Book Review:


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Stanley Cavell is a Professor Emeritus of Harvard University. He is the author of numerous books, which by all accounts have had quite an impact on North American philosophy. This impact is due to his cross-disciplinary approach to philosophic writing, uniting topics normally reserved for either ‘Anglo-American' or 'continental' philosophic methods (perhaps showing the possible arbitrariness of this division). As well, his books have had influence in the humanities more generally, with Cavell writing on subjects such as Shakespeare, film, and music. However, his writings on these subjects are always related to questions of philosophic import.

The task of the Contemporary Philosophers In Focus series is ostensibly to present the main areas of research and interest of the philosopher under scrutiny. This particular volume contains essays on various aspects of Cavell's thought, a list of which appears in the introduction by Richard Eldridge: ethics; theory of action; philosophy of mind and language; aesthetics and modernism; Romanticism and German Idealism; American philosophy and the idea of America; Shakespeare; and movies, opera and the problem of voice. However, Eldridge makes clear that Cavell's unique approach to philosophic questioning will determine how the aforementioned subject matter is presented. This “transfiguring” will hopefully show the greater task of Cavell's writing, which is describing “his larger vision of the human” [p. 11].

This review will only examine four of the nine essays in

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1 It should be noted at the outset that I have not read any of Stanley Cavell’s work, and thus my knowledge of how the essays composing this book relate to Cavell’s actual thoughts will be extremely limited. This may be seen as advantageous, as I will be able to address the essays, and the book as a whole, entirely upon their own merits.
detail. These are the introduction, and the essays on ethics, aesthetics, and politics. The choice of these three is not just for the sake of brevity; rather, this review will show the relation between the three topics for Cavell, and will thus show the unity of Cavell's objective as a thinker.

The introductory essay by Eldridge, entitled “Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance,” attempts to give an overview of Cavell's basic conception of philosophy, which from initial reading seems to be of the ordinary-language variety. Ordinary-language philosophy, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy [1st ed., p. 551], is “a...movement holding that the significance of concepts, including those central to traditional philosophy—e.g. the concepts of truth and knowledge—is fixed by linguistic practice.” Meaning of concepts, in other words, will be determined by their use in the everyday world of human interaction. The actual method of philosophy, then, is characterized by Cavell as a process, a continuous activity, rather than having as its purpose determining correct answers to universal questions (“there are arguments that must not be won” [p. 2]).

The philosophical task will entail both an examination of one's own beliefs and conceptual definitions, and the constant reference to the general linguistic community, which acts as a standard to determine the validity of said beliefs. For Cavell, seeking both selfhood and community acceptance means that one is simultaneously avoiding and acknowledging both, trying to maintain a balance between the two. This tension is what determines our expressiveness through language, in other words, the tension is what determines what we can say. It is at bottom the commonalities shared by all of us as users of language in a community that gives us the criteria by which to judge decisions about action. Philosophy's goal, in the Cavellian sense, will thus be to determine the criteria for judgement explicitly. This determination, for Cavell, also includes judgement about ethical matters: “each life is an exemplary of all, a parable of each” [p. 10]. This ethical stance entails an acknowledgement/acceptance of the choices others make in their life, and then determining one's criteria for judgment based on what you as an individual felt was right or wrong about the others’ choices, i.e. avoiding becoming
exactly like them. It is this balance between acknowledgement and avoidance that allows Cavell's conception of the ethical, based on the commonalty of human life, to show itself.

It is a hallmark of this book that each essay begins in some way addressing the conclusion of the one previous to it, and thus the first essay proper of the book is titled, “Stanley Cavell and Ethics.” Stanley Bates has, in this essay, shown how Cavell's work is indebted both to the Anglo-American and continental traditions. Cavell's book - *The Claim of Reason*, considered by many of the essays in this volume as his most important—is determined by Bates to be set against the philosophic conception of ethics in the 1950s. This conception, based upon epistemological scepticism and the primacy of logic, culminated in Ayer stating that “ethical concepts are pseudo-concepts and therefore unsayable” [p. 19], i.e. they do not satisfy the criterion of logical testability. Cavell argues against this, stating that ethics develops over time through actual social practice (following the *Investigations*-era Wittgenstein). Moral action follows rules, and these rules are determined by the interaction between individuals. Cavell is thus applying the Wittgensteinian notion of a language-game to the problem of ethics.

Continuing, Bates says that for Cavell “there is no ultimate rule or principle that governs the whole of what can be of value in human life” [p. 37]. In Bates' words, Cavell thinks that an examination of the various ways of “the progress of individual selves, or souls” [p. 38] will show the idea of moral perfectionism. Moral perfectionism here is the concept that each single human life will have its own way of perfecting itself, and it is through the examination of other lives that an individual will determine what is best for his life. This is where Cavell's link to the continental tradition is exposed: Nietzsche is the philosopher *par excellence* whose ethical formulations entailed individuality with no reference to an overarching moral principle. Cavell's examination of Emerson in *The Claim of Reason*, and Cavell's commitment in Emerson's favour, show both Emerson's and Cavell's relation to Nietzsche's ideas of each individual determining his or her own way of life. Bates quotes *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to drive the point home: “'This is my way: where is yours?'—thus I answered those who asked me 'the way.' For the way—that does not exist” [p. 37].
The next essay under scrutiny will be the fifth, “Aesthetics, Modernism, Literature: Cavell's Transformations of Philosophy” by J. M. Bernstein. Bernstein notes from the outset that aesthetic claims, judgment about beauty or taste, are related to claims about ordinary language. Bernstein's analysis of Cavell results in the extension of the concept of aesthetic judgment to include works of art themselves, as they are in effect claiming something as artifacts. Hence, there is a link between philosophy and art, as both are making claims to meaning. The open question, open because Cavell does not fully answer it, becomes, 'how does Cavell save philosophy and art from identification with each other?' Bernstein states that Cavell makes sure that philosophy remains responsive to its own tradition, something that art does not necessarily have to do. Bernstein identifies Cavell's 'transformation of philosophy' as an attempt to eliminate the goal of philosophy as 'underwriter of the sciences,' i.e. the task of philosophy is to determine the standard of scientific claims. This dependent conception, for Cavell, fails to take into account the questions of ethics, which, as seen above, are of prime importance for Cavell.

Returning to the examination of art, Cavell, following Kant's Critique of Judgment, determines aesthetic judgments to be judgments of taste, without having any fixed concept as a referent (no concept of beauty qua beauty, for example). Aesthetic judgments can be argued for, but they are unable to be proven. Rather, they require “testimony” [Bernstein's word, p. 114] on the part of the critic. It is this individual's acknowledgement of the art as beautiful that forms the content of an aesthetic judgment. Modernist art explicitly refers to this theme, in that it does away with all traditional notions of art and yet still claims to be a work of art, in the sense of a thing made by a human being to express meaning. Modern art, for Cavell, attains meaning precisely by acknowledgement as art from the critic's judgment. It is on this basis that Cavell, in Bernstein's interpretation, wants to transform philosophy: each philosophic work, or fragment, will be of philosophical import through the acknowledgement of it as a philosophical work, determined through comparison to the tradition of philosophy. This is similar to how examples of modern art each reaffirm the notion of art as a whole, extending the concept of art to include the work in question. In the case of art,
however, there does not have to be any reference to a tradition; rather, the very basis of modern art is the abandonment of tradition. Continuing, the relation to Cavell's notion of ethics is also readily apparent: each individual's life is considered ethical by acknowledgement from others as a good life to lead, thus extending the concept of 'good life' to include the way of life under question.

The final essay under scrutiny in this review will be the seventh, "Cavell on American Philosophy and the Idea of America," by (once again) Richard Eldridge. It is this essay that shows how Cavell touches on political themes, not in the way of presenting a political 'theory,' but rather how to be a good American citizen in accordance with the idea of America that Cavell elucidates. (As a digression, one can see how Cavell develops the Wittgensteinian notion of being born into the language-game and having our concepts determined by it, in this case being born into the 'American language-game.') America is, for Cavell, a place of philosophical experiments, as American philosophy is primarily about "coping" [p. 173] with the novelty of day-to-day occurrences by determining the right course of action at the time, i.e. the distinctly American phenomenon of pragmatism.

Eldridge states that this is not enough for Cavell—this conception of the task of philosophy fails to aspire to the fullness of human potential [p. 174]. For (Eldridge's interpretation of) Cavell this potential may be realized philosophically, not through 'escape from the cave,' but rather "engagement" with "the near, the low, the common, the ordinary" [p. 181]. Instead of trying to free oneself from the prejudices of one's political circumstance, it is better (because possible) to simply examine the everyday world one lives in, shown by the use of language in one's particular linguistic community. It is through this, the activity of philosophy, that one escapes dullness, conformity, and acquiescence, by seeking the affirmation of one's choices judged against the standard of the ordinary everyday. The best life that one may lead "may not be measured from the outside" [ibid.], i.e. against a metaphysical standard. Rather, the standard is "the ordinary, the cave, America" [ibid.]. For Cavell, the question then becomes, what is the worth of this task, i.e. what is it for? In short, Cavell's answer is that it gives one *happiness* [p. 183]. What is sought, then,
is “consent to our present state as something we desire, or anyway desire more than we desire change” [p. 186, italics added]. We seek acceptance/acknowledgement from the group of the goodness of our choices as choices, and the criteria for our judgment concerning such matters will be based upon the consensus reached by the community through usage of those criteria. For Cavell (as interpreted by the three authors picked from this compendium), ethics’, aesthetics’, and politics’ criteria for judgment arise from the linguistic community itself, and all judgments will themselves be judged in accordance with the consensus of the group.

As stated in the previous paragraph, the essays under scrutiny portray Cavell's work, following the basic ideas of Wittgenstein, as applying the concept of 'examining language and its use' to given topics. This book explicates this theme throughout, and, if it is accurate in representing Cavell's thoughts, does a fine job of both showing those thoughts in relation to many of the themes Cavell writes on, and situating Cavell's work in the philosophical tradition as a whole. Cavell's importance as a thinker, it may be argued, is his showing how the division of philosophy into categories, such as 'philosophy of science,' is useful insofar as the division shows the ultimate unity of philosophic activity. This unity is shown, in this case through these various essays, by Cavell's constant return to what he determines to be the important, indeed the only, standard by which to judge philosophic truth, the linguistic community we are all a part of.