

Voicing the Self: Foucault, Cavell and an Ethics of Citizenship

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INTRODUCTION

A concern with voice now forms part of the discourse of democracy, citizenship and social justice prevalent across policy areas, and can be identified throughout measures intended to encourage participation in democratic society. For example the European Commission's 'Your Voice in Europe' web portal enables citizens to have an input into policy consultations. Encouraging participation so conceived is vital to the creation of Europe as a legitimate political entity with which its citizens identify. Education plays a vital role in directly promoting the idea of Europe to its citizens, for example, through its various educational exchange programmes (e.g. SOCRATES, ERASMUS). At both the national and European levels education is also seen as playing a central role in encouraging democratic participation and producing politically literate citizens. The construction of European citizenship also entails the identification of a shared European heritage informing a narrative of Europe that reinforces the sense of a shared culture and way of life that Europeans both enjoy and that they should wish to protect (see Shore, 2000).

The concern with voice is not only evident in the language of policy. Across educational research, policy and practice it is assumed that finding one's voice is a preparatory stage for active citizenship and therefore an essential skill for eventual participation in democracy. The ability to express oneself—measurable as the ability to demonstrate a level of oral and written literacy—and the confidence to do so are taken as evidence of this progression.

The mode of citizenship demanded of the 21st century knowledge economy entails a characteristic understanding of the need to express oneself, related to the demand for accountability. The demand for measurable visibility and audibility in certain forms reinforces a particular understanding of the relationship between voice and participation in democratic society. As Jan Masschelein and Kerlijn Quaghebeur (2005) have argued, the discourse of participation prescribes a particular identity, a participatory individuality. This demand is not only informed by the need for citizens to be maximally productive, but also for Europe to evidence itself as a democracy. In the context of the knowledge economy democratic participation is an essential measure of levels of education, political literacy, and the legitimacy of Europe as an entity. European Commission research reports, for example, make direct links between education, the development of political and democratic culture and levels of happiness and well-being (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2005). In this context then voice becomes operationalised in order to serve as a measure of other demographic indicators. In education it is the means to the end of producing self-determining autonomous individuals exercising their freedom in ways that capitalise their lives (Simons, 2007). While voice forms

part of the discourse of inclusion and social justice in social and educational policy, research and practice, its empowering and liberating promise is oriented in a particular direction. Rather than the finding of voice being instrumentalised as an indicator of happiness, personal growth and the effectiveness of education in the name of democracy, the finding of voice might be the very point of education.

In this paper I will explore the relationship between voice and citizenship in terms of an ethical and moral responsibility for what we say. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Stanley Cavell I explore how the predominant understanding of narrative implies an evolutionary linearity that in turn implies that finding one's voice amounts to a finding of one's true self through the overcoming of oppression. I will briefly outline Foucault's account of governmentality in order to show the individualising and totalising mode of government through which the current discourse of voicing the self can be understood. I will show how the account of power relations given in Foucault's essay 'Governmentality' relates to his understanding of subjectivity and ethics by drawing on his work on the Greco-Roman practices of *parrhesia* (literally, free speech).

These practices not only indicate different ways of understanding the relationship between the citizen and society but, as examples of the ethic of the care of the self, indicate an understanding of the relationship of the self to the self and to the other that draws attention to the moral aspect of voicing the self in which one's citizenship is implicit. Stanley Cavell's account of the relationship between philosophy and autobiography illustrates how finding one's voice is a displacing and reclaiming of the language we are bequeathed, and further problematises the essentialist understanding of voice and narrative. This reclamation, the claiming of one's voice as one's own, also shifts our understanding of the arrogance of the voice of philosophy, as commonly understood. The arrogance that concerns researchers seeking to give voice through their narrative accounts of individual experience refers to the *hauteur* with which philosophy, including the philosophy of education, is seen to address its audience. For Cavell, arrogance, or the arrogation of the voice of the philosopher in his terms, refers to the fact that philosophy—and the individual—can only speak for itself. This is the necessary arrogance of philosophy. In the paper I move between the terms 'voice', 'narrative', and 'autobiography' in order to highlight connections, from the ethical and moral perspectives Foucault and Cavell provide, between these terms.

Foucault and Cavell help to illustrate an understanding of citizenship in which the focus on the self is a response to our answerability to the other. By acknowledging this responsibility for how we voice ourselves we take our citizenship seriously. Such a rethinking is necessary in light of a desire for education to encourage participation and thus produce democratic citizenship.

THE INDIVIDUALIZED SUBJECT

Foucault's essay 'Governmentality' provides an historical account of the 'problematic of government' from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, in which he traces shifts in the object with which the focus of government is concerned. I focus here on the shift he identifies in the early nineteenth century. This is the aspect of his analysis most commonly taken up in relation to the current educational context. I will later indicate, however, with reference to his account of *parrhesia*, how a broader reading

of his historical analyses can help to open up new ways of thinking about our subjectivation as citizens in the current educational context.

Foucault identifies a significant shift from the government of territory, seen in texts of the sixteenth century, to the government of population, which he describes as:

a sort of complex composed of men and things. The things, in this sense, with which government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those things that are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, and so on; men in their relation to those other things that are customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, and so on; and finally men in their relation to those still other things that might be accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, and so on (Foucault in Faubion, 2002, p. 209).

Government at this time becomes concerned with the management of this complex of variables and ‘the pursuit of the perfection and intensification of the processes it directs ... the instruments of government, instead of being laws now come to be a range of multiform tactics’ (p. 211). Knowledge of the state then became concerned with analysis of these variables and hence emerged statistics, ‘the science of the state’ (p.212). Through this accumulation of data came a refinement of the object, and the problem of population emerged as having ‘its own regularities, its own rate of deaths and diseases, its cycles of scarcity, and so on’ (p. 216).

The shift to population as the object of this art of government brought about an ascription of increasing levels of detail relating to the individual as a thing, an asset in the economy. As such, areas of specialist knowledge—biology, psychiatry, pedagogy, for example—developed, through which the individual is understood and is thereby subject. Foucault identifies that this individual, ‘man’, emerged at the threshold of the Classical period and modernity (Foucault, 2007, p. xxvi). The human being at this stage became known, and came to know himself, as an individual. Foucault writes:

I intend this concept of ‘governmentality’ to cover the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other. Those who try to control, determine, and limit the freedom of others are themselves free individuals who have at their disposal certain instruments they can use to govern others. Thus, the basis for all this is freedom, the relationship of the self to itself and the relationship to the other (Foucault in Rabinow, 2000, p. 300).

In his historical analyses—genealogies—Foucault does not start from a particular understanding of the human subject but seeks to show how the human subject is constituted at a particular time. Nor does he seek to trace the evolution of the human subject from its origins to its present form. Rather his intention was to question ‘teleologies and totalizations’ (Foucault, 2005, p. 17):

Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject—in the form of historical consciousness—will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called his abode. Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought. In this system, time is conceived in terms of totalization and revolutions are never more than moments of consciousness (pp. 13-14).

Foucault's criticism of continuous history indicates how such an approach also entails assumptions about the human subject. Smeyers *et al.* (2007) have recently raised concerns over the use of narrative research that appears to assume a unilinearity in the formation of subjectivity and the possibility of finding one's true, essential self. Foucault's use of the word 'abode' indicates the implication that the effacement of power relations might enable one to reclaim their rightful place, their home, in the *polis*. The subject is not an eternal fixed entity; the individualised subject is the product of particular practices of the self and an object of this mode of government. The subject 'is not a substance. It is a form' (Foucault in Rabinow, 2000, p. 290).

The idea of giving voice—the possibility of public self-expression—often found in educational research implies an understanding of power as something it is possible to remove or seize from another. Power, Foucault suggests, is always assumed to be bad.

... when one speaks of power, people immediately think of a political structure, a government, a dominant social class, the master and the slave, and so on. I am not thinking of this at all when I speak of *power relations*. I mean that in human relationships, whether they involve verbal communication [between two people] ..., or amorous, institutional, or economic relationships, power is always present: I mean a relationship in which one person tries to control the conduct of the other ... these power relations are mobile, they can be modified, they are not fixed once and for all (pp. 291-292).

For Foucault, power is produced in individual agency, in the action of the self on the self and on the other. He refers therefore to power relations, rather than to power. Foucault rejects the possibility of the effacement of power relations and the existence of a true just condition to which we can return. This does not mean, however, that his understanding of power relations lacks the possibility of resistance. This possibility is understood as existing because of our freedom. He is, however, cautious over the use of the term 'liberation':

if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a

consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression (p. 283).

He therefore emphasises practices of freedom over processes of liberation. His concern was with how we can practice freedom ethically: 'what is ethics, if not ... the conscious [*reflechie*] practice of freedom? Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection' (p. 284).

This implies that the relation of the self to the self is essential for the ethical enactment of our relationship to others, which is inherent in our human being as citizens. If to speak is to act, this implies that I have an ethical responsibility to acknowledge that my voice is mine and that I speak for myself. The finding of voice is not the autonomous finding of one's true self but is a response. It is the displacement and reclamation of the language, and hence our relation to thought and to the world, that we are bequeathed. A concern for citizenship in the finding of voice implies the ethical concern for others. But on Foucault's account I can only care for others if I take care of my self. How one expresses oneself is the everyday enactment of citizenship. It is in what I express that there is the possibility of defining my voice. I cannot think myself without reference to my voice. I am contained by it and I must be willing to claim it as mine.¹ Stanley Cavell finds this expressed in 'Emerson's defiant injunction ... to become, not simply accept, the one you are to be known as' (Cavell, 1994, p. 26).

The ability to speak confidently and appropriately in class discussions, and to read aloud, is taken as an indication of attaining a high standard of learning and a positive attitude to it, as is having an opinion and being able to express it clearly. Such skills and competencies are central to 'Citizenship' as the subject is understood in the UK:

The curriculum should also cover practical skills that enable young people to participate effectively in public life and prepare them to be full citizens. It should enable children and young people to develop discussion, communication and teamwork skills. It should help them learn to argue cogently and effectively, negotiate successfully and co-operate with others. It should also enable them to think for themselves, solve problems and make decisions effectively (QCA, 1998, p. 21).

Later, I realised that I had taken on a language and that, literate as I officially was, I had no language beyond it with which to question and displace it. When in adulthood my education drew attention to what I was saying, my ability to speak confidently no longer felt comfortable. I was using language, and thereby acting, in a way that I had inherited and not questioned. In the context of a concern with voice, citizenship and ethics this raises the question: What if, when I have 'found my voice' (in the instrumentalised sense learnt through the curriculum), I don't like what I hear?² This is not a question of vanity, or of always wanting to have the correct answer. It is a concern for a form of ventriloquising (see Fulford, 2009) and stifling. To explore the implications of this question I wish to draw attention to ways of understanding voice, of expressing one's self, in which the ethical and moral dimensions of this expression are to the fore.

Socratic *parrhesia* illustrates an educative relationship with another through which one might find one's voice. This is not a single process of education that enables a true self to be revealed but a continual form of questioning the self that ensures that what one says accords with how one lives. The other in this relationship may not necessarily be a teacher in the formal sense. Finding one's voice—an expression of the self that accords with an ethical responsibility to others—is a continual form of work on the self in which the master or teacher may take the form of a number of other individuals, texts and experiences throughout one's life. Any mastery to which Foucault refers is not total or permanent. The account that one gives of oneself may not be a singly written account or testimony of one's autobiography or ethical standpoint but consists in how one acts, which includes how one speaks, in the everyday. In Foucault's description of Socratic *parrhesia* the interlocutor who is tested by Socrates is required to listen, which requires a passivity in relation to Socrates. The work on the self that one undertakes as, through one's education in the world, one finds one's voice is therefore a response. The other is implicit in this understanding, but our ethical relationship to the other lies in acknowledging the relation of the self to the self: 'Care for others should not be put before the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior' (p. 287).

Socrates did not require a chronological autobiography. As an understanding of the finding of voice this would, as Foucault has shown, be to place oneself within a linear history, reclaiming one's rightful abode. The concern with voice, however, is also concerned with enabling the ability to critically engage with the society in which one lives. In an important sense then it seems that taking one's history or one's autobiography on one's own terms is an important part of this agonism. The ethical dimension of this that Foucault draws attention to, however, gives priority to the care of the self as necessary for the care of others. Stanley Cavell provides an example of the way in which autobiography, philosophy and voice are necessarily linked, in a way that attends to our moral answerability to others.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY, VOICE AND MORAL PERFECTIONISM

The finding of voice related to the politics of recognition often found in educational research is in part informed by the belief in a silencing of voices by philosophy, that traditionally philosophy is spoken by and for a patriarchal elite⁴. Cavell takes up the idea of voice in philosophy by questioning the arrogance of philosophy to speak for humanity and his right as a philosopher to take the tone that he does, which he terms the arrogation of voice. For the philosophers, he writes: 'Their basis is autobiographical, but they evidently take what they do and say to be representative or exemplary of the human condition as such' (Cavell, 1994, p. 8). The philosophers' basis for what they say is autobiographical in the sense that they speak anecdotally, from experience, but also in the sense that there is no other basis from which one can speak. This draws attention to the moral and educational aspects of Cavell's understanding of philosophy, shaped by Emersonian moral perfectionism.

The Emersonian moral perfectionism Cavell explores rejects a teleological understanding of perfectionism. It is not perfectibility, the possibility of a final ideal state. This would imply that one could finally fulfil one's responsibility, that the demand of the other could ever be fully answered. It also entails a form of work on

the self. Cavell illustrates this when explaining why he does not refer to Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* in his course on Moral Perfectionism. Murdoch gives as an example 'a woman who comes to see her mother-in-law in a new more loving light' (Cavell, 1990, p. xviii). Cavell does not derive from Murdoch's description, however, 'the sense that in the woman's change of perception she has come to see herself, and hence the possibilities of her world, in a transformed light' (p. xix). He sees the example as more like an overcoming of snobbery. This 'does not constitute a perfectionist transformation, a new attainment of the self; a passing bite of guilt might suffice' (p. xix). There is more at stake than in Emersonian moral perfectionism than changing one's view toward the other to what one feels it should be. This implies that if the woman's feelings are commensurate with the other woman being her mother-in-law then she has fulfilled a moral duty. But the relationship to herself remains unchanged.

Cavell's account of the relationship between philosophy and autobiography draws attention to the possible parrhesiastic role of philosophy. As a philosopher his writing is necessarily anecdotal, or autobiographical, as there is no other basis from which he can write. There is a power relationship between the philosopher and his audience but also between the philosopher and himself. The former is not a relationship of domination; he does not tell us how to act but reveals a truth about ourselves that calls for a response. We educate ourselves in this relationship. Aware of this responsibility to the audience the philosopher speaks a truth about his own life and of the lives of others. The underpinning moral perfectionism of Cavell's work, and the trust we place in the author, assumes a sincerity, a truth, in what is said. It is a truth that puts us at risk, destabilises the safety of home. For Emerson and Cavell,

The point of conversation ... is not to know others, to be geared towards settling down in agreement, and consequently to share a common ground of understanding: it is rather in its disequilibrium, even its antagonism ... that conversation serves acknowledgement (Saito, 2009, p. 8).

For Cavell 'how we relate to the language we use is part of our becoming political—the very theme of his Emersonian moral perfectionism' (p. 2). The moral dimension relates to the ordinary language philosophy that Cavell is concerned with, which emphasises the performative aspect of language, that is, that we do things with words. We do not use words only for ourselves, to exercise our right to self-expression, to make ourselves heard, to participate. When we speak we also speak for others. Our shared language consists in 'rule-following practices', the cohesion of which depends on assenting to a shared language. The individual takes up this language as her own. It is the expression of her self. For Cavell, 'citizenship in that case is the same as my autonomy; the *polis* is the field within which I work out my personal identity and it is the creation of (political) freedom (Cavell, 1979, p. 23 cited in Standish, 2004, pp. 94-95). Paul Standish draws on Cavell to argue that:

Participation with others in a community is not something that presents itself as an optional extra, something that may add a new dimension to one's life or bring advantages. Not to participate, not to give one's voice to others, is to stifle

oneself, because the self can only be realized in conversation with others (Standish, 2005, p. 379).

Participation in this sense is not, therefore, something for which there is a preparatory stage. We are from the beginning of our lives called upon to participate by our living in community with others. Not to acknowledge this as we become aware of this, as we find our own way of voicing ourselves in the world, denies a condition of our subjectivity. This is denied by a conception of citizenship in which the finding of voice is a measure of the ability to participate. Our condition of answerability entails an instability that cannot be mastered. As Saito has put it, we must learn to be ‘*at home in transition*’ (2007, p. 273).

CONCLUSION: FOUCAULT, CAVELL AND AN ETHICS OF CITIZENSHIP

The idea of voice as predominantly understood in educational and wider policy discourse in the current European context is part of the construction of a particular form of citizenship. The finding of voice as the return to one’s rightful abode as part of the teleological understanding of autobiography and of narrative is problematised by the understanding of history and of the subject Foucault provides. The work of Foucault and Cavell discussed here shows the finding of voice to be a negotiation of the home, the language and the culture, that we are bequeathed. The theme of home is taken up more strongly elsewhere in Cavell’s work, particularly in relation to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1995) (e.g. *The Senses of Walden*, 1981). Cavell contrasts Heidegger’s sense of home as a place to stay with Thoreau’s as a place to sojourn; that is to spend the day, and to leave. This finding of voice entails a form of work on the self. In this, one puts oneself at risk; one might not feel at home with what one finds. As an account of education, this raises questions about the possibility of happiness as an educational aim. Instead, it seems we may wish to consider what education for unhappiness, that is, an education that allows us to be ‘*at home in transition*’ might look like.

Foucault’s account of Socratic *parrhesia* illustrates the ethical relation of the self to the self as a condition of our responsibility or answerability to the other. To respond to the truth with which we are confronted requires an accounting for oneself that rewrites the self. As a form of work on the self this, as part of our education as humans, can never be a final mastery of the self or the other. The finding of voice is the acknowledgement of our responsibility for how we voice ourselves. The relationship of the self to the self that this entails is an educative relationship that is never finally attained; it is never fully commensurate with itself. This reattained self is superseded as soon as it is achieved. Cavell and Foucault both illustrate how the idea of voice so prevalent in our current policy and educational language, and therefore part of the dominant mode of subjectivation, as something that can be given, a competency for citizenship, denies the being with others and the struggle to know where we stand that constitutes human existence, that is our education. Their work enables an understanding of citizenship as having or finding a voice and which emphasises the ethical and resists the individualising and totalising rendering of voice of current discourses of citizenship and democracy.

NOTES

- 1 The word 'claim' takes on a particular meaning in Cavell's work on language and voice. He refers to some usage of language, for example in traditional philosophy, as 'non-claim'. This is to say that what is said has no purchase on the world—for example the sentence the cat sat on the mat is used to explain a point of epistemology, but it does not refer to anything, it does not do anything beyond this. This is not an everyday use of the language. In *The Claim of Reason* the title asks both what is the claim of reason and what is reason's claim on me?
- 2 The charge of ventriloquism in the idea of finding voice is refuted both in educational research and in practice. Fulford (2009) illustrates, however, that current literacy practices enact such a ventriloquising of voice, and in the name of academic literacy and professionalisation.
- 3 'The Greek word *basanos* refers to a "touchstone", i.e., a black stone which is used to test the genuineness of gold by examining the streak left on the stone when "touched" by the gold in question' (Foucault, 2001, p. 97).
- 4 This returns again to the idea of arrogance. Cavell's account is based on a discomfort with and the acknowledgment of the unavoidable arrogation of voice in philosophy.

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