience of conscience.

But, as I said, the characterization seems to lose some credibility because More’s conscience sounds too individualistic—as though all beliefs to which one commits oneself were equal. However, as a Catholic, understood in terms of Bolt’s prefatory comments, More’s conscience would have been ultimately based on theological principles expressed by the community of the church in its indissoluble connection with Christ. Anyway, More is not defending some absolutely private sphere—but what he takes to be an indissoluble community bound by an original connection with Christ. More’s conscience means his self as belonging to that community in some infinite sense. And it seems to him that the alternative is not another community but the destruction of community. As a socialist, Bolt thinks of this destruction in terms of the alienating, atomistic, and commercialized world he sees around him, where there is no conscience and where every man has his price. Where there is only the undefined, consumer self, there can be no genuine community because there can be no shared intrinsic values; because there is no common good, there cannot be genuine character.

But Bolt does not expect his audience to believe, as More does, in the Catholic Church or that we each have an absolutely inviolable and immortal soul. However, he does think that most of us feel some reluctance to violate an oath, such as the marriage vow (xiv). This means that we invest something of ourselves when making the vow. His audience can then imagine what it must be like to take an oath for one like More, for whom to perjure oneself, to swear falsely, is to call one’s God to witness one’s lie, and so deliberately invite damnation. Bolt assumes that we can now only understand this theological aspect of oath-taking symboli-
cally. As an agnostic, he expresses the hope that there could be a rational basis for defining self and preserving selfhood—without what he regards as the magical appeal of religion (xiv).

Following this line, he looks at the crisis of conscience in a way that does not involve us in More's specifically theological views. The purely moral issue is whether one may ever lie on oath, and we may focus exclusively on that. That is the defining issue of conscience. For More, to lie on oath is to be damned—to destroy one's soul or self. But Bolt deliberately phrases it in a way that need not be religious. As I mentioned, he has More say that taking an oath is holding one's self in one's hands, so that if one opens one's fingers, one needn't hope to find oneself again (83). One has radically destroyed one's center if one cannot hold to an oath.

Returning to the controversial quotation, where More says that the truth or otherwise of the Apostolic Succession is not essential but rather the fact that he believes it. This has, as I said, been criticized as anachronistic and subjectivist in a way that would be incompatible with More's Catholicism. But it could be argued that what More is referring to here is the nature of taking an oath—what is at issue morally here is not the veracity of a particular doctrine but the necessity of integrity, of truth to oneself, and of not lying under oath.

THE MORAL HERO/Saint

I want to turn now to how the play addresses the possibility of moral sanctity or moral heroism. Bolt apologizes in the preface for treating a Christian saint as a hero of selfhood (xiv). Bolt's dilemma is that he needs to include the religious convictions so crucial to the selfhood of his hero while broadening his appeal to a secular audience as well.

What makes the character of More heroic for the audience are not his specific beliefs, which would probably alienate many, but rather a complex of characteristics rooted in his sense of self, or integrity. He manifests to an extraordinary degree noble qualities and traditional virtues—such as courage, loyalty, honesty, generosity, resilience, and self-control. Importantly, these moral qualities are combined with an admirable intellect. It is significant too that his ethical and intellectual qualities are conjoined with a passionate nature. He is far from being cold, as is evident in his moving exchanges with Meg and Alice in the prison cell.

Considering More's moral heroism to the point of death, we could read the play as challenging current ethicists who favour what is described as minimal morality—typically, rule-governed morality, as a
kind of Hobbesian contract. According to minimal morality, explains Louis Pojman (2000), the function of morality is to create the moral space where individuals can pursue their projects unhindered. Its principles can be applied universally to all rational agents—and applying such principles allows much of life to go on unaffected by morality. It is coextensive with a sphere of negative freedom and makes no connection between the ethical and the profoundly personal, such as we find in Bolt’s portrait of More. Bolt’s More is more representative of the eudaimonistic ethics of Plato and company. Although his version of selfhood is modern in one sense, it gives rise to the recognizable, traditional virtues mentioned above. While More does refer to a small reserve of selfhood, his mastery of that space of selfhood determines the moral character of his whole life. To that extent, his characterization would support Pojman’s thesis that “there is no moral-free zone.” Also, eudaimonistic ethics imposes a duty of moral development—that we develop moral sensitivities and so on, so that we can approximate the abilities of moral saints and heroes. Bolt is clearly offering More as such a character ideal (xi).

In a well-known essay from 1982 entitled “Moral Saints,” which is cited by Pojman, Susan Wolf argues that saints are dull-witted and humorless, and have no time for literature, art, or music etc. She contends that while such qualities may not be logically incompatible with sanctity, in practice the saint would not have time to pursue them. Furthermore, according to Wolf, the moral saint lacks a self: “The way in which morality . . . is apt to dominate . . . seems to require either the lack or the denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self” (424). Bolt’s depiction of More can serve as a counterexample to Wolf’s thesis. More exemplifies a saintly, heroic ideal that is not incompatible with gregariousness, a sense of humor and irony, skill with language, and “splendid social adjustment” (xiv). Moreover, More certainly does not fit the bland profile proposed by Wolf.

More’s moral excellence certainly does not make him narrow. His son-in-law William Roper is closer to the stereotype that Wolf objects to. But it is Wolf’s schematic idea of moral excellence that is faulty. It equates moral worthiness with a maximum number of virtuous acts, thus leaving no time for cultivating the non-moral virtues that are also worthy and make life pleasant. Clearly, the relation between moral and non-moral excellences in a moral saint is a good deal more nuanced than Wolf recognizes. More’s complex character demonstrates how non-moral characteristics can contribute to a personality that appeals to us in its entirety as morally heroic. His sacrifices would not be so impressive had he not so
many genuine attachments to friends and family and had he not achieved so much in his career and so on.

**More Versus Worldliness and Unworldliness**

Following from this last point, I now turn to how the characterization of More avoids both political cynicism and what could be described as moral otherworldliness. Political cynics cannot comprehend More’s decision to side neither with Cromwell nor with the Spanish ambassador Chapuys. They are puzzled because he is immune to the enrichments that would come from falling in line with the king’s wishes and because he combines political loyalty with spiritual independence.

At one point Wolsey says, “You’re a constant regret to me, Thomas. If you could just see facts flat on, without that moral squint, with just a little common sense, you could have been a statesman” (10). More’s response is that when statesmen forsake their private consciences for the sake of their public duties, they lead their country to chaos (12). Wolsey suggests that More’s failure to rise above his scruples and draw a clear line between private conscience and the duty of a public statesman endangers the common good by making civil war more likely; More thinks, on the contrary, that what harms the polity is when politicians lose touch with their private conscience.

When More is with Wolsey or Cromwell or Richard Rich, we find him defending prayer and conscience and other such apparently impractical moves against the “realism” of political expediency. However, in William Roper More challenges an overly idealistic or impractical view of morality in a public context. More’s ability to enjoy the good things in life and his unfailing wit and sense of humour are pointedly contrasted with Roper’s stiltedness. More also rejects Roper’s denigration of human laws and of appearances. Roper contrasts being practical with being moral, just as Wolsey contrasts being moral with being political, but More rejects both of these false dichotomies.

Thus, More combines unworldliness with a kind of worldliness. Of course More is not worldly in the sense of being corrupt and cynical; but he is worldly in the sense that he accepts the limitations of living in the world, and particularly living as a public figure in a politicized world. He embraces the world because he embraces the limitations of the human condition, and this is most evident in his defense of human laws, human society, appearances, and public language against the kind of inner light views of Roper. Bolt carefully sets up a metaphorical polarity to represent
More’s peculiar kind of worldliness. He has More consistently express his desire for terra firma and resist being drawn into open sea. The land beneath one’s feet is Bolt’s symbol for the human dimension; and he uses the image of a forest to represent the human laws by which we protect our social life (38-39). He claims that it is by operating within this forest that we honour God in a way that is appropriate for human beings, which is with the complexity of our minds. The open sea or sky represents for More the superhuman perspective that we cannot, as human beings, achieve. This is the realm of absolute right and wrong, where God judges what is in people’s hearts. It is God’s domain, not ours. Those like Roper who prefer the open sea believe they are engaging God more directly, but for More this is presumption.

More explains how his moral principles here rest on his worldview in a key speech to his family that occurs in the middle of the second act: He says “God made angels to show him splendor—as he made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But man he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind! If he suffers us to fall to such a case that there is no escaping, then we may stand to our tackle as best we can. . . And no doubt it delights God to see splendor where he only looked for complexity. But it’s God’s part, not our own, to bring ourselves to that extremity! Our natural business lies in escaping” (74). In this passage, More explains his own strategy, and unwittingly foretells what the outcome will be. He makes clear his adherence to the order of the Great Chain of Being. It is the position of man in this scheme of things that defines the kind of morality of which man is capable. We are neither animals nor angels, and our moral challenges are proper to our human condition. We are not to jump to a lazy or naïve idealism that rejects social, institutional, and worldly realities and norms. Instead, we have to struggle to preserve integrity within such complex moral environments. In extremis, we may be forced to stand outside the worldly framework—where its realities have degenerated to such an extent that we cannot be just within it—but More’s point is that we must be forced. He does not choose martyrdom. On the other hand, the source of More’s choices lies in metaphysical beliefs about an otherworldly context. Ultimately, his choices only make sense within the context of the destiny of his soul in the next life. In the final analysis his self is in tension with nature, if that self can sanction the end of his natural existence.
**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we may focus on the fact that Bolt portrays what he takes to be a perfect character. There are various meanings for the phrase “man for all seasons,” but one meaning is that More’s kind of perfection is supposed to be relevant to our time. I take it that More is meant to exemplify what could be described as a realistic kind of perfection for our time. He is not essentially removed from the world but is well-integrated and multidimensional. Crucially, More shows that moral integrity is possible. Obviously it would be a key disincentive to pursuing moral integrity if we thought it was impossible for human beings to achieve in the world. Bolt seeks to show through More that it is possible—and at the same time that More was not a stilted character who could never relax or have normal emotions.

It is undeniable that Bolt to some extent presents More as more individualistic than he was, but there is a sense in which this partial misreading of More is both deliberate and inevitable. Bolt wishes to use More to confront his own 20th-century society. It seems that More’s actions can only be described for contemporary consumption in the language of heroic selfhood. We seem almost bound to interpret him through the lens of a romanticist individualism of irreducible personal feeling. Bolt’s More may have had widespread appeal as the depiction of almost a “rebel without a cause.” The more objectivist authority behind More’s actions is inscrutable from within the play. His “adamantine self” appears to be an inexplicable force of nature. The central question is whether More is appealing to subjective will or something objective. The ambiguity of the term “self” is crucial here. The modern audience can “hear” the appeal to self as an appeal to free subjectivity, freedom to live and die as one chooses. However, when Cromwell (92) accuses More of “frivolous self-conceit,” More retorts that his acting on conscience is acting necessarily “for respect of my own soul.” “Your own self you mean!” says Cromwell, to which More replies “Yes, a man’s soul is his self!”

In the Preface, Bolt declares that “a clear sense of the self [may] only be able to crystallize round something transcendental in which case, our prospects look poor, for we are rightly committed to the rational” (xiv). This creates a fundamental vagueness in the play, however. More’s notion of self/soul necessarily crystallizes around something transcendental, whereas Bolt wishes to inspire us with a sense of self without that transcendental source and without anything substantial in its place.

It follows that there is a certain emptiness at the heart of More’s selfhood in the play—Bolt does not show how selfhood could crystallize
around anything objective, so in spite of his wish, he does not show us how morality can be rational. However, a modern’s difficulty in grasping the source of More’s moral strength may be just the point. Our society fails to present us with a coherent ideal, and an ideal from the past needs to be modified, but in the process, the substance of that ideal is missing. We are not able to crystallize selfhood around something transcendental, so we can just look on, admiring but not really comprehending More’s actions. Notably, More rejects his son-in-law Roper’s description of his resignation of the chancellorship as “taking a stand.” But for we moderns, we can only see such actions as taking a stand or making a gesture.

REFERENCES


