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The Ethical Choices of Philosophers in Tom Stoppard's Philosophical Plays

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This article examines Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers* (1972) and *Professional Foul* (1977) as complementary investigations into the limits and possibilities of philosophical ethics in modern dramatic form. Through the analytic lens of ethical context, the study argues that *Jumpers* dramatizes the collapse of moral authority in a culture dominated by opportunism and relativism, where ethical principles lose traction amid performative reasoning and institutional incoherence. *Professional Foul,* by contrast, relocates philosophical inquiry within a politically volatile landscape, foregrounding how ethical coherence must be forged through situated decisions rather than safeguarded by theoretical consistency. Across both works, Stoppard stages ethical dilemmas, communicative breakdowns, circular dramatic structures, and strategically motivated violations of norms to interrogate the unstable boundary between moral reasoning and real-world action. These plays together suggest that ethical agency is neither guaranteed nor fixed, but continually shaped, tested, and transformed at the shifting intersection of thought and practice.

Keywords: Tom Stoppard, philosophical drama, dilemma, ethical context, moral agent

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Tom Stoppard'ın Felsefi Oyunlarında Filozofların Etik Seçimi

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Bu makale, Tom Stoppard'ın *Jumpers* (1972) ve *Professional Foul* (1977) adlı eserlerini, modern dramatik biçimde felsefi etiğin sınırları ve imkânları üzerine birbirini tamamlayan incelemeler olarak ele alır. Etik bağlamın analitik merceğinden bakıldığında, *Jumpers* ın fırsatçılık ve görelilik tarafından belirlenen bir kültürde ahlaki otoritenin çöküşünü sahnelediği; etik ilkelerin, performatif akıl yürütme ve kurumsal tutarsızlıklar arasında etkisini yitirdiği ileri sürülür. Buna karşılık *Professional Foul*, felsefi sorgulamayı siyasal açıdan istikrarsız bir zemine yerleştirerek etik tutarlılığın teorik bütünlükle korunmaktan ziyade belirli koşullar içinde verilen kararlarla şekillendirilmesi gerektiğini vurgular. Her iki eserde de Stoppard, etik ikilemleri, iletişimsel kopuşları, dairesel dramatik yapıları ve stratejik biçimde güdülenen kural ihlallerini işleyerek ahlaki akıl yürütme ile gerçek dünyadaki eylem arasındaki istikrarsız sınırı sorgular. Bu oyunlar birlikte değerlendirildiğinde, etik öznenin ne kendiliğinden ne de kalıcı olarak güvence altında olduğunu; tersine, düşünce ile eylemin değişken kesişiminde sürekli biçimde oluştuğunu, sınandığını ve dönüştüğünü öne sürer.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tom Stoppard, felsefi tiyatro, ikilem, etik bağlam, ahlaki fail

1. Introduction

In the Western tradition, the interdependence and intertwines between philosophy (as the realm of ideas) and drama (as the realm of language and enactment) find their most striking expression in Plato. As Marvin Carlson reminds us in *Theories of the Theatre,* since the Greeks, theatre has long served as a cultural apparatus through which intellectual and ideological debates are staged as collective experience (Carlson 16-21). This insight resonates with Martin Puchner's argument in *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy* that "it was Plato's dramaturgy that effectively 'overturned' Platonism" (Puchner 171). Drama, with its embodied language and theatrical vividness, thus becomes a powerful medium for disseminating metaphysical ideas to a broader public. Within this Platonic lineage of philosophical drama, the Czech-born British playwright Tom Stoppard (1937–2025) emerges as a quintessential contemporary "dramatist of ideas" (Puchner 113), whose meta-theatrical practice brings to the fore a sustained and rigorous philosophical inquiry. In interviews, Stoppard himself readily acknowledged that his plays genuinely reflect the architecture of his own intellect— "an equilibrium between literature and philosophy" (qtd. in Gussow 18). For Stoppard, philosophical thought is the first and most substantial course in the theatrical feast he serves.

Critical reception has long emphasized this philosophical dimension in Stoppard's oeuvre. The theatre critic Mel Gussow famously catalogued Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead as "theatre-phil," *Travesties* as "lit-phil," and *Jumpers* as "phil-gym" (Gussow 84). David Kornhaber further traces this tendency to the British reception of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, which gave rise to a generation of philosophical playwrights from George Bernard Shaw to Tom Stoppard (Kornhaber 2012:80-82). Regarding the relationship between philosophical speculation and dramatic ethics, Stoppard once spoke with such characteristic candor: "Philosophy is merely the organization of a man's thoughts in his bathtub, … drama provides a moral matrix for shaping the values by which we live" (qtd. in Delaney 84). Here, Stoppard's notion of a "moral matrix" parallels the concept of the "ethical context" in Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism—a "discursive and historical sphere" (Nie 256) in which literary works exist and interact with their social milieu. In Stoppard's dramaturgy, the stage becomes a privileged site for philosophical investigations, while his characters not only present multiple facets of the ethical context but also, through their dilemmas and ethical choices, enact a form of Platonic revelation.

This conceptual foundation allows Stoppard's plays to function as philosophical laboratories, where his characters enact, resist, or disintegrate under the pressures of ethical conundrums. Through these figures, Stoppard dramatizes how philosophical worldviews shape—and fail to shape—moral actions. The following analyses therefore approach *Jumpers* (1972) and *Professional Foul* (1977), two plays that foreground philosophy professors as ethical agents, as paired investigations in philosophical ethics: each play stages a distinct ethical context, yet both use the philosopher's predicament to illuminate how thought and action repeatedly collide, fracture, and reconfigure the very conditions of moral choice.

2. Thought and Action: Philosophers' Conflict

It is intriguing that the titles of *Jumpers* and *Professional Foul*—both featuring philosopher-protagonists—do not directly reference philosophical concepts, but rather evoke the domain of athletics. In *Jumpers*, the term "*Jumpers*" refers not only to the troupe of amateur gymnasts in yellow leotards who perform endless acrobatic routines throughout the play, but also to the university's Vice-Chancellor, Sir Archibald Jumper (called "Archie" in the play), the ideological and personal antagonist of the protagonist, George Moore (addressed simply as "George"). Moreover, the term designates the radical liberal faction—the *Jumpers*—led by Archie and supported by the gymnasts. When interrogated by Inspector Bones about these curious performers, George provides a description that deftly captures the fusion of gymnastics and philosophy that defines the play:

BONES: Tell me something—Who are these acrobats?

GEORGE: Logical positivists, mainly, with a linguistic analyst or two, a couple of Benthamite Utilitarians… lapsed Kantians and empiricists generally… and of course the usual Behaviourists… a mixture of the more philosophical members of the university gymnastics team and the more gymnastic members of the Philosophy School. The close association between gymnastics and philosophy is I believe unique to this university and owes itself to the Vice-Chancellor, who is of course a first-rate gymnast, though an indifferent philosopher. (*Jumpers* 41)

By contrast, the title *Professional Foul* is borrowed directly from the lexicon of competitive sports. The phrase denotes a deliberate foul committed by a player to prevent an opponent from scoring or gaining advantage—a calculated breach of the rules for strategic benefit. The practice is especially common in football (soccer), the sport that forms the background of Stoppard's play, which is set in Prague during the European qualifying rounds of the World Cup.

At the same time, both "jumping" and "fouling" metaphorically allude to the philosophers' own rational and irrational actions within these plays. Through such athletic metaphors, Stoppard constructs a collective portrait of philosophers whose moral choices—whether cautious or transgressive—reveal the tension between abstract thought and embodied action.

2.1 George: Idealist Philosopher in Contemplation

From its opening scene, *Jumpers* immediately presents the tension and conflict between the moral philosophy professor George and the psychoanalytical philosopher Archie. To celebrate the Radical Liberal Party's victory in the British general election, the Vice-Chancellor, Archie, holds a jubilant party at the home of his psychotherapy patient and romantic interest, the faded cabaret singer Dorothy Moore (called "Dotty" in the play). During the festivities, the amateur gymnast-philosophers from the Department of Philosophy perform their human pyramid. Suddenly, one of the *Jumpers*—Professor of Logic, Duncan McFee (*called "McFee"*)—is shot and collapses, sending the guests fleeing in panic.

Meanwhile, George, as usual, has shut himself in his study; apart from telephoning to complain about the noise, he remains wholly unaware of the murder unfolding in his own home. Even when the following day brings dramatic changes to both nation and world—the shift in British politics and the moon landing—he notices none of it, absorbed instead in composing a paper refuting McFee's position for an upcoming philosophy colloquium. Thus begins what has been described as "a near-surreal philosophical play in the guise of an Agatha Christie murder mystery" (Barnes 36).

Stoppard barely conceals the fact that George's name evokes his real-life philosophical prototype, the ethicist G. E. Moore (George Edward Moore, 1873–1958), known for his influential work *Principia Ethica* (1903). George's pedantry and naïveté in the play likewise echo Moore's. As Alfred J. Ayer observes, Moore's "philosophical inquiries did not arise from reflection on the real world or on specialized academic fields, but rather from the opinions other philosophers had expressed on these matters" (Ayer 141). Moore was famously unworldly and indifferent to practical affairs—and George mirrors this bookish mode of inquiry. Not only does he declaim lengthy monologues to his mirror, he also learns about public events (British political upheavals) and even domestic crises (the murder) only through others' reports, lacking any first-hand engagement with reality.

The staging further reinforces this separation: the three areas of George's home (his study, Dotty's bedroom, and the hall) are lit separately so that "the bedroom can be blacked out completely while the action continues elsewhere" (*Jumpers* 7). The spatial division underscores the disjunction between George's abstract philosophical–ethical context and the "real-world" ethical environment occupied by Dotty and everyone else. For George, philosophy is a purely academic exercise detached from the complexity of human life. Thus, in his ethical universe, neither Dotty's emotional and physical needs nor the murder in his home carries more weight than the props—Thumper the rabbit and Pat the tortoise—he uses to illustrate his argument. When the traumatized Dotty repeatedly interrupts George's recitation of his paper by crying out "Help! … Murder! … Rape! … Horror! … Wolves!" in distress (*Jumpers* 15-18), George's misinterpretation exposes his ethical priorities:

DOTTY (*off*): Fire!

(George fires, startled before he was ready, and the arrow disappears over the top of the wardrobe.) Help

—rescue—fire!

GEORGE (shouts furiously): Will you stop this childish nonsense! Thanks to you I have lost the element of surprise! (*Jumpers* 19)

Absorbed in his philosophical world, George is holding a bow—one of his lecture props—and thus interprets "fire" only as the imperative "fire the arrow" instead of a desperate cry for help. Even after realizing the situation, his concern remains that the dramatic effect of his paper has been compromised by the loss of the arrow. Small wonder, then, that George never notices McFee's corpse, even when Dotty hides it clumsily under a nightgown right before his eyes.

Later, when the doorbell rings and the police arrive, George assumes it is the much-despised Archie. Whispering into the tortoise's ear, he mutters, "Now might I do it, Pat" (*Jumpers* 34). The line adapts *Hamlet*'s famous hesitation—"Now might I do it pat, now he is praying" (Shakespeare 213)—as he contemplates killing Claudius. Like *Hamlet*, George hesitates and over-analyzes; he meets practical problems with purely abstract reasoning. He is therefore doomed both in his intellectual contest with Archie and in his attempt to repair his fractured marriage. G. B. Crump labels George's behavior "ineffectuality" (Crump 368). I would suggest instead that such a judgment is made from the standpoint of the real-world ethical context. Within George's philosophical–ethical domain, however, his actions are entirely coherent. His prolix, jargon-laden speech mirrors the logic of his ethical choices: his "inaction" is not inertia or incompetence, but rather an ethical stance comparable to the non-choice of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they face death—a refusal to be swayed by an ethically deteriorating external world, a steadfast commitment to his philosophical convictions, and a faith in moral intuition and altruism.

George enters the real world only once in the play—not when he discovers Dotty's affair with Archie, nor when he learns a colleague died in his home, but when he realizes that he himself accidentally killed Thumper with his arrow and then inadvertently stepped on Pat, prompting him to "burst into tears" (*Jumpers* 72). This moment of emotional collapse occurs precisely when his philosophical world disintegrates with the loss of the two props essential to his paper's logic. His despair thus reveals his fierce attachment to preserving the integrity of his philosophical framework and ethical environment. George's philosophical world, mute and myopic when confronted with specific real-life crises, ultimately demonstrates what Kornhaber calls the "incommensurability between the pursuit of moral philosophy and the practice of a moral life" (Kornhaber 2021:84)—the irreducible gap between two ethical environments that cannot be reconciled.

2.2 Archie and the *Jumpers*: Moral Relativists in Motion

To George's colleagues—philosophers who delight equally in physical and political forms of movement—he is the least active philosopher imaginable. In the play, motion and stillness correspond directly to the contrasting philosophical commitments of the characters. As the only moral absolutist on the stage, George maintains that human "goodness" is intransigent and non-negotiable; moral relativists, by contrast, regard standards of goodness as variable and therefore inhabit an ethical "limbo" (*Jumpers* 58). True to their name, the *Jumpers* flit unethically between incompatible moral standards, and some even argue that murder, like lying, is "simply anti-social" and thus "not sinful" (*Jumpers* 39).

If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead dramatizes an ethical void by juxtaposing Shakespeare's orderly world with the drift of its marginal figures, *Jumpers* similarly sketches the erosion of moral values in modern society through its depiction of academic *jumpers* who have abandoned both moral standards and religious belief. Their jumps operate on several interrelated ethical levels:

(1) Bodily action. The *Jumpers* perform literal circus-style feats, "jump[ing] through" the Vice-Chancellor's oversized metal hoops (*Jumpers* 43). Their acrobatics signify complicity with the radical liberal order that now dominates the university.

(2) Thought. Having lost intellectual discipline, the *Jumpers* lack an interest in philosophical reflection and rush to hasty conclusions—jump to the conclusion. Logic, ostensibly their professional currency, is displaced by shallow, spectacular bodily display.

(3) Emotion. Their emotional detachment precludes empathy. Their repetitive gymnastic routines embody the cold, mechanical reasoning typical of moral relativism—a process constructed from a series of disconnected intellectual jumps. As George says in the Coda, their epistemology reduces "knowledge" to the mere "possibility in matters that can be demonstrated to be true or false." (*Jumpers* 77)

All these layers of metaphor culminate in the figure of Archie—the Vice-Chancellor, who lists trampoline as his "main interest" (*Jumpers* 52). Although *Jumpers* is "not a polemic against the evils of modernism" (Durham 179), Archie's title nevertheless signals his moral orientation: the "vice" in "Vice-Chancellor" inevitably evokes its other meaning—immorality. Even described as "satanic" (Hunter 79) by some scholars, Archie appears polymathic, collecting doctorates in medicine, philosophy, law, literature, physiotherapy, and more. Yet his interpretations of the world are superficial and opportunistic, mirroring the empty athleticism of the *Jumpers*. He can prepare a keynote address in two minutes—an apparently orderly "one-two-three-four" that is in fact nonsense (*Jumpers* 60). In a further satire of intellectual vacuity, the ushers hold up scorecards reading "9.7—9.9—9.8" after his speech (*Jumpers* 73), as though judging a gymnastics routine. Metaphysical speculation has been debased into quantifiable performance, serving the swift satisfaction of personal advantage.

Archie's treatment of Dotty during her "therapy" is likewise subject to quantification. Convinced that all psychological and physical ailments manifest on the skin, he uses a vaguely defined "dermatograph" to "read" data from Dotty's naked body:

ARCHIE (*within*): …There…

DOTTY (*within*): …Yes…

ARCHIE: There… there…

DOTTY: Yes…

ARCHIE: …and there…

DOTTY: Yes… yes.

(*These sounds are consistent with a proper doctor-patient relationship. If Dotty has a tendency to gasp slightly it is probably because the stethoscope is cold*, Archie on the other hand, might be getting rather overheated under the blaze of the dermatograph lights.)

ARCHIE (within): Excuse me…

(*Archie's coat comes sailing over the drapes. George retreats, closing the door.*) (*Jumpers* 51)

Because Dotty's bed is enclosed by a curtain, neither George nor the audience can see what happens—only hear dialogue that resembles clinical detachment. As George later mutters, "She's in bed with the doctor. Not literally, of course" (*Jumpers* 68). Meanwhile, Dotty's body image is projected onto the television via the Skin-Reading Machine.

Within real-world ethical norms, Archie's actions suggest the sexual exploitation of a female patient. For Weldon Durham, Dotty's pathological state symbolizes the "moral toxicity permeating the world," while Archie's transgressions allegorize "the intrusion of politics upon morality" (Durham 173). Yet within the play's philosophical framework, appearances cannot confirm inference. Archie retorts, "What would it have looked like if it had looked as if I were making a dermatographical examination?" (*Jumpers* 69). The line paraphrases Wittgenstein's critique of subjective certainty:

Meeting a friend in a corridor, Wittgenstein said: 'Tell me, why do people always say it was natural for men to assume that the sun went round the earth rather than that the earth was rotating?' His friend said, 'Well, obviously, because it just looks as if the sun is going round the earth.' To which the philosopher replied, 'Well, what would it have looked like if it had looked as if the earth was rotating?' (*Jumpers* 66)

Philosophy insists that the objective world does not bend to human assumptions. Archie exploits this principle, knowing that questioning its validity will drive George into paradox. Thus George, humiliated, must remain neutral; Archie escapes blame. This strategic evasion constitutes Archie's "moral jump"—the essence of moral relativism.

Archie and his followers embody the anti-intellectualism and ethical disarray of their environment—or rather, they create it. After the political upheaval depicted in the play, Britain is inverted: churches become gymnasiums; an atheist (the Radical Liberal agricultural spokesman) is appointed Archbishop of Canterbury; police officers assume the role of honor guards. Those in power ignore or sabotage the moral and political order essential to social functioning.

The *Jumpers*' ethical confusion extends even beyond the Earth. Dotty watches the moon-landing on TV, and the two astronauts, the Captain Scott and Oates pair, apparently function as Doppelgängers for Archie and George. After a mishap leaves insufficient fuel for two, Scott kicks Oates from the ladder to secure the sole survival spot (*Jumpers* 14). Yet the moral relativist can rationalize even this crime: "Of course, to somebody on it, the moon is always full, so the local idea of a sane action may well differ from ours" (*Jumpers* 29). The echo of Archie's habitual self-justification is unmistakable.

This pattern culminates when George petitions Archie to appoint him Chair of Logic, arguing that ethics is "always based on logical principles" and that he is "the longest-serving professor" (*Jumpers* 64). Archie's disdain for ethics—and the lowly place of ethics and theology in the university—mirrors a cultural abandonment of moral and spiritual values. Archie replies glibly: "I don't wish to make a fetish of denying you chairs, but you will appreciate that I can't ask you to sit down—a psychiatrist is akin to a priest taking confession" (*Jumpers* 64). Unlike George's earnest mishearing earlier, Archie's pun on "chair"

(professorship/seat) is a malicious exploitation of linguistic ambiguity. Linguistic disorder is one of the clearest signs of ethical disorder. And often even such verbal evasiveness is unnecessary, for "where wrong-doing is not agreed upon, neither is the need to justify it" (Gabbard 92).

Even in the dream-constructed Coda, Archie remains dominant—the nucleus of George's ethical nightmare. Leadership should carry responsibility and shared purpose, yet Archie exemplifies a leadership that drives society toward opportunism, moral unaccountability, and self-interest. The destructive influence of such pseudo-philosophers lies in their ability to persuade the public to accept moral relativism as "orthodox, mainstream philosophy" (*Jumpers* 39), marginalizing conscientious philosophers like George and destabilizing ethical order at its foundations. This is the choice of evil.

2.3 McFee and Crouch: Transformations of Ethical Identity

Professor McFee, the logician, is a senior member of the *Jumpers*, a close ally of Archie, and an ardent supporter of Jumperism. Although he is murdered at the very beginning of Act I, he nonetheless functions as an invisible central character linking the play's various ethical threads. He stands at the center of the human pyramid formed by the *Jumpers* in the opening acrobatic tableau; he occupies the center of the murder mystery (Who killed him? Why?); and he is also the intellectual center of the forthcoming annual philosophy symposium, at which McFee—as conference chair—will present the position George intends to refute. After his death, McFee's body becomes the shifting visual center of the stage as Dotty and Archie repeatedly attempt to conceal it.

Several scholars have noted that the name McFee carries the meaning "son of faith" (Davidson 309; Dean 62). Thus, the collapse of the human pyramid at the moment the head of the Logic Department is shot symbolically represents the disintegration of ethical order following the loss of both logic and faith. In the Coda, the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury—now an emblem of scientism replacing religious belief—is compelled by the *Jumpers* to take McFee's former place atop the pyramid. Yet this attempt at ethical reconstruction also fails: another gunshot erupts, and the pyramid again collapses into chaos. Leslie Thomson observes that the repetition of imagery at the beginning and end of the play forms a "circular structure" (Thomson 481), but I would argue that the repeated collapse of the pyramid suggests something more crucial: so long as the agents who constitute the ethical environment (the *Jumpers*) remain unchanged, the environment itself—determining the ethical trajectory and the choices available to its characters—cannot shift. The figures onstage remain trapped in this circular structure precisely because they inhabit a historical moment in which moral values have been weakened to the point of paralysis.

Like George, Archie, and the other aptly named figures in the play, McFee suffers from what might be termed "Cognomen Syndrome"—a psychological correspondence between name and social role (Crump 357). His given name, Duncan, together with his Scottish surname, evokes King Duncan in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a parallel that corresponds to McFee's position as "the guardian and figurehead

of philosophical orthodoxy" (*Jumpers* 64) and foreshadows his violent end. Yet the ethical identity suggested by a name is never fixed. Once as devoted to philosophy as George, McFee undergoes a transformation after losing faith in moral absolutes. The "son of faith" embraces moral relativism; in doing so, he wins Archie's favor and advances within the university hierarchy. The theme of the symposium he is slated to chair—"Man—Good, Bad, or Indifferent?" (*Jumpers* 73)—directly encapsulates the issue of ethical choice. Predictably, as a representative of Jumperist thought, McFee would answer "indeterminate", while George, as the lone dissenter, would suffer humiliation and bullying.

As the plot unfolds, the apartment building's caretaker, Crouch, gradually reveals McFee's hidden ethical identity. Before his death, McFee had concealed the fact that he was married while beginning a romance and engagement with George's young secretary. Seeking to evade responsibility, he retreated to a monastery in an effort to escape worldly entanglements.

McFee's death thus offers a lens through which to examine the ethical behavior of the other characters. Aside from the mentally unstable Dotty, nearly everyone has a plausible motive. George harbors professional jealousy but lacks the capacity for wrongdoing; the secretary, likely betrayed and humiliated, may resent McFee, though her moral stance remains unclear; Archie possesses both motive (he tells the inspector he quarrelled violently with McFee the previous night) and the ethical license to kill, since he does not believe murder to be morally wrong; and the *Jumpers* demonstrate their moral bankruptcy by stuffing McFee's body into an oversized garbage bag, echoing George's mocking description of Jumperist utilitarianism: "No problem is insoluble given a big enough plastic bag" (*Jumpers* 31). Although McFee occupies the center of the murder plot, *Jumpers* is no conventional detective drama; the function of his death is not to direct attention toward solving the mystery but rather to open space for examining each character's ethical choices.

The first person to report the murder and to discover McFee's hidden body is Crouch, who collects rubbish and serves drinks during the party, giving him access to all the rooms, including George's study. Though not an academic philosopher, Crouch has befriended McFee during the latter's clandestine visits to George's home to have "a bit of chatting" about philosophy, and eventually earns Archie's praise as "something of a philosopher" (*Jumpers* 70). Crouch's philosophical aptitude is revealed in his unexpected critique of George's paper:

(…*Crouch is seated at George's desk, reading the typescript and chuckling!)*

CROUCH: Saint Sebastian died of fright!—very good! (*To Secretary; surprisingly.*) Of course, the flaw in the argument is that even if the first term of his infinitely regressing series is zero rather than infinitesimal, the original problem remains in identifying the second term of the series, which however small must be greater than zero—you take my point? I grant he's answered Russell's first point, I grant you that—the smallest proper fraction is zero—but—

GEORGE (*snatches the paper*): Yes, but you entirely miss my point, which is that having established that the first term—that is God—corresponds to zero, there's no need to worry about the second term—it is enough that it is the second—Surely you can see that?

CROUCH (*humbly*): I expect you're right, sir. I mean, it's only a hobby with me. (*Jumpers* 69–70)

This arcane, comically opaque exchange is dramaturgically functional: it reveals that Crouch, the unassuming layman, possesses latent philosophical acuity, even detecting errors in a professor's argument. Yet as an amateur, he ultimately yields to George's authority. His name, Crouch—to bend low—reflects both his subservient ethical status and his deferential posture. The act of crouching can also be read as the preparatory movement before a jump. Indeed, Archie, after refusing George's request, whimsically appoints Crouch as McFee's successor—the new Chair of Logic and the symposium's presiding officer—thus transforming Crouch's ethical identity into that of a "proto-Jumper". Archie's justification is telling: "We'll get a new chairman, someone of good standing; he won't have to know much philosophy" (*Jumpers* 60). Archie seeks a compliant puppet, and Crouch—blinded by the mundane world, unaware of his professional inadequacy, and ignorant of the *Jumpers*' technical expertise—becomes the perfect candidate.

Their exchange at the end of Act II becomes a kind of ethical apprenticeship, a lesson in Jumperist relativism:

CROUCH: And now he's dead.

(*Secretary snaps her handbag shut with a sharp sound and takes her coat out of the cupboard.*)

ARCHIE: A severe blow to Logic, Mr. Crouch.

CROUCH (*nodding*): It makes no sense to me at all. What do you make of it, sir?

ARCHIE: The truth to us philosophers, Mr. Crouch, is always an interim judgment. We will never even know for certain who did shoot McFee. Unlike mystery novels, life does not guarantee a denouement; and if it came, how would one know whether to believe it?" (*Jumpers* 71–72)

If the secretary's handbag snapping shut provides the audience with a surface-level clue to the murderer, Archie's relativistic suspension of judgment gestures toward a deeper nihilism—no truth, no right or wrong, no good or evil. Crouch articulates the confusion spectators themselves experience, a confusion that prepares the ground for the Coda, in which the *Jumpers* transform the philosophy symposium into a frenzied carnival. The play's concern, therefore, is not the resolution of a crime but the pervasive ethical disarray—indeed ethical darkness—that blankets the action.

This is emphasized visually in the opening scene, when the lights cast the secretary's swinging motion across the stage and Crouch stands in alternating patches of illumination and shadow. Taking an unwary step, he is struck by the swing and collapses, smashing a glass on the floor (*Jumpers* 10). In that moment, the glass—and symbolically, his earlier moral assumptions—shatters. His transformation into a Jumper has begun.

In *Jumpers*, Stoppard renders the philosophical enterprise inseparable from the ethical environments that shape and distort human action. Through the contrasting figures of George, Archie, McFee, Crouch, and the *Jumpers* collectively, the play exposes how ethical identity is continually produced, threatened, and reconfigured within a world where moral authority has fractured. George's uncompromising moral absolutism collapses under the weight of a reality governed by opportunism and moral relativism; Archie's calculated "moral jumps" exemplify the seductions of power in an ethical landscape emptied of stable values; McFee's fall and Crouch's ascension reveal how ethical positions can be discarded or adopted according to circumstance rather than conviction. The recurrent images of falling bodies, collapsing pyramids, and misfired arrows underscore the instability of any ethical architecture built upon precarious foundations. Ultimately, *Jumpers* suggests that philosophy cannot remain insulated from lived ethical disorder: the play stages the philosopher's struggle not merely to formulate moral propositions but to inhabit a world where the very conditions for ethical coherence have eroded.

3. Ethical Coherence: Philosophers' Resolution

If *Jumpers* probes whether a philosopher ought to privilege thought or action, Professional Foul shifts the ethical focus to the question of how choices can be made in ways that achieve both logical and moral coherence. Stoppard's play for television Professional Foul was first aired in September 1977 on BBC2, Europe's earliest color television channel—a medium that provided Stoppard's philosophical and ethical concerns with an expansive audience—particularly given that the play is set in the Eastern Bloc's Prague, ideologically far removed from Western Europe at the time. As Richard J. Buhr points out, many of the "epistemological and ethical problems that had long preoccupied Stoppard are clarified and brought to their culmination in Professional Foul" (Buhr 320).

I argue that this continuity and development manifest primarily in two respects. First, structurally, the play resembles Stoppard's earlier idea-comedies such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and *Jumpers* in that it situates its characters against the backdrop of the real-world ethical environment, while foregrounding the philosophers' own philosophical-ethical environment—here, a scholarly philosophy colloquium—as the arena for ethical critique and debate. Second, in terms of characterization, the play, like *Jumpers*, portrays a cluster of ivory-tower philosophers; but unlike the abstract and absurdist mode of *Jumpers*, Professional Foul offers its protagonist a far more concrete space for ethical practice, presenting audiences with ethical conflicts and moments of moral resolution that resonate with lived experience. The play thus underscores the significance of ethical practice—of how ethical choices are actually made—namely, that "moral philosophy is useless when it remains mere theory divorced from action, and that ethical insight arises through lived experience" (Purse 185).

As noted earlier, the term "professional foul"—a strategic breach of rules commonly seen in competitive sports—refers literally to the action taken by England player Roy Broadbent during the European qualifying match for the World Cup, when he deliberately "scythe down" the Czechoslovakian

striker "from behind" to prevent a goal (Professional Foul 161). Metaphorically, the term also alludes to the ethically questionable choices made by several philosophers and other characters in the play—choices that violate not sporting rules but the norms of social morality.

3.1 Work Ethics of Philosophy Academics

The play features four participants at the Colloquium Philosophicum in Prague: the American philosopher of language Brad Stone and three British philosophers—Andrew Chetwyn, Professor Anderson (whose first name is not revealed), and Bill McKendrick. Among them, Stone—slow to register or respond to his surroundings—is the only philosophy professor who refrains from committing any form of "professional foul". Early Stoppard scholar Joan Dean has noticed a pair of structurally comparable mirror-figures across Professional Foul and *Jumpers*: "In the matter of translating abstract ideas into action, McKendrick resembles George—both profess that philosophy must engage directly with socio-political practice, yet both remain chronically inconsistent; Anderson, by contrast, mirrors McFee in evolving from a detached intellectual into an active participant in political life" (Dean 93). I concur with the latter observation, though in ethical terms Stone, rather than McKendrick, aligns more closely with George—sealed off in a hermetic bubble of pure academic abstraction. Stone is preoccupied with trifling linguistic ambiguities such as "ran well", which may mean "the show ran well" or "the horse ran well" (PF 151), and he carries this self-amusing pedantry from the conference floor to the dining table, much to everyone else's embarrassment.

The other three philosophers all arrive in Prague with motives that extend beyond academic exchange. Professor Anderson, the Cambridge ethicist and football enthusiast, sees the conference as a perfect opportunity to attend the Czechoslovakia–England World Cup qualifier—after all, "[a] World Cup qualifier is not just a football match" (PF 152). On the plane, he explains to McKendrick his "ulterior motive":

ANDERSON: Yes. To tell you the truth I have an ulterior motive for coming to Czechoslovakia at this time. I'm being a tiny bit naughty.

MCKENDRICK: Naughty?

ANDERSON: Unethical. Well, I am being paid for by the Czech government, after all.

MCKENDRICK: And what …?

ANDERSON: I don't think I'm going to tell you. You see, if I tell you I make you a co-conspirator whether or not you would have wished to be one. Ethically I should give you the opportunity of choosing to be one or not.

MCKENDRICK: Then why don't you give me the opportunity?

ANDERSON: I can't without telling you. An impasse." (PF 136–37)

Anderson knows full well that treating the colloquium as a free trip to a football match violates basic work ethics, yet because such conduct is a tacitly accepted custom in academic life, he frames this "unethical" act as merely "a tiny bit naughty", thereby alleviating his guilt over the choice.

Professor Chetwyn, likewise an ethicist, is—at least in McKendrick's telling—a highly politicized scholar:

MCKENDRICK: … I mean politics. Letters to The Times about persecuted professors with unpronounceable names. I'm surprised the Czechs gave him a visa.

ANDERSON: There are some rather dubious things happening in Czechoslovakia. Ethically. (PF 136)

Chetwyn remains mysteriously absent throughout much of the conference, and in the end is detained at the airport by the police. From what little we learn, his true purpose was to smuggle important documents out of the country on behalf of Czech friends. The act clearly violates Czechoslovak law, yet in contrast to Anderson's earlier self-serving use of "ethically", the phrase here acquires a strong moral charge—Anderson implicitly endorses Chetwyn's action as ethically justified civil courage.

By comparison, the cynical McKendrick may have the least legitimate motivation for attending the colloquium. He jokingly describes his field of research as "philosophical assumptions of social science" (PF 137), invoking Marxist ideals of social engagement and expanded scholarly horizons as cover for his hedonistic pursuits—womanizing, heavy drinking, and general misconduct. Upon landing in Prague, he eyes the women in his pornographic magazine and remarks, "I wonder if there'll be any decent women?" (PF 139), using the ambiguous "decent"—ostensibly "virtuous", actually "attractive"—to gloss over his dubious intentions.

3.2 Anderson's Moral Conflict and Its Resolution

The ethical conflict that Anderson confronts—and the means by which he resolves it—occupies the central arc of Professional Foul. As the earlier examples demonstrate, Anderson is adept at using what might be called an "objectifying" philosophical method to defuse an ethical crisis, that is, converting a moment of moral danger into a problem susceptible to philosophical analysis. Yet the challenge he now faces is unprecedented in scale. Pavel Hollar, a Czech student whom Anderson once taught at Cambridge, visits his hotel to ask a grave favor: that Anderson secretly carry his doctoral dissertation out of the country so that it may be translated into English by a friend in Britain. The dissertation is politically sensitive because its argument runs counter to the "ethics of the state" in Czechoslovakia then:

The ethics of the state must be judged against the fundamental ethic of the individual. The human being, not the citizen. I conclude there is an obligation, a human responsibility, to fight against the state correctness. Unfortunately that is not a safe conclusion. (PF 145)

Like George in *Jumpers*—habitually mishearing words from within his insulated philosophical world—Anderson misinterprets the word "safe". He launches into a long analytical explanation of how

Hollar might strengthen his argument. In philosophical discourse, *unsafe* indeed means that a conclusion is debatable or methodologically weak. But here, *unsafe* expresses Hollar's fear for his own life: "I mean, it is not safe for me." (PF 145) His danger arises precisely because his argument challenges a collectivist state ethics that demands individual compliance. Faced with his former student's plea, Anderson makes his initial ethical decision within the horizon of his own philosophical-ethical environment: he refuses, on the grounds that he is "an honoured guest" invited by the Czech government (PF 144). Yet even this refusal is delivered without conviction:

ANDERSON: … I'm sorry … I mean it would be bad manners, wouldn't it?

HOLLAR: Bad manners?

ANDERSON: I know it sounds rather lame. But ethics and manners are interestingly related. The history of human calumny is largely a series of breaches of good manners…. (Pause.) Perhaps if I said correct behaviour it wouldn't sound so ridiculous. You do see what I mean. (PF 144)

"Manners" and "correct behaviour" dilute rather than confront the ethical stakes of the request; both function as euphemisms that sidestep the moral problem. Although etiquette is a minor component of ethics, it usually applies only to decorum in everyday social settings—as when McKendrick scorns Stone's poor dining manners and calls him "a lousy eater" (PF 167). It is never adequate as a moral category. Seeing his student impoverished, mistreated, and fearful, Anderson is clearly moved. When he learns that this brilliant young philosopher has spent ten years working as a bus-stop cleaner, he falls silent, "not knowing what to say" (PF 142). His duty as a teacher would be to help Hollar; his duty as a law-abiding guest would be not to violate Czech legal strictures. Anderson thus finds himself in a classic ethical double bind.

In his rumination on dilemmas, Zhang Longxi sees Anderson as a paradigmatic example, who "understands ethics as a sort of contract between free-will-owning individuals or communities" (Zhang 293). In the concrete situation of the play, Anderson believes that "having accepted their [the Czech government's] hospitality, I cannot in all conscience start smuggling … It's just not ethical" (PF 146). His sense of ethical coherence rests on his understanding of which ethical norms constitute the customs to which a guest must conform. But because Anderson and Hollar inhabit different ethical environments, what seems a self-evident social contract to the former appears idealized, even unattainable, to the latter—indeed, it is precisely the ethical environment Hollar aspires to create. Within Hollar's ethical world, writing a dissertation critical of the state and asking his professor to take it abroad are both perilous acts of resistance. Once Anderson recognizes this discrepancy, he tries to protect Hollar by removing the dissertation from the hotel so that it cannot be discovered by the police, partly out of concern for the student, partly out of guilt for refusing him. Thus he agrees to return the dissertation to Hollar's apartment the next day—"an indirect way of assuming ethical responsibility" (Dean 92). It is "indirect" because Anderson's plan is merely to return the dissertation on his way to the football match,

which he had already intended to attend by skipping McKendrick's paper. That he is detained at the apartment by police inspection—and thereby misses the match altogether—is an unforeseen sacrifice.

What ultimately compels Anderson's second ethical decision is his experience within Hollar's apartment. Expecting to drop off the dissertation quickly, he finds instead that Hollar has been arrested and the apartment is crowded with police. Hollar's wife asks him to stay as a witness during the search, as required by law. Forced to miss the match, Anderson is permitted to listen to the radio commentary. The irony is sharp: just as a "professional foul" occurs on the football field, the police simultaneously commit what might be called a "double professional foul" (Zhang 294) in the apartment—one officer plants black-market currency in the room to frame Hollar on economic charges. After the police leave, Hollar's distraught wife and child break down in tears, and the sight finally moves Anderson to promise he will help.

Anderson's promise—his second ethical choice—takes shape in two stages. The first consists of a series of philosophical and practical "professional fouls". He spends the night revising his conference paper to incorporate Hollar's arguments, transforming his prepared remarks into an explicit condemnation of the Czech government and turning himself into a conduit for Hollar's suppressed voice. Just as the police planted evidence and just as Anderson earlier used the conference program to cover a pornographic magazine on the plane, his rewriting of the paper constitutes another strategic breach of decorum. The Czech authorities predictably cannot permit such dissent to be aired at the colloquium. The conference chair first claims that the translators cannot accommodate last-minute changes; when this fails to deter Anderson, a fire alarm is pulled to evacuate the hall—another "professional foul" deployed to defend the ethical order of the State.

Anderson's second step completes a structural ring reminiscent of *Jumpers*. After the airport search, he boards the plane safely and reveals to McKendrick that he placed Hollar's dissertation in McKendrick's bag while the latter was drunk. The play thus returns to the aircraft setting with which it began, creating a circular ethical structure. Once they learn that Chetwyn has been arrested at the airport, the opening discussion of the ethical legitimacy of his actions recurs; yet Anderson, who has also smuggled documents illegally, escapes through a final "professional foul"—the covert substitution of luggage. Anderson acknowledges that he has "reversed a principle" (PF 184), making McKendrick an unwitting accomplice, but he explains the pragmatic logic of his choice: "They [the police] were very unlikely to search you." (PF 185). Such an inversion of ethical principle resembles the logic of a professional foul in football: a rule is broken to maximize a morally intelligible advantage. Whether this counts as ethical or unethical depends entirely on the observer's ethical environment and standpoint. Anderson's two infractions fulfill his promise to Hollar but violate McKendrick's autonomy and undermine the political-ethical order of Czechoslovakia. This ring-like ethical structure enacts Anderson's own remark that "[e]thics is a very complicated business" (PF 185).

Anderson's wry ease in dismissing McKendrick's protests contrasts sharply with his earlier anxiety when he notices the plane's wing trembling at the start of the play. That tremor symbolized, as critics

have noted, a concern over "the fragility of the modern mechanized world" (Buhr 322)—a metaphor for the instability of the ethical principles that govern Anderson's philosophical world once he enters the contingencies of real life. Through a sequence of ethical decisions and strategic professional fouls, Anderson ultimately attains a form of ethical coherence and completes a trajectory from abstract philosophical theory, through concrete moral practice, and back again to reflective ethical understanding. In this sense, Anderson's final composure in the face of ethical ambiguity mirrors the structural and conceptual logic that governs *Jumpers*: both plays end not with the restoration of a stable moral order but with the philosopher suspended within an environment fundamentally out of joint. Yet where George remains immobilized—caught within the airtight logic of his philosophical world and unable to intervene meaningfully in the ethical disorder that surrounds him—Anderson discovers a path toward ethical coherence precisely through acting within such disorder. His sequence of decisions and professional fouls forms an arc that moves from abstract principle to situated judgment, from theoretical scruple to morally fraught responsibility. Far from resolving the contradictions of the world he inhabits, Anderson's actions acknowledge them, demonstrating that ethical agency consists not in preserving purity but in navigating complexity. In paralleling George's paralysis with Anderson's compromised but committed engagement, Stoppard suggests that the philosopher's task is neither to withdraw from ethical chaos nor to master it definitively, but to respond within it—to forge, however imperfectly, a coherence that remains attentive both to philosophical rigor and to the lived stakes of human vulnerability.

4. Conclusion

Stoppard's two philosophical plays trace distinct but converging paths toward an understanding of how moral agency is formed, tested, and often undone within unstable ethical landscapes. In *Jumpers*, George's uncompromising moral absolutism reveals the danger of philosophical systems detached from lived experience. His faith in the internal consistency of ethical reasoning cannot withstand the surrounding culture of opportunism and relativism, and the play's recurrent imagery (collapsing pyramids, misfires, and recursive misunderstandings) underscores a world in which moral order is no longer grounded in shared principles. As Bernard Williams cautions, philosophy often falters when it seeks "the absolute conception" of ethics at the expense of human complexity (Williams 139). George's plight exemplifies precisely this limit: for him, philosophical clarity becomes a form of paralysis.

Professional Foul presents an inverse dilemma: here the philosopher must act. Anderson's decisions—shaped first by hesitation, then by reluctant responsibility, and finally by ethically risky intervention—demonstrate that moral coherence often emerges through negotiation rather than prescription. Ethical responsibility surfaces not through theoretical purity but through engagement with the vulnerabilities and urgencies of others. His "professional fouls", morally compromised though they are, indicate a willingness to assume responsibility within a coercive political environment where inaction itself becomes ethically fraught.

In juxtaposing a philosopher immobilized by principle with one compelled into action by circumstance, Stoppard stages the tension between contemplative ethics and lived moral practice from within. This tension echoes Martha Nussbaum's reminder that to understand how literary works "share certain ethical commitments," we must also attend to "seeing on what grounds some philosophers have denied or refused them" (Nussbaum 190). Stoppard's plays intricately dramatize both the refusal of ethical responsibility and its reluctant acceptance.

The recent passing of Tom Stoppard inevitably situates these readings within a widening historical frame. His philosophical plays stand as part of a larger dramatic tradition in which theatre becomes a testing ground for philosophical inquiry. While neither play offers a stable solution, both suggest that philosophy becomes ethically meaningful only when it confronts the world's disorder rather than retreating from it. Ethical coherence, in Stoppard's dramatic universe, is provisional, contingent, and forged at the shifting intersection of thought and action—a process continually renegotiated in response to human need and political pressure. Stoppard thus reimagines the philosopher not as a guardian of abstract moral truth but as a figure compelled to navigate, however imperfectly, the unresolved complexities of ethical life.

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