



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Quiz Night Redux: Hamlet edition

Clay Nelson © 23 May 2021

We have just heard Polonius' collection of proverbs as advice to his son Laertes, who is off to university in Paris. It contains one of Shakespeare's most oft quoted lines in valedictory speeches, blogs, music and films, "To thine own self be true."

Third Lightning Round (Multiple choice)

What does "To thine own self be true" actually mean?

- A) Be yourself?
- B) Don't change who you are?
- C) Follow your own convictions?
- D) Don't lie to yourself?
- E) All of the above?
- F) None of the above?
- G) It depends?

I wager that the correct answer is G. It depends to some extent upon the meaning of "self," the meaning of "true," and perhaps even the meaning of "meaning."

When the word 'self' is used as a noun, as in "the self", it does useful psychological work. What is "the self"? What is it that you are true to when you are "true to yourself"? "The self," usually refers to who a person 'really' is, to an internal reality, a reality that can sometimes remain hidden behind the exterior or visible aspects of a person. The self — like soul, mind, spirit, and nature — refers to someone's essence, to what someone essentially, actually, really is as opposed to what someone only appears to be.

Like self, the word "true" has several senses. A person can be true, as in faithful, in contrast to being disloyal. Or a person can be true, as in honest, in contrast to being deceitful. And something can be true as opposed to being false; a thing can be actual and real, not imaginary, counterfeit, or only apparent. As such, we can ask, one should be true to oneself as opposed to being what? "Disloyal" to oneself? "Dishonest" to oneself? "False" to oneself?

There is also the pragmatic question: How does one go about being true to oneself? And the ethical question: Should one be true to oneself? But I want to remain with the question that is both more basic and more difficult: What does “To thine own self be true” mean?

To answer this question, we must consider the greater question, What is the meaning of “meaning”? What do we mean when we ask, What is the meaning of “To thine own self be true”? Meaning usually relates to the significance or sense of something and is often understood as intent. Thus, our question can be restated as, What was Shakespeare’s intent when he wrote, “To thine own self be true”? What was he trying to accomplish? What were his goals? What did he intend to communicate? What did he want us to understand when we heard, “To thine own self be true”?

If we understand meaning as intent, then Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’ implies that “the self” exists only as a rhetorical, philosophical, and psychological construct that we use to make sense of our experiences and actions in the world, not as anything real.

Return to the play, when Polonius blusters onto the scene to send Laertes off with a speech made up entirely of proverbs that can be boiled down to some fairly straightforward rules for living: Don’t speak your mind. Don’t act without thinking. Don’t be too formal with people, but don’t be too informal either. Keep your friends close. Keep your friends few. Don’t fight, but if you do, win. Be a good listener. Don’t talk too much. Listen to others complain, but don’t complain yourself. Dress nicely, but not too nicely. Don’t borrow money from others. Don’t lend money to others. And then there is the famous line, “To thine own self be true.” Does the subsequent line, “Thou canst not then be false to any man”, help us understand “To thine own self be true”? When Polonius says not to be “false” to anyone, is he simply saying, Don’t lie to yourself, and then you won’t lie to others? Or is Polonius suggesting, more ambitiously, that if Laertes remains loyal to his internal essence — his self, soul, mind, spirit, nature — then the Laertes that others experience will be the real Laertes?

What is most interesting about Polonius’ proverbs is not that they hold some salvific truths that we all ought to adopt. What is most interesting is that Polonius’ proverbs are violated in the very saying of them. His edict to “give thy thoughts no tongue” is undone in his tonguing of his own thoughts. His

injunction, “Be thou familiar,” jars with the schoolmasterly tone he takes with his own son. His command to “give . . . few thy voice” is violated in giving voice to that command. Ironically, Polonius goes on (and on, and on) in a long-winded speech of more than twenty lines about how Laertes should be measured in his words. This is the same Polonius who, later in Hamlet, insists that “brevity is the soul of wit” It is a case of do as Polonius says, not as he does.

But the keynote of Polonius’s speech, “To thine own self be true,” reveals a discrepancy between doing and saying. In speaking his proverbs to Laertes, Polonius is not being true to his own proverbs. In saying “To thine own self be true,” Polonius is being untrue to his own self.

The lines Shakespeare assigns to Polonius are not moralistic. Shakespeare is being descriptive, not prescriptive. He is not giving us “life lessons.” He is representing the ways in which life lessons are given. “To thine own self be true” is not Shakespeare’s advice for living. It is his satire of moral entrepreneurs.

But I want to suggest that “To thine own self be true” is more than just a critique of hypocrisy. It is also Shakespeare’s indictment of the idea of “the self.” Consider when Ophelia tells her father that she isn’t quite sure what to think about her relationship with Hamlet, Polonius does not tell her to be true to her own self. Instead, he tells her what to think: “You do not understand yourself. . . . Think yourself a baby”? “The self” is Polonius’s image for the version of his children that he wants to see. Polonius is his children’s self. When Polonius speaks to Ophelia and Laertes, “the self” isn’t who they really are but who he wants them to be, and Laertes and Ophelia (like the rest of us) aren’t essentially anything other than the sum of their past actions. From this perspective, “the self” is something we invent in an attempt to synthesise patterns in our actions, to recognise our ideals, and to stabilise the ethical choices we might face in the future.

To be clear, I am not saying that “the self” does not exist. I am saying that, from a Shakespearean perspective, “selves” — along with souls, minds, natures, identities, and essences — exist in a radically different and less impressive way than is usually assumed. The self exists as a function of discourse, as a concept invented by humans, not as a reality that is psychologically, philosophically, theologically, or existentially compelling.

Shakespeare's point in the scene with Polonius' proverbial wisdom is not simply that we are inconstant, contradictory, hypocritical — that we humans are, like Polonius, not true to our own selves. Shakespeare's point is that we cannot be true to our own selves because "the self," understood as one's essence, does not exist. We have no selves to be true to: that, paradoxically, is the meaning of "To thine own self be true," if we understand meaning as intent. If we ask the question, as we did at the start, "What did Shakespeare want to communicate when he wrote 'To thine own self be true'?" then we must answer that Shakespeare's intent was to display for his audience the simultaneous attractiveness and offensiveness of the concept of "the self": it simplifies our inconstant, disorganised actions by saying that some of them are true and some false to who we really are, and in this simplification it misrepresents the human being, who is not a container or vessel for some self that sometimes one is true to, sometimes not. The notion that there is something inside me that is truly, absolutely, impermeably, really who I am — whether I call it my soul, mind, spirit, essence, identity, or self — is a fiction, one that covers over the fact that what we are is simply the totality of what we do.

What we would best do is seek to understand the world, not to fix it or others. Hamlet shows us that when you try to fix a world you don't understand, you and your entire family might die. If we understand the world, we answer Hamlet's question in Act III, "To be or not to be?" in the affirmative. There is no other self than our being. There is no other thing to do than to be. Who we are is constantly changing by what we do, by how we respond to life's circumstances. We will be a different person at the end of our being from the person we are at the start. That is undeniably true. That's not advice. It's neither good nor bad, neither something to pursue nor something to resist. It just is the case.

**Meditation / Conversation starter: Last Lightning Round (take your pick)**

- Whose vision of yourself influences most your being and what is it?
- How has your self-understanding of your being changed over the years?