Being Ordinary beyond Ideology in Politics and Philosophy: Humanism in Cavell

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In his major work The Claim of Reason*, Cavell elaborates his perspective, which in this paper I propose to call humanism, on the major problem of modern philosophy: skepticism. Cavell reveals that the argument of skepticism is a denial of what he calls the human condition. By next combining this perspective with Cavell's arguments on social contract theory, this paper offers an interpretation of his arguments on political issues such as "slavery" and "abortion", specifically that these are instances of our actual denial of our social conditions, which leads us into an ideological dichotomy that is false.*

INTRODUCTION

In both politics and philosophy, we occasionally reach a point where there is a crucial question to which there seem to be only two possible but incompatible answers. Those who feel one way may feel that the other must be repudiated. It is at this point that people tend to be split into two, sometimes ideological, camps. One typical example of such point in philosophy may be the skepticism that poses the question whether we can know the world and other mind, which has recently been revived through a philosophical movement called 'speculative realism'. Quentin Meillasoux is a French philosopher, who in his book *After Finitude* (2007), basically interprets post-Kantian continental philosophy (including Wittgenstein and Heidegger), based on the negative response to skepticism, which concedes that we cannot 'access' the real; he attempts to present a counter argument to this through his version of speculative realism.

By contrast, Stanley Cavell, in his major work *The Claim of Reason* (1979), successfully provides a unique and alternative interpretation of skepticism, if not its response, which is more than a straight yes or no. Cavell explains why we cannot have a straight answer to skepticism and offers an alternative mode of reading philosophical texts as human expression, which sometimes 'cannot be fully meant'. This mode requires an alteration in our common perception of philosophy and the ordinary. It also enables us to deal with political controversy in a different way, which is exemplified in two unnoticed cases—abortion and slavery—in Part 4 of *The Claim of Reason*. Here, I elucidate that the mode proposed above actually presents the moral aspect of the political controversy that demands us to accept those problems as our own, which, in my opinion, is the essentially democratic way of living politically.

§1

The major conflict concerning skepticism that Cavell aims to resolve in The Claim of Reason is between ordinary language philosophy and, what Cavell calls, traditional epistemology, which began with Descartes. Although the latter claims that there must be a skeptic question apparently denying our ordinary 'beliefs', the former asserts that there cannot be such question,

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accusing philosophers of shifting meanings of words or incompletely describing the context of philosophical investigation. Cavell defends traditional epistemology against these accusation from ordinary language philosophy; however, he argues how traditional epistemologist's words cannot be fully (naturally) meant.

Defending traditional epistemology, Cavell suggests that the problem of ordinary language philosophers' critique on traditional epistemology consists in its denying the problem of existence by arguing that no reasonable person will raise questions of existence when there is no special reason. One example of this special reason may be as follows: when we see a rather still bird on a tree, we may reasonably suspect whether it is real. By contrast, the objects, which Cavell refers to as 'generic'—and the situation chosen by traditional epistemologists in their investigation of the general human ability of knowledge do not have such specialty. Therefore, there is no special reason to raise question about their existence.

However, the lack of special reason does not justify the assertion of ordinary language philosophers that there is plainly no reason to do so. Our examination of the rather still bird reveals some knowledge about the bird only in this case; it cannot settle the question about human knowledge as a whole. Cavell's expression for this is 'there are no (Austinian) criteria of a thing's existence beyond the criteria of its identification' (p. 240). Confirming the tenacity of the question of existence, Cavell proceeds to acknowledge such question as an understandable response to human condition. To understand the Cavellian vision of human condition, we must discern Cavell's views on the discovery of traditional epistemologists.

By doubting the reliability of our senses in reality, philosophers place themselves outside their own world; what we see becomes what we 'only' see. It is an experience of 'being sealed off from the world' (p. 238). This is the position of philosophers who are 'trying to establish an absolutely firm connection with that world-object', but are 'deprived of the ordinary forms of life in which that connection is, and is alone, secured' (ibid.). Cavell borrows the term 'forms of life' from Wittgenstein, by which he means the fact that we agree with each other on judgements over basic ordinary things, such as what we take as a chair, how we sit on it, and so on; Cavell refers to this as 'mutual attunement' (p. 32). This is key to understanding the Cavellian vision of human condition that 'nothing is deeper than the fact, or the extent, of agreement itself', implying that if we disagree—being 'out of tune', as we sometimes are, then there would be nothing we can appeal to (ibid.).

If we can accept that there is nothing more fundamental than mutual attunement as a crucial fact of the ordinary, then we can identify what dissatisfies traditional epistemologists and what they desire; they want something more than 'the ordinary form of life', which is only based on mutual attunement, something that can provide us absolute certainty, which they find missing in the ordinary life. This absoluteness is supposed to discharge our responsibility. Cavell, states as follows:

> In philosophizing we come to be dissatisfied with answers which depend upon our meaning something by an expression, as though what we meant by it were more or less arbitrary. [...] It is as though we try to get the world to provide answers in a way which is independent of our responsibility for claiming something to be so. [...] And we take what we have fixed or constructed to be discoveries about the world, and take this fixation to reveal the human condition rather than our escape or denial of this

> condition through the rejection of the human condition of knowledge and action and substitution of fantasy. (p. 216)

Fixation and construction imply the denial of our mutual attunement, which is the human condition of knowledge. By doing so, we could end up in a sealed-off position wherein we paradoxically lose the connection that some philosophers are desperate to build in an absolute sense.

Moreover, Cavell notably uses first person plural 'we' instead of 'they', which indicates that he regards philosophers as some of us, normal human beings. This reflects an aspect of the spirit in Cavell that I want to refer to as humanism: he regards philosophy as 'a set of texts' instead of 'a set of problems', implying, in my opinion, rather sensible expression of human experiences (p. 3). The political extension of this may be that as human beings, we have undeniable internal relationship with each other, which we may want to deny in some cases. Another aspect of this spirit is that human condition can be so disappointing, dissatisfying, anxious, and unbearable that we want to escape from the ordinary life as philosophers do in the case of skepticism. This vision of human condition reveals to us the moral task underlying the humanity of becoming ordinary human being, which in the case of politics seems to be even more critical.

§2

The argument about abortion and slavery itself is not a political one; rather, it is embedded in the context of discussion about the possibility of a certain imagined state called 'soul-blindness', in which we cannot regard a human being as a human being. Moreover, Cavell questions the meaning of treating human being in this manner. (The problem of 'soul-blindness' is itself a part of a prolonged, complicated discussion about skepticism of other minds contrasted with skepticism of material objects.) Abortion and slavery are frequently regarded as examples of soul-blindness because in abortion, 'human embryo is a human being' (p. 373), and in slavery, slave-owners themselves sometimes claim that their slaves are not human beings. Though these two cases seem to share the same issue of denying humanity, Cavell's arguments suggest that these are not the cases of soul-blindness, but for different reasons.

In case of abortion, whether human embryos are human beings sometimes becomes an ideologically (dogmatically) divisional point between conservatives and liberals, as the question of knowing reality for philosophers. Although Cavell does not accept it as a fact, he does not mean to say that 'human embryos are not human beings' (p. 378). This is so counterintuitive that most of us may find it difficult to accept. However, if we consider Cavell's conclusive assertion of the problem of knowing another mind that 'my taking you for, seeing you as, human depends upon nothing more than my capacity for something like empathic projection', it would be easier to understand why Cavell does not accept as a fact (p. 423). I consider 'nothing more' implies that there is nothing, as evidence or proof, we can accumulate or construct to disregard our responsibility in convincing ourselves that someone else is a human being. Thus 'human embryos are human beings' is an expression of those who consider human embryos as human beings and want other people to share their perspective; this sincerity is what Cavell claims to share.

Nevertheless, he is strongly against using legal power to eliminate the option for abortion,

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claiming that 'those who wish to oppose it legally are tyrannical and sentimental hypocrites' (p. 374), since 'voluntary abortion is less bad than its criminalization is; but it is not therefore all right' (ibid.). Cavell draws a long list of unjust social institutions, such as 'shame or discrimination attached to bastardy', to support his claim that 'legal abortion is an alternative to unjust law and neglected children is not a matter of good logic but of bad institutions' (ibid.). He further states as follows:

> The more terrible one takes it to be, the more terrible one should take its indictment of society to be. It is a mark of social failure, not unlike the existence of prisons. (p. 375)

Here, Cavell shifts our focus from the ideological question of whether human embryos are human beings to practical and institutional problems that really need to be tackled, which I believe is a thoughtful advice for the political discourse. In addition, I aim to further examine this implication by connecting it with the human condition described in the earlier section, using Cavell's insights on social contract theory.

Mutual attunement as a human condition has its political extension, or embodiment (i.e., society and its government), which according to Cavell, is questioned by the idea of social contract. Cavell rejects David Hume's response to the question of the advantage of society as follows:

> What I consent to, in consenting to the contract, is not mere obedience, but membership in a polis, which implies two things: First, that I recognize the principle of consent itself; which means that I recognize others to have consented with me, and hence that I consent to political equality. Second, that I recognize the society and its government, so constituted, as mine, which means that I am answerable not merely to it, but for it. So far, then, as I recognize myself to be exercising my responsibility for it, my obedience to it is obedience to my law; citizenship in the 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. (p. 23)

Since this describes an ideal state of a society and its government, Cavell suggests that the questions invoked by social contract theorists arise from actual society and government, to which we feel we do not want to give our consent. Therefore, the question of how to acknowledge the present government as 'mine', presented in social contract theory, becomes the question of how to acknowledge this unjust society as 'mine' in the case of abortion. The emphasis on the word 'mine' indicates our responsibility toward our society and the first step is acknowledging how we avoid taking it upon us.

In skepticism, the price for avoiding the acknowledgment of our condition is sealing yourself off from the world or other people, whereas that for avoiding the acknowledgment of social injustice is the division of human kind, the consequence of which is our victimization of each other under the cover of ideology. This is characteristic of slavery; when slave-owners claim that their slaves are not human beings, it cannot be really meant, for they treat them 'as more or less human' (p. 376). One way of understanding this is by imagining some situations constructed by Cavell; for example, 'when he wants to be served at table by a black hand, he would not be

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satisfied to be served by a black paw' (ibid.). Here, he is not denying the humanity of his slaves, rather, 'his internal relation with them', implying that 'there are kinds of humans' (ibid). By splitting humans into different kinds, he denies their presence in the realm of justice.

Therefore, we may believe that there must be a different way of treating human beings other than as slaves. However, instead of agreeing that there is, Cavell argues as follows:

> The anxiety in the image of slavery—not confined to it, but most openly dramatized by it—is that it really is a way in which certain human beings can treat certain others whom they know, or all but know, to be human beings. Rather than admit this we say that the ones do not regard the others as human beings at all. (p. 377)

He refuses to create a subcategory among human beings, and it has an obvious connection with his argument of 'outcasts' (p. 436). He argues,

> So far as we think that the human being is naturally a political being, we cannot think that some human beings are naturally outcast, naturally in league with one another. So if there are outcasts, we must have, or harbor, sub specie civilitatis, some explanation of their condition. (p. 437)

One of the explanations for outcasts is that their conditions are not fully human, which is exactly the explanation of slave-owners. Then if we agree with them on that part, we are avoiding seeing that it is we who have 'consented to casting out' (p. 436).

As we have seen, both abortion and slavery expose us to the human condition realized in polis, in which everyone of us has a moral task to make the society of his own, which reflects the moral task underlying humanity of becoming ordinary human being*.

NOTE

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REFERENCE

Cavell, S. (1979) *The Claim of Reason—Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

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