Stanley Cavell, 1926-2018

Daniele Lorenzini

Stanley Cavell, the Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value at Harvard University, was one of the most prominent philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, who developed over the course of five decades an impressive *oeuvre* characterised by two main quests that define the singularity of his philosophical voice: on the one hand, the quest for the ordinary, originated in Cavell's deep fascination with its uncanny and *extra*ordinary aspects; on the other, the quest for a specifically *American* philosophical tradition, independent of the (mainstream) analytic one. Understanding these two long-standing quests is pivotal to addressing an apparently unclassifiable and tradition-crossing *oeuvre* that might otherwise seem too eclectic and dispersed, with its interests ranging from ordinary language philosophy to aesthetics, from American transcendentalism to psychoanalysis, from post-Kantian continental philosophy to music, from literature and theatre to cinema. Cavell understood philosophy 'as a diverse and democratic activity that cannot be confined to the academy and that naturally extends to all aspects of culture', which, far from being a well-defined academic discipline, consists in a perpetual effort to make sense of our (ordinary) words, practices, and forms of life.[1] As he puts it in *The Claim of Reason*, one cannot teach philosophy without acknowledging that one 'requires education', that is, that one needs to be constantly ready to change, since 'in the face of the questions posed in Augustine, Luther, Rousseau, Thoreau … we are children.' That's why Cavell defined philosophy as 'the education of grownups' – a definition that would later be commented upon and adopted by authors including Pierre Hadot and Hilary Putnam.[2]

Among Cavell's central guides was the Wittgensteinian call to 'return' words from their metaphysical to their everyday use. What really matters is not hidden but lies in plain view, before our eyes; however, it is usually too close or too banal – too *ordinary* – to be perceived. Philosophical jargon contributes a great deal to our inability to see the richness and complexity of our everyday language and practices. Hence, in an original way, Cavell condemns philosophy's widespread refusal to address 'the difficulty of reality', that is, its tendency to flee concrete issues and seek refuge in abstractions, and above all – as Cora Diamond puts it – its ignorance concerning the question of 'how to inhabit a human body.'[3] However, the ordinary is not to be 'discovered': it is rather a place to which one returns thanks to a conversion of one's gaze and attention, and to a radical change in the hierarchy of importance – a change that, according to Cavell, was already prefigured in Thoreau. Thus, by insisting on the transformative powers of the ordinary, Cavell emphasises the essential (but usually downplayed) link between – as well as the critical potentiality of – American transcendentalism and ordinary language philosophy. He also explicitly contests the hierarchies commonly accepted in contemporary academic philosophy that exclude, from the start, the possibility that anything 'serious' could ever be said, for instance, about the Hollywood comedies and melodramas of the 1930s and the 1940s, or that Cary Grant and Bette Davis could occupy the same page as Plato and Kant in a philosophy book.

In the Overture to *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1994), Cavell characterises philosophy in terms of 'the claim to speak for the human', that is, of 'a certain universalising use of the voice', and presents 'the arrogant assumption of the right to speak for others' as the ground of ordinary language philosophy – in par-

ticular, of the later Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin's works. Connecting, again, ordinary language philosophy and American transcendentalism in a quite unprecedented way, Cavell discovers the foundations of this 'systematic arrogation of voice' in Emerson's idea that 'the deeper the scholar dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true.'[4] However, far from constituting a definitive answer, these claims lead to the formulation of one of the most important questions in Cavell's *oeuvre*: the question of the community, haunted as it is – and will always be – by what he calls 'the truth of skepticism.' As Cavell puts it in *The Claim of Reason*, 'to speak for oneself politically is to speak for the others with whom you consent to association, and it is to consent to be spoken for by them'; this means that you constantly risk the rebuff 'of those for whom you claimed to be speaking' and that you risk having to rebuff 'those who claimed to be speaking for you.'[5] Such a risk, formulated here in political terms, has a far more general relevance: it is inscribed, Cavell argues, at the core of our condition of 'creatures of language', of our own form of life characterised by the desire to be acknowledged by others and therefore by the need to make ourselves intelligible to them.

> That my actions are part of the life form of talkers (as Wittgenstein characterises the human, at [*Philosophical*] *Investigations*, §174) makes them open to criticism. That I am open to, perhaps responsive to, the criticism of being insensitive, cruel, petty, clumsy, narrow-minded, self-absorbed, cold, hard, heedless, reckless … is as much a mystery as my being open to the charge of being imprudent or undutiful or unfair. That we are not transparent to ourselves means that such criticism demands confrontation and conversation.[6]

This is why Cavell is convinced that one cannot find one's own voice – in politics as well as in friendship, love, parenthood, and so on – by speaking for oneself privately. On the contrary, one should take the risk of publicly addressing others within the framework of a community (of language and life) that can never be taken for granted, since it is itself at stake in our words. Thus, Cavell constantly insists on the importance to fight against the temptation of

'empty[ing] out my contribution to words, so that language itself, as if beyond me, exclusively takes over the responsibility for meaning.'[7] This is indeed the only way one has to let oneself matter to the other, acknowledging that 'your expressions in fact express you, that they are yours, that you are in them.'[8] The vulnerability of the human voice – and of our form of life as creatures of language – is therefore far deeper than the power language has to wound. It (also) stems from the fact that it is always possible to deny that my expressions in fact express me, that it is always possible not to mean what I say, and that at the same time to mean what I say exposes me to the risk of being rebuffed, of discovering that in fact I do not matter to the other, that I am unable to make myself intelligible to her. This essential vulnerability of the human voice that Cavell never ceases to emphasise is strictly connected to the vulnerability of ordinary language explored by Austin: ordinary language can always 'go wrong', as Austin argues, since it can not only miss its object, representing or describing it incorrectly, but *fail* just like every other human action. As Cavell puts it, 'if utterances *could* not fail they would not be the human actions under consideration, indeed not the actions of humans at all.'[9]

However, in Cavell's view, the vulnerability of our ordinary (linguistic and non-linguistic) practices is not to be interpreted negatively, as the sign of a radical passivity that would inevitably trap us in a form of determinism. On the contrary, it is precisely because it is vulnerable, because it can always go wrong, that the ordinary can function as a crucial vehicle for change and transformation. This idea constitutes one of the most original contributions of Cavell's work to the philosophy of language. We *do* and we *suffer* things with words: not only because words can wound, but also because, in order to do anything with words, we need to accept the risk of exposing ourselves to various types of failures as well as to the others and their responses – which cannot be known in advance and have the power to profoundly affect our being and life. Therefore, in taking seriously (and extending) Austin's work, Cavell ends up challenging the very idea of a given and unitary subject of speech acts: 'our word is our bond' means that speaking is – also – a way for us to give ourselves a form, not only

vis-à-vis the others (with a view to making ourselves intelligible to them), but also vis-à-vis ourselves. Indeed, far from being the external *translation* of a series of 'inner' realities, language as both action and passion is the vehicle for a complex set of processes of (re)constitution of ourselves. These processes are an essential part of our life as creatures of language and deserve to be addressed, as Foucault would have said, from the perspective of a 'dramatics' rather than a pragmatics of discourse.

This is why, according to Cavell, the menace of skepticism 'is not simply that since we may "always" be wrong in our (empirical) judgements, the moral to draw is … to be cautious in our claims, to measure how far we attach our wills to our words about the world.' It is rather that, 'since I am, as finite, threatened with consequences from unforeseeable quarters, I am at any time acting, and speaking, in the absence of what may seem sufficient reason.'[10] Skepticism, and notably scepticism concerning other minds, is not a philosophical problem that stands in need of a *solution*: it is a fact, Cavell argues, an existential condition entailed by the finitude and separateness of human beings, and which in turn entails the constant need for human beings to change. Thus, far from trying to get rid of it, philosophy should always be kept 'open to the threat or temptation of skepticism.'[11]

Cavell's lifelong interest in the need for human beings to transform or transfigure themselves allows us to explain his discovery of what he calls 'moral perfectionism.' As he explains at the beginning of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1990), moral perfectionism is not a *theory* competing with others, but a dimension of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought, running from Plato and Aristotle to Wittgenstein and Heidegger, and including – among others – Augustine, Spinoza, Locke, Kant, Mill and Nietzsche, as well as several (non-philosophical) authors such as Kleist, Ibsen and Wilde. But this 'register' of the moral life is also to be found in Emerson and Thoreau, who give it a particularly interesting (and specifically American) form. In *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, Cavell claims that moral perfectionism is exemplified by Emerson's willingness to attract the human to 'the work of becoming human' – which is not a discovery of something hidden, but

a *re*-discovery that takes the form of the creation of something new. Indeed, for Emerson and Thoreau, philosophy consists, first, in the loss of the world, and then in the 'returning of it, to it' made possible by the transfiguration of oneself.[12] Moral perfectionism has to do precisely with the acknowledgment that there is always a 'further self' not yet realised, and thus with the effort to attain it, although Cavell clearly emphasises that there is no *final* self to be reached – no Absolute Spirit to be achieved, no true self to be given voice to. Moral perfectionism is rather about the perpetual movement from a state of the self to another, an incessant self-transformation aiming to attain 'the further or higher self of each', signalling that the human being 'is always becoming … always partially in a further state.'[13] This path is Nietzschean in that it does not go upward – Cavell claims that philosophy is 'a refusal of, say disobedient to, … transcendence' – but downward: it takes place in the immanence of ordinary human practices, and could also be described as 'the task of accepting finitude.'[14]

Moral perfectionism is thus linked to the ancient (Greek and Roman) conception of philosophy as a way of life, characterised by the effort to radically transform one's way of seeing the world and of living in it. Indeed, the most important question for Emerson is (still) that of 'the conduct of life': How shall I live? It is possible to emphasise here interesting analogies between Cavell's work and other (apparently very different) perspectives such as Pierre Hadot's reading of the history of philosophy in the light of the notion of spiritual exercises or Michel Foucault's late interest in the techniques of the self.[15] And also to bring moral perfectionism closer to a certain conception of the virtues, since they both assign a central role to the formation of the moral character and criticise the idea that morality resolves itself into a series of discrete moments of choice, or that moral reasoning consists in applying a defined set of principles and rules to the 'facts' of a given situation. On the contrary, like Iris Murdoch, Cavell, too, is convinced that moral life is not 'something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices', but rather 'something that goes on continually' – and that what is crucial is precisely 'what happens in between such choices.'[16] It is there that one's self gets formed and

reformed, that the way one sees the world gets shaped, that the 'facts' of a situation gets defined. By speaking of (and studying) moral perfectionism, Cavell thus aims to broaden the traditional philosophical conception of the moral life and to show that moral thought does not take place in 'a situation with fixed, given possibilities' (as Cora Diamond puts it), but consists in a *creative* exercise that transforms the situation, and the moral agent herself. Moral perfectionism is not a moral theory (that's why, ultimately, it should not be considered as a mere variety of virtue ethics), but rather a way to help us to see morality in a different light. Indeed, according to Cavell, morality has to do first and foremost with the way in which we pay attention to things and people, with the hierarchies we build concerning what matters to us, and with the effort to change ourselves in order to reach a higher (but never definitive) state of our subjectivity.

This original conception of the moral life may appear dangerously elitist. However, Cavell claims that it is essentially *democratic* and that, far from being limited to morality, it possesses an explicit political dimension. In addition to (different forms of)

moral perfectionism, there is also a political perfectionism – one 'that happily consents to democracy' and gives voice to a 'democratic aspiration'.[17] What we might call democratic – or American – perfectionism is defined by the contrast between conformity and self-reliance; as John Stuart Mill would have said, it consists in the (unconventional) 'exercise of individuality'.[18] Such contrast and exercise define, in Cavell's eyes, a political task: democratic perfectionism emphasises the tension not only between myself as I am and myself as I may become, but also – and more importantly – between society 'as it stands' and society 'as it may become'. As Cavell puts it at the beginning of *Cities of Words*:

> The very conception of a divided self and a doubled world, providing a perspective of judgement upon the world as it is, measured against the world as it may be, tends to express disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects, and perhaps to lodge the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world.[19]

This is why democratic perfectionism is grounded in the self-reliant (public) expression of one's own

voice. Indeed, the question of democracy, in Cavell's eyes, is the question of the relation between one's personal voice and political discourse: I need to recognise myself in what my society says since I gave it my voice, accepting that it speaks in my name. However, as soon as this relation becomes dissonant, that is, when I no longer recognise my voice in the voice of others, I also need to accept the task of (publicly) expressing my dissent, relying on my sense of what democracy should be. As already noted, Cavell emphasises that the constitution of a (social and political) community relies on the double need to speak for others and to be spoken for by others. And, surprisingly, he addresses this complex issue in his book on what he calls 'the Hollywood comedies of remarriage': what is at stake in them is precisely the possibility for the central pair to overcome the threat of an irreparable rupture (the divorce) and to *re*-establish their mutual relationship (to *re*-marry, that is, to get *back* together, together *again*). Thus, these comedies explore the possibility to create a community based on 'a meet and happy conversation' through which participants acknowledge their shared condition of finitude and separateness, transforming it in the foundation of their life *together*. Indeed, for the central pair, 'talking together is fully and plainly being together, a mode of association, a form of life' whose objective is not to reach a final agreement, but to attain mutual acknowledgment, since – as Cavell puts it – 'we do not have to agree with one another in order to live in the same moral world, but we do have to know and respect one another's differences.'[20]

However, far from drawing a quietist and idealised picture of democracy, Cavell's writings on political perfectionism also suggest that disobedience, as Thoreau first defined it, is (paradoxically) the real foundation of democracy, a sign of health and not at all of decline. Democratic perfectionism is therefore the name Cavell gives to a 'counter way of life', that is, to the establishment of a *critical* relation to one's own society as it is, and to 'the power to demand the change of the world as a whole.'[21] In his eyes, this is an – and probably *the* – essential feature of democracy that, in order to exist, should be incessantly *re*-discovered, as should (philosophy in) America. We will always owe these rediscoveries to the ground-breaking and joyfully unconventional work of Stanley Cavell.

Daniele Lorenzini is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie 'Move-in Louvain' Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre Prospéro, Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles, and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, Columbia University. From Autumn 2019, he will be Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick.

Notes

1. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary and Sandra Laugier, 'Stanley Cavell and the American Contradiction', *The New York Times*, 2 July 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/opinion/stanley-cavell-and-the-american-contradiction.html
2. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125.
3. Cora Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1:2 (June 2003), 13.
4. Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), vii–viii, vii.
5. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 27.
6. Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 142.
7. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 57.
8. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 382–83.
9. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 85.
10. Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 139.
11. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1990), 35.
12. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 10, 114.
13. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 12, 53; *Cities of Words*, 26.
14. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 46; *Cities of Words*, 4.
15. See Daniele Lorenzini, *Éthique et politique de soi: Foucault, Hadot, Cavell et les techniques de l'ordinaire* (Paris: Vrin, 2015).
16. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 37.
17. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 1.
18. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', in *The Portable Emerson*, eds. Carl Bode and Malcom Cowley (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1981), 160; John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 119–140.
19. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 2.
20. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 87–88; *The Claim of Reason*, 269.
21. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 115.