

# Merchant of venice and the philosophy of aristotle philosophy essay



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Every individual perceives the world through a different pair of eyes. This results in countless worldviews and interpretations of reality. Moral philosophies arise that contradict other people's ways of living and consequently cause numerous hardships. Given that ethics plays an integral role in business, the entire business world contains clashing views and ideologies. In Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice," three business ideologies arise from the play's main characters: Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock. A brief summary of the story supplies enough information to draw certain conclusions about these ideologies, and shows a relation between events in the Merchant of Venice and the philosophy of Aristotle.

Among the three, Antonio possessed the most wealth. Antonio hates Jews and consequently spits on Shylock's face. In addition, Antonio competes with Shylock's money lending business by lending money at zero interest. After a while, however, Antonio needs to borrow money from Shylock. Shylock agrees but proposes an interesting condition for the loan: if Antonio defaults on the loan, he permits Shylock to cut off a pound of his flesh.

Portia, a beautiful woman that numerous men want to marry, is involved in an interesting situation as well. One of three boxes of gold, silver, and lead hold a portrait of Portia. Men wanting to marry Portia pick a box, but if it does not contain the portrait of Portia, they are to remain single forever. The Prince of Morocco makes the first attempt. He idolizes money and consequently picks the gold chest. Unfortunately, not all that glitters is gold and the Prince must remain single forever. The Prince of Arragon chooses the silver chest and, like the first contestant, must remain single forever.

Bassanio makes the last attempt and chooses the lead casket. Meanwhile,  
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Antonio receives word that his ships are lost at sea. Shylock manages to have Antonio arrested and brought before the court for defaulting on the bond.

After Portia and Bassanio get married, Bassanio receives a letter stating that Antonio defaulted on the loan. Bassanio and Gratiano return to Venice with money from Portia, and try to save Antonio by paying Shylock back. Secretly, Portia sends her servant to talk to Portia's cousin Bellario. Shylock declines Bassanio's offer of 6,000 ducats, twice the amount of the loan. He demands his pound of flesh from Antonio. Portia, as "Balthazar," asks Shylock to show mercy in an elegant speech, but Shylock declines that as well. Shylock continues his demand for the pound of flesh from Antonio. Next, Portia points out a flaw in the contract. The contract only allows Shylock to remove the flesh, but not the blood of Antonio. Portia declares that if Shylock sheds any of Antonio's blood, Shylock will die. Shylock encounters the situation where he must ask the Duke for mercy, and the Duke dismisses Shylock's death sentence.

Antonio, Shylock, and Bassanio appear to view business differently than one another, although some similarities exist as well. Antonio holds a risky view of business, while Shylock views it as a chance of following the letter of the law and a chance to trap people. On the other hand, Bassanio takes a more moderate view of business, taking advantage of opportunities but in some cases holding back. Antonio displays characteristics that suggest he holds a risky view of business. For example, he bailed out Bassanio on numerous occasions. This prompted Bassanio to ask for the trip to see Portia. Antonio lent so much money that he needed to ask for a loan from Shylock. This

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demonstrates a risk-taking quality and it seems easy to imagine Antonio risking all of his money on the stock market. Antonio expresses this business ideology saying, “ I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it, And if it stand, as you yourself still do, Within the eye of honour, be assured My purse, my person, my extremest means, Lie all unlocked to your occasions.” Bassanio views business as an opportunity to take advantage of other people’s work for his own pleasure. However, there is a limit to his madness. As Antonio plays risky games giving his money away, Bassanio plays the other end of the spectrum receiving the prize. At first, it appears Bassanio simply uses Antonio. However, Bassanio restrains himself when Antonio’s life is on the line. After Shylock states the terms of the bond, Bassanio exclaims, “ You shall not seal to such a bond for me. I’ll rather dwell in my necessity.”

Business plays an interesting role for Shylock given his Jewish worldview. Jews, adhering to Old Testament tradition, seek to enforce the letter of the law. They view this practice as a service to God. This becomes especially evident when he inquires about the law during the court session. Shylock states, “ Is that the law?” Business pacts, then, give Shylock a way to express his moral values while making money at the same time. Given these different views of business, it makes sense that one man understands the nature of business better than the others.

A combination of Shylock’s view and Bassanio’s view seem to express the nature of business appropriately. Business should be rational, profitable, and not interfere with religious values. Adopting a combined view allows one to express their religious values, make money, and still make rational decisions. For example, Shylock’s view lends religious expression through business.

Bassanio's view lends rationality and the most profitability. He makes the most money receiving it from Antonio, but stops when he hears the insane requirements of the bond.

Shylock mentions to Antonio that he has nothing to gain by collecting the pound of flesh from him. This seems like a trick to persuade Antonio into accepting the bond. If Shylock hates Christians, he has something to gain by tricking Antonio. Shylock hints at this bias saying, "Would any of the stock of Barabas had been her husband rather than a Christian!" If Antonio pays the loan back, then all is well. If he defaults, however, Shylock gets to cut his flesh. Shylock would benefit from this since he hates Christians, which Antonio happens to be.

Aristotle writes about virtue in his famous treatise *Nicomachean Ethics*. He contends two types of virtue exist. Intellectual virtues arise from learning, whereas moral virtue arises from the practice of certain habits. Portia possesses intellectual virtue as well as moral virtue that allow her to settle the dispute. Some of Portia's virtues include courage and wit. She shows great courage standing up disguised in court. Her wit allows her to save Antonio by finding the problem with the contract. Courage is a moral virtue, so she acquires it by practicing courageous acts. On the other hand, wit is an intellectual virtue acquired by learning. Shakespeare possibly decides to have the case settled by a woman due to the virtues they commonly possess. Moreover, he might have had the case determined in a court of law because it relates to the Jews religious beliefs. Overall, the play contains numerous elements related to virtue and highlights the variety of ways people view the nature of business.

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