

The Aliveness of the Posthumous (1)

EDITORIAL COMMENT

The publication of *Here and There* has recently made a first encounter with Stanley Cavell's intellectual legacy possible. If you did not hear the bells ringing in celebration, it is probably because you are not part of the community of Cavellian or, perhaps, Wittgensteinian scholars and sympathizers. Of course, there is nothing wrong with preferring other communities. But bells should, at least in principle, be rung for everybody, regardless of whether one would like to listen and respond to their chiming.

Cavell's work has more or less disappeared from the radar in central contemporary, but this fact is not to be mistaken for the *absence* of his (style of) thinking from the current philosophical and, more generally, cultural scene. Some of the philosopher's distinctive ideas have found their way to the present day through adjustments, readjustments, adaptations, camouflages and, sometimes, misreadings. Spurred by the publication of *Here and There*, this Special Issue of *Conversations* proposes to follow this trail of breadcrumbs leading back to where Cavell's thought is at home and, hopefully, to invite old and new students to sit at the fireplace.

With this aim in mind, we have asked some of the leading intellectuals already sitting there in circle to take the floor and guide us through an original exploration of topics, aspects and trends belonging to or departing from Cavell's philosophy, which have particularly drawn their attention and, sometimes, inspired their personal work. Around the fire, we will hear a great variety of voices, some speaking for, some with, some against the philosopher, but all calling upon the listener to find his or her own voice, that is, to examine and critically evaluate Cavell's ideas and arguments, or the ideas and arguments they have contributed to shape. If successful, the essays here collected will lead one to appreciate that the philosopher's thought can be alive, and

well, in contemporary philosophy, across the branches internal to the discipline and beyond the boundaries the discipline purports to draw in order to “know itself,” as Cavell used to write.

This Special Issue has two parts, the first of which you are now reading. In both parts, essays are divided into sections corresponding to key themes of Cavell’s philosophy. The division is intended to make the consultation by the reader easy: not only do the Cavell’s writings lack any such rigid separation, but it is fair to say that they resist any attempt to produce one.

The essays in the first section, “Philosophy and Self-Knowledge,” discuss Cavell’s general conception of philosophy as an activity fundamentally aimed at the clarification of thought and, by means of that, at the acquisition or the recovery of self-knowledge. Kelly Dean Jolley travels to the early days of the history of philosophy and examines the structure of Socratic Ignorance. According to Jolley, Socrates finds in himself an ignorance different from that he finds in his interlocutors. The latter is what Jolley calls “*Double Ignorance*,” namely an ignoring of their own ignorance of the topics on which Socrates interrogates them. To explain this Double Ignorance, Jolley appeals to Cavell’s distinction between *knowing* and *acknowledging* and argues that Double Ignorance involves a failure or refusal of acknowledgment, which is to be understood not as an epistemic but as a personal lack, a spiritual sclerosis or self-deception. The Socratic interpretation of the Delphic motto to know oneself is, then, an invitation to self-acknowledgment and, specifically, an invitation to acknowledge one’s ignorance, a condition that Jolley takes to be necessary to philosophise.

In his essay, Duncan Pritchard starts by discussing Cavell’s elusive notion of the “truth in scepticism.” Pritchard argues that such a claim is not the discovery that scepticism about the external world is true but a claim about human beings’ position in the world once such scepticism is shown to be empty. Against widespread conceptions of (Wittgensteinian) quietism, Pritchard explains that the claim in question captures, instead, something deeply disquieting, which Cavell is right to point out. By drawing on *On Certainty*, Pritchard characterises this disquietude as an *epistemic vertigo*. This vertigo is caused by recognising the ultimate groundlessness of our believing, that is, once we become aware, through philosophising and at the expense of

a lack of attunement with our ordinary rational practices (hence the vertigo), of the hinge commitments of our worldview *qua* hinge commitments. Corresponding to this truth in scepticism, concludes Pritchard, there is a truth in the idea that life is meaningless. This second truth identifies the existential *angst* not due to our fundamental values in life being found illegitimate or wrong, but to our realising that such values are not and cannot be up for being grounded.

Eli Friedlander focuses on Cavell's short essay "Hamlet's Burden of Proof," a relatively neglected piece of the philosopher, especially if compared with his other remarkable readings of Shakespeare's plays. According to Friedlander, what is unique to this short essay — both within Cavell's own discussion of Shakespearean tragedy and in the panorama of philosophical interpretations of *Hamlet* — is Cavell's distinctive understanding of the nexus between fate and contingency. After exploring the views on the matter by Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, Friedlander explains that, for Cavell, this nexus turns around the idea of a primal fantasy of origins (i.e., on the fantasy of parental intercourse, constituting the modern appropriation of the myth of an incestuous birth found in ancient tragedy). In the context of Shakespeare's play, Cavell originally takes such a fantasy to bear on the contingency of one's existence and constitution as a subject. Friedlander articulates this reading in detail, suggesting that the fantasy in question calls upon one to enact and re-enact one's existence (as this rather than that individual) in the face of trauma, mere acting and scepticism.

The second section, "Perfectionism and Modernism," contains essays that explore some of Cavell's central concerns in ethics and political philosophy. After a brief personal recollection of Cavell as a teacher, Paul Guyer comments on the place that Kant, the central figure of his scholarly work, occupies in Cavell's thought. While Kant's theoretical philosophy is a significant reference in Cavell's trajectory, the same is not true for Kant's moral philosophy, even though the latter is not entirely absent from the philosopher's interests. Guyer discusses two challenges that we might find in Cavell's late writings, the first about the unrepresentability of Kant's realm of ends and the second about Kant's notion of duty within an ethics for "essentially isolated, friendless people," at odds with the moral register of Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism. About the first challenge, Guyer argues that a close reading of Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* reveals that, though we cannot represent the

particular ends of the realm of ends, we can nonetheless represent its general law. About the second challenge, Guyer notes that in the *Metaphysics of Morals* — a work missing from Cavell's canonical Kant — Kant imagines instead an ethics that acknowledges degrees and forms of friendship and human intimacy, not far from Cavell's perfectionism.

In her essay, Alice Crary draws on Cavell's early essay 'Music Discomposed' and his late talk collected under the title 'Impressions of Revolution' in *Here and There* to discuss the philosopher's signature concept of modernism in the arts in connection to political revolutions. The alignment of artistic and, specifically, musical revolutions with political ones on the grounds that they both establish a new and continuous practice presupposes, in Crary's reading, the possibility of attributing meaning to music. The fact that music can be assigned meaning or, better, that music calls us to negotiate the sense that there is in what we say and think shows, according to Crary's Cavell, that music has political momentum and, as a mature art, can be revolutionary. This momentum is not exclusive to music but might be cultivated in other arts and forms of experience, where our capacity to assign new meaning and to find alternative values can make us, as Crary puts it, "capable of thinking revolution" in times of crisis and injustice.

William Day further explores this Cavellian theme that music implicates the listener and enjoys, thereby, political significance by discussing its relevance for the old and new debate over the relation between jazz and democracy. Day presents two antithetical positions in this debate. On the one hand, the position defended, e.g., by Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch, according to whom jazz is an emblem of democracy; on the other hand, the position endorsed by Benjamin Givan, for whom jazz performances fall short of any sort of democratic ideal. Day claims that both positions are predicated on a limited idea of 'democracy' as a mere top-down system of organisation of society. On the contrary, he appeals to a tradition in political thought (traceable to Plato, Rousseau and Emerson) which conceives of democracy, as it were, from the bottom up, as built on the responsibility of citizens to find their own voice in order to acquire the capacity to self-rule and live together politically. From this perspective, argues Day, the democratic thrust of jazz lies in calling upon the listener to give voice to what she hears 'between the lines' and, in so doing, to find out

whether others share her impressions and a community is formed around them (with the constant risk, nonetheless, that her voice falls instead on deaf ears).

The essays of the third and last section, entitled “Media and Inheritance,” follow or spell out the influence of Cavell’s thought across various disciplines and cultural phenomena. In her essay, Rachel Malkin claims that Cavell’s ideas and themes are more widespread in contemporary literary and Americanist criticism than one might imagine. Malkin carefully situates Cavell’s work both within and in distinction to these fields, as well as asking what risks we might run in inheriting Cavell’s mid-century philosophical loyalties and anxieties, his concern with America, and his romanticism. Malkin also explains that Cavell’s writings enjoy a multi-faceted and complex afterlife, since they have been critically inherited in ways that push them productively beyond his project’s parameters.

David LaRocca uses Cavell’s reflections on the medium of television to continue a discussion, started in previous work, on the modes of metatelevision that feature in the British TV series *The Crown*. According to LaRocca, TV series like that show us the conditions for acknowledging and for being acknowledged because we are called upon to monitor the monitor, while the latter, in fact, holds us captive. Moreover, the various examples of metatelevision in the series trigger our reflections on how the distinction between form and content is presented, or questioned, by and within the show. To this extent, argues LaRocca, those examples implicate the viewer and invite her to investigate her own relationship with the medium of television.

As we already mentioned above, this Special Issue will have a second part, which will carry on the work the essays here collected started. Further voices will join those that we will soon hear and contribute to making Cavell’s themes and suggestions salient (again) within and without the blurred boundaries of philosophical debates. The editors hope that this Special Issue can revive the interest in Cavell’s philosophy, convince old and new students that it is very much alive and stimulate reflections that aim at exploring, developing, improving, correcting, clarifying, and even challenging the many paths that the philosopher has opened and travelled. Whether the voices we have singled out will be helping guides or will, instead, result in an ear-piercing cacophony is for the reader to adjudicate. But, if she decides to sit with us around the fireplace, engage with Cavell’s ideas and then leave his house with

new conviction in her own voice, or with indications of how to find it, this Special Issue will have accomplished its task.

FRANCESCO GANDELLINI, FILIPPO CASATI AND GORDON BEARN