Table Talk:
On Moral Perfectionism

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Plato, Aristotle, St. Matthew, St. Augustine, William Shakespeare, Blaise Pascal, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schlegel, Heinrich von Kleist, John Stuart Mill, Henrik Ibsen, Matthew Arnold, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Henry David Thoreau, Oscar Wilde, Sigmund Freud, George Bernard Shaw, John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Samuel Beckett.

As a prospective list of fantasy dinner party guests, it would be hard to imagine a more illustrious and stimulating group of companions with whom to share an evening of food and conversation. So, if to this list were added Ovid, Dante, Montaigne, Spinoza, Milton, Moliere, Schiller, Rousseau, Goethe, Hegel, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Kierkegaard, Walt Whitman, Melville, Dickens, Twain, D.H. Lawrence, and William and Henry James, one might start to feel that an already rich diet of shared physical and intellectual nourishment risked becoming one of uncomfortably indulgent excess. And if invitations were then extended to certain directors and stars of Hollywood's Golden Age, like George Cukor, King Vidor, Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, Preston Sturges, Max Ophüls, Joan Fontaine, Ingrid Bergman, Bette Davis, Paul Heinreid, Claude Rains, Barbara Stanwyck, Clark Gable, Claudette Colbert, Katherine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Irene Dunne, Spencer Tracy, James Stewart and Henry Fonda, one might well be forgiven for thinking that one's host was either guilty of succumbing to considerations of glitz and the claims of so-called popular culture at the expense of intellectual and artistic seriousness; or had instead abandoned any (further?) attempt to construct a coherent list of guests so as to create an atmosphere of such seriousness, thereby trading the exclusive for the arbitrary.

But why bother making explicit what is for the most part so deliberately obvious a list of canonical figures of Western culture, and to append to it the names of key

players from a specific moment in that culture's history of cinema? For Stanley Cavell, the composer, of course, of this list, the attraction of such a fantasy—in which the authors of some of our most important works of thought and literature sit alongside the authors of some of our most popular works of film—lies in the imagined fruit of their conversation during the course of the evening's entertainment:

> Suppose that there is an outlook intuitively sketched out (sometimes negatively) in some imaginary interplay among the following texts. (I ask almost nothing from the idea of this interplay. It is not meant to do more that momentarily activate the fantasy, perhaps it vanishes early, that there is a place in the mind where the good books are in conversation, among themselves and with other sources of thought and pleasure [...].[1]

But even if we were to exclude representatives from the world of film for a moment, it might still seem difficult to envisage that the undeniably august, but nonetheless varied and opposing voices which remained could be any more capable of finding intelligible and productive ways of engaging with each other than with their cinematic companions. What potentially congenial topic of conversation could such a diverse group of guests hope to find that might give rise to that characteristic air of conviviality that typically pervades the successful passing of such events? Cavell's guiding intuition in the generation of this fantasy of conversation, in the imaginary interplay of voices of these thinkers and artists as they find expression in some of their most famous works, is, of course, that a topic of serious mutual interest can be found: that each has their own way of articulating a certain outlook or dimension of moral thought he calls moral or Emersonian perfectionism—an emphasis on an individual's concern for the state of their self or soul, and on the possibility or necessity of the transformation of oneself and one's society, which has at its centre a certain species of personal relationship or friendship as the means through which such transformation may be effected.

In this special issue, we want to explore the nature and scope of this outlook by activating or inhabiting this fantasy by providing the place or occasion for an imaginary Cavellian dinner party, in which the subject of perfectionism provides its guests

1. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 4–5.

with a congenial topic of conversation; one upon which each has their own view, and one from which we might—thanks to the efforts of our host—draw continuing moral and spiritual sustenance.

Erin Elizabeth Greer aptly kicks off the occasion with the introduction of a new guest: Indra Sinha. She argues that Sinha's novel, *Animal's People*, beyond its often-remarked affinities with postcolonial thinking, also gives voice to a moral perfectionist impulse, in relation to justice.[2] For Greer, this is most salient in the novel challenging our expectation of what a rightful participant in the "conversation of justice" may look like.

Sarah Drews Lucas too reflects in her essay on the conditions that allow certain voices to be left out of the conversation and pushed to the margin of the political community. Reflecting on the "woman's voice," as it is thematised in Cavell's writings on remarriage comedies and melodramas of the unknown woman, as well as drawing on Eliot's *Middlemarch*—and its various scenes of marriage—she argues that the feminist notion of care can shed light on what is distinctively demanding of moral perfectionism.[3]

Themes of marriage and of desire also find prominence in Steven G. Affeldt's essay, as he brings us back to *the* beginning, with a perfectionist reading of the book of Genesis. Affeldt argues that its early chapters, rather than demonstrating our fallen condition and our need to submit to external authority, instead speak of the conditions by which we achieve our humanity for ourselves. Much hinges, he suggests, on the possibility of being seduced into language and of finding, in the process, one's own voice.

The next two essays, by Patrice Philie and Oskari Kuusela respectively, explore the insight, central to moral perfectionism, that the self is always divided: that there is beyond the attained self, a next, unattained but attainable self. Philie argues that Cavell's reflections in part four of *The Claim of Reason* on knowledge of other minds and on acknowledgement can help us further tease out the nature of the relationship of the self to itself.[4] These matters are helpfully refracted, he suggests, in a key passage of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.[5]

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2. Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* (Simon & Schuster, 2007).
3. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Penguin Classics, 1994), 832.
4. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1979).
5. Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. J. Sturrock (Viking, 2004).

Kuusela, in contrast, argues that there is an essential connection between the moral perfectionist concern with the (divided) self for itself and the epistemological aspiration to comprehend the truth. He makes the case for such a connection by drawing on Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* and its famous discussion of M and D.[6] In that respect, he is the only contributor to invite a guest who Cavell had previously refused to admit, thus questioning not so much the criteria for admission, but an instance of their application.[7]

Finally, Lawrence Rhu's essay concludes the proceedings in an autobiographical mood, summoning his own scenes of dinner conversations against the backdrop of Plato's *Symposium* and Erasmus's "The Religious Feast." In the process, he reflects on the reception of Emerson among a number of influential writers of the American South, including Walker Percy, Robert Penn Warren, and Richard Tillinghast.

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6. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).
7. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xviii–xix.