

# On the Way of Seeking One's Voice: Transfiguration with Individual Powerful Story of Ethics

RISAKO SUGIURA

Department of Education, Kyoto University

*This essay explores the importance of having one's voice in a diversity of individuals' tastes, with references to Cavell's view of voice through the film Stella Dallas. I will focus on two characteristics of voice, 'pain' and 'acknowledgement', which are deeply concerned to sympathy. It is impossible for us to precisely understand each other, but we have also intellect to acknowledge one another.*

## INTRODUCTION

When the concept of 'taste' is completely individual thing and it only involves isolation, aversion, or incommensurability, human cannot live with others, because there cannot be any understanding between different cultures. Now in here, the concept of self-transfiguration will contribute to interaction between them because of two of its characteristics. One is that one's voice is sought through the 'pain'. The other is its necessity for 'acknowledgement'. By seeing them in the film *Stella Dallas* with Cavell's interpretation, we can see how Stella overcome her pain of individuation which could have end in grief.

## WHAT IS TASTE?

According to Wittgenstein, 'our having thoughts at all (human thoughts, in the ordinary sense) depends upon my having grown up in a language community' (Standish, 2018). It means that our thoughts are generally confined to a specific language game in a community to which we belonged in our childhood. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell says that 'for grownups the requirement of education is not natural growth, but change. Conversation is a turning of our natural reactions; so it is symbolized as rebirth' (Cavell, 1999, p. 125). It indicates that as time goes, our sense of taste is to some extent fixed by language.

Taste is also said by Cavell to be something concerned with one's instinct. In contrast to Emerson, who thinks education of one's taste is significant, Cavell says that 'what Freud says about origin of judgement, making judgement for or against, is that this is like aversion, against something, or for something. Freud says judgement is related to the earliest, the most primitive instincts—the oral instinct, to take food. If you do not have that instinct, you cannot live'. (Saito, 2004, p. 89)

As Emerson says, 'the inmost in due time becomes outmost' (p. 87). Taste is ultimately something individual and then it can involve individuality, isolation, or aversion. Relying on one's taste can be affirmative of one's life, however there is a danger of falling into the futility of appealing to the taste of those who have different taste. As we have seen above, taste has a kind of incommensurability because of its individuality.

## SEEKING ONE'S VOICE

In this topic, I see the characteristics of the concept of voice, especially in the process of its being sought. I will mention two important things—pain and acknowledgement—in getting one's voice.

### Pain

Voice is always concerned with one's morality because seeking one's voice is a result of confronting between oneself and one's community. According to Cavell, one's voice essentially participates in ordinary language and has both ways of assent and aversion (p. 88). In a study of Cavell's ordinary language philosophy, Standish says that Cavell's view implies a kind of political equality, bridging epistemology and politics (Standish, 2004, p. 94). In making judgements, the speaker exercises a kind of responsibility: one's morality is at stake in all judgements (ibid.). Cavell also says: 'citizenship...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, 1999, p. 23). Ordinary language philosophy is committed to the recovery of the voice of the ordinary from its suppression or denial by the impersonal metaphysical voice of philosophy (Standish, 2004, p. 95). In sum, to get one's voice, we are required to know what we really are (in a deeper meaning, which may ultimately reach to one's taste) and what the others are.

In the film *Stella Dallas*, Stella expresses her voice by refusing conformity to high society. Standish claims it is true that Stella's rebellion against the community is the expression of her self-reliance; this cannot, however, be self-reliance *ab initio* (Saito, 2004, p. 82). 'In her scandalous Christmas tree appearance at the country club (which gives tremendous embarrassment to Laurel), Stella demonstrates her distaste as aversion to conformity, her resistance to what extinguishes her gleam of light, in Emerson's phrase' (ibid.). Cavell explains this is her act of acknowledging 'public disapproval' as the stakes of her separation (Cavell, 1996, p. 202). However, Stella's longing is neither the separation of Laurel, nor disapproval from the community. In my opinion, she may see a glimmer of hope of approval by the community members of her taste. A state of her losing comfortable community may drive her to the negation of morality. This is uncomfortable situation for both community and individual.

### Acknowledgement

Second, to have voice, what is important is 'acknowledgement'. It is relationships among women (the mother-daughter relationship and the friendship with Mrs. Morrison) that support Stella's self-transfiguration. Cavell says that in accepting her unknownness and isolation with acknowledgement of her individualization through mother's gaze, Stella gets the motivating power to walk to the other way (pp. 210-212). Cavell calls this mother's gaze acknowledgement, which is different from recognition (p. 202). He also says it requires for one's individualization to be acknowledged, despite of any rules of community, to have self-reliance. This acknowledgement is seen in the dialogue between Stella and Mrs. Morrison. At the time, Mrs. Morrison could acknowledge Stella because Stella spoke to her in simple words without arrogance or pride; based on the definition of voice, this scene shows Stella's voice most clearly. Mrs. Morrison sympathized with her pain or weakness by using her imagination.

However, the final end of Stella's transfiguration was not this dialogue. This film is concluded with the scene of Stella witnessing Laurel's state of satisfaction at her wedding and walking away from the world of the transparent screen, with a smile on her face. Cavell views this smile as derived from a kind of ecstasy (p. 212). Because of this positive expression, he insists that this is not a story of self-sacrifice of mother, but of self-liberation and self-perfection.

Now, as Cavell asks, is there crucial contradiction between Stella's positive expression and the traditional interpretation of self-sacrifice? Indeed, Cavell's explanation of self-liberation and self-perfection is very much to the point, but I will take the possibility of the story of self-sacrifice back to Stella's story, which Stella wants to tell with a positive meaning. There can be such a story of mother's self-sacrifice for Laurel. One proof that puts the end to her story is obviously her seeing Laurel's satisfaction. In detail, it can be understood a story of after-the-fact acknowledgement by herself for her judgement of self-sacrifice and her education of (relationship to) Laurel.

### THE MEANING OF STELLA'S SMILE

The last scene of the film *Stella Dallas* is concluded with an image of Stella witnessing Laurel's state of satisfaction at her wedding and walking away from the world of the transparent and rejective screen, with a smile on her face. What does the positive expression mean? Cavell views this smile is derived from a kind of ecstasy (ibid.). Cavell contradicts the traditional view of self-sacrifice of a mother, to explain her smile at the last scene (ibid.). Then he retranslates it as the view of unknown woman's self-liberation and self-perfection. I found that she sees her own story from objective point of view, in Stanwyck's acting. Rhetorically, the last scene puts an end in a story of *Mrs. Dallas*. But it is possible to say that a similar idea come to Stella's mind at the scene. She recognizes the story which includes her struggle at a community and comes to the happy end. That is to say, it can be understood a story of after-the-fact acknowledgement by herself for her and her education (relationship) to Laurel.

To come to this end, Stella neither compromised nor exaggerated her taste. Here, we can see the importance of transfiguration. As we see, it has a certain period, which becomes not only an end but also beginning for one's life. It is a story of struggle caused by the differences between others—struggle with pain, what Nietzsche, Emerson, and Cavell called 'the pain of individuation'—and a story which has a strong power to overcome oneself.

### VOICE IN POLIS OF OUR DAILY LIVES

In political contexts, it is important to compromise morality and tastes. In Michel Foucault's concept of 'parrhesia' in a discussion of voice, the word 'parrhesia' refers to a type of relationship the speaker and what he says. He makes what he says manifestly clear and obvious and avoids any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks (Standish, 2018). The concept will help us to be more conscious to differences with others and contribute to form both our voices and moralities in community.

Acknowledgement is also crucial in polis, because it accepts the idea of diversity. If our tastes are ultimately individual, this concept (distinguished from recognition or knowing) will create an attitude of tolerance. (It is like following lines, 'I think that, but I can appreciate what you

say', or 'I grasp what you express, and now, I think about it in a different way'.) Even if people cannot fully understand each other, there can be a way of co-existence, that is, the sense of diversity.

## CONCLUSION

The danger of incommensurability of taste partly can be resolved through seeking one's voice. What is required for the mutual understandings is transfiguration with pain and acknowledgement to mediate tastes. As we have seen, seeking one's voice and getting powerful story are experienced through one's specific pain. A story from one's struggle (self-transfiguration) sometimes leads to be selfish or be suppression of oneself, but it is opportunity to get something about morality. Like Stella's case, if one's story supports individuals, it should be called ethics which is seeds of democracy. We should positively learn such attitude as preparation for transfiguration and acknowledgement.

## REFERENCES

- Cavell, S. (1996) *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Cavell, S. (1999) *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Saito, N. (2004) Awakening My Voice: Learning from Cavell's Perfectionist Education, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 36 (1), pp. 79-89.
- Standish, P. (2004) In Her Own Voice: Convention, Conversion, Criteria, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 36 (1), pp. 91-106.
- Standish, P. (2018) 'Student Voice, Parrhesia, and Speaking in One's Own Voice.' Presented at International Collaborative Studies I, 'Thinking about Education through Film.' (at UCL Institute of Education on December 9, 2018).