

Cavellian Perfectionism without Perfection and the Emersonian Conversation of Justice

Under What Condition is a Return from Alienation Possible?

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Abstract

*This paper attempts to reconstruct American philosopher Stanley Cavell's moral perfectionism referring to his critique on John Rawls's political philosophy and the idea of an Emersonian conversation of justice. Cavell points out that Rawls's conception of just society lacks the Emersonian conversation of justice especially in his argument on original position. The conversation of justice in Cavell, as in the classical notion of human development in German tradition, takes crisis and overcoming of it as an opportunity for perfection. I will show in the final section that Perfection in this sense is not fully put into practice in Bob, the protagonist of the film *Lost in Translation*.*

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will attempt to reconstruct Stanley Cavell's moral perfectionism referring to his criticism of Rawls and Cavell's notion of the Emersonian conversation of justice. Then, focusing on Bob, the main character of the film *Lost in Translation*, I will examine how Cavell's conception of moral perfectionism can be lived out in real life. I believe that Bob is not well prepared to live a Cavellian moral perfectionism, as far as it is portrayed in the film. This is because he does not meet the conditions for the practice of moral perfectionism as a way of life.

PERFECTIONISM WITHOUT PERFECTION AND THE EMERSONIAN CONVERSATION OF JUSTICE

The American political philosopher Richard Flathman called Stanley Cavell's perfectionism "perfectionism without perfection" (Flathman, 2006). What is presented as "perfectionism without perfection" is distinguished from a version of "perfectionist perfectionism" which "claim to have identified the *telos* toward which all human thought and action should be directed and by standards of which all thinking and acting should be assessed" (Flathman, 2006, p. 99). What is referred here is the understanding of perfectionism in political theory posited by Rawls in the first place. Perfectionism has been understood as a teleological doctrine originating in the Aristotelian conception. Borrowing from Flathman's terminology, Aristotelian perfectionism is a "perfectionism *with* perfection" in the sense that it is oriented toward the realization of the end that man is originally equipped with.

In his *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1999, TJ in following part) the most outstanding political philosopher of the 20th century John Rawls dismisses perfectionism in Aristotelian or Nietzschean sense because it is teleological and elitist doctrine (TJ, pp. 22-23; 290-291). Although there have

been some attempts to defend perfectionism from Rawlsian critique in line with Rawlsian liberalism (Joseph Raz and Thomas Hurka might be the leading defenders of liberal perfectionism), perfectionism has still been in an unfavorable position in contemporary mainstream liberal political theory.

TJ is an attempt to present a vision of society in accordance with the principles of justice in a pluralistic society. Because perfectionism as a teleological doctrine includes an explanation of what a good life is, we are urged to dismiss perfectionism being a “comprehensive doctrine” as implicated in *Political Liberalism* (Rawls, 1995, pp. 179-180).

Cavell is generally favorable to such a project of Rawls in TJ itself. Although Cavell supports perfectionism, he is not defending the kind of comprehensive doctrine that could not be accepted in a Rawlsian conception of social justice. Cavell would be a liberal thinker in a very general sense. The perfectionism that Cavell seeks to defend is both non-teleological and non-elitist however. To see what his conception of perfectionism is like, we should look into Cavell's notion of “Emersonian conversation of justice.”

Cavell states in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Cavell, 1990, CHU in following part) that: “The idea of what citizens in different social positions “can say to one another” about the justice of their differences is fundamental to the persuasiveness and the originality of Rawls’s moral theorizing” (CHU, p. xxiv). From Cavell’s point of view, this is what Rawls’ political theory lacks despite its reliance on the “conversation of justice.” Cavell proceeds:

I speak of this idea, threading through *A Theory of Justice*, as the conversation of justice. But I leave this title ambiguous as between the conversation eventual citizens must have in arriving at principled judgments about the justice or fairness of the original position in which the principles of justice are chosen, and the conversations actual citizens must have in settling judgments about the degree of embodiment of those principles in the actual society, or system of institutions, of which they are part (CHU, p. xxiv).

What the conversation of justice is about is deliberately left ambiguous in Cavell’s writing. But still, we can see here at least that the conversation of justice occupies an important place in the Rawlsian conception of justice, in that it activates the conception itself, but the Rawlsian construction of “the original position” lacks consideration of how this is possible.

Cavell begins by stating that Rawls’s critique of Nietzschean perfectionism results from the fact that he chiefly focuses on social institutions rather than private and personal conversations. According to Cavell, Emersonian conversation in the private sphere is tied to public interests. What kind of conversation is this Emersonian conversation of justice, then? In the same way that Cavell does not give a clear definition of perfectionism, he does not give us a clear explanation of the nature of the conversation of justice. Let me refer here then to the motif of “remarriage” that Cavell appeals to in his explanation of perfectionism. Citing seven Hollywood comedies that appeared between 1934 and 1949¹, Cavell states that:

The title “remarriage” sets as the most notable narrative feature of the genre that its members, unlike classical comedies, concern not a young pair’s efforts to overcome an obstacle and to get together in something called marriage (...) but rather concern

a somewhat older pair's efforts to overcome a threatened divorce (...) and to get together *again, back together* (CHU, p. 103).

Although it is a very fragmentary quote, what is presented here by the metaphor of marriage and remarriage is the process of human perfection in which we face a crisis (divorce), overcome it, and are reunited. This understanding of human perfection is reminiscent of the classical notion of human development in Germany (*Bildungstheorie*). Wilhelm von Humboldt, for example, wrote in *The Limits of State Action*:

It is the fearful extremity through which all that active courage - all that endurance and fortitude - are steeled and tested, which afterwards achieve such varied results in the ordinary conduct of life, and which alone give it that strength and diversity, without which facility is weakness, and unity is insanity (Humboldt, 1969, p. 41).

The experience of crisis – often called “alienation” in the classical *Bildungstheorie* - is a moment for the man to reflect on and perfect his way of life.

Furthermore, according to Cavell, the conversation is an important part of this process. He goes on to say: “It also means that I recognize that at some time my sense of society's distance from the reign of perfect justice, and of my implication in its distance, may become intolerable. Then if an argument should not take place (under present conditions?), what should take its place?” (CHU, p. 110). The conversation of justice refers to the argument that should occur when we get the sense that we are caught up in the gap between the present society and perfect justice. Whether the crisis or alienation becomes a moment for Emersonian perfection depends on whether such a conversation occurs².

HAS PERFECTION BEEN ACHIEVED? ON LOST IN TRANSLATION AND RETURN FROM ALIENATION

Citing Cavell's critique of Rawls in *Cities of Words* (2004), Paul Standish says that what is needed is “openness to conversation, readiness to be turned,” without trying to reinforce one's own identity (Standish, 2011, p. 78). This is a reference to the “virtue” that the members of a society should possess. Being “ready for new possibilities (...) ready to become” – can we see then such readiness, such virtue, in the suffering demonstrated by Bob in *Lost in Translation*? We'll see that only if the predicament leaves room for the self to escape from it, and only if one is ready to transform one's identity through conversation, then one is ready for new possibilities.

Let's move on here to the interpretation of the film *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003). The film tells the story of Bob, a famous American movie star, and Charlotte, the wife of a busy cameraman, as they bond over the lonely time they spend together in their short stay in Japan. In the film, Bob doesn't seem to have had a good relationship with his family, or rather with his wife, even before he came to Japan. It is a description of a typical midlife crisis, fed up with a marriage of 25 years.

His short stay in Japan can indeed be an opportunity for him to change his way of life. However, whether he can live a life of Cavellian moral perfectionism depends on whether he can modify his relationship with his family and “remarriage” after returning to his home. At least I did not find such a transformation in Bob.

At the end of the movie, there is a scene where Charlotte and Bob are lying in bed together and talking. Charlotte states, “I’m stuck,” and they talk about the uneasiness of life. When he is asked by Charlotte, “how about marriage?” Bob replied, “That’s hard.” He said that he used to enjoy it, but the way of life that he used to live has gone, and it will never return. Marriage was an important opportunity for him to change his way of life. But he, like Charlotte, is stuck and unable to move on. His encounter with Charlotte is also an opportunity for him to reflect on his own life. But in the end, these events do not lead to a “conversation of justice” for him. Because he ascribes the cause of his midlife crisis to external facts, such as his marriage and the fact that he is middle-aged. His alienation remains alienation, from which he is unable to return to the process of perfection, I believe.

Finally, I would like to conclude my essay by mentioning a certain character of Cavell’s moral perfectionism. Cavell conceives of his perfectionism as a kind of critical re-interpretation of Rawls. However, as Cavell himself states, Rawls consciously restricts the object of his argument to “social institutions,” and this is why he rejects the perfectionism that tries to present the essence of the good life. And Cavell’s moral perfectionism is not so much a narrowly-defined political theory as it is a way of life, a way of describing the moral life. In this sense, there is no such conflict between Rawls’s political philosophy and Cavell’s vision of perfectionism. Rather, the complementary strengths of Cavell’s argument lies in presenting a vision of the moral life and the good life that Rawls never spoke of.

Cavell’s perfectionism is inevitably elitist as well in a different way than Rawls criticizes other versions of perfectionism. Just as we have to conclude that the life of Bob no longer seem to leave much room for moral perfection. But such is the nature of inquiry into ways of life, and as Cavell himself attempts to do, I think it can be applied to the interpretation of film and literary criticism to help us explore what kind of moral life we can and should lead in a Rawlsian liberal and pluralistic society.

NOTES

1. For Cavell’s more detailed analysis of these film as the comedy of remarriage, see Cavell, 1981.
2. Therefore, the knowledge gained in the Rawlsian original position is extremely insufficient for realizing perfect justice according to Cavell (*CHU*, p. 107). This comment seems that is similar to the communitarian critique on Rawls.

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