

Cavell After Cavell: A Philosophy Without Tears

EDITORIAL COMMENT

The world is full of complainers. But the fact is, nothing comes with a guarantee.

JOEL AND ETHAN COEN, *Blood Simple*

1. After June 19th, the title—“Cavell after Cavell”—for this collection of papers on Stanley Cavell’s rich philosophical work has taken on a new meaning. Originally, contributors were asked to explore new trends based on Cavell’s thought, but what we have now is also reminiscent of an homage by some notable scholars who were his students or who knew him very well.

In the first paper, Victor J. Krebs traces two of the main topics that thread Stanley Cavell’s otherwise eclectic and idiosyncratic themes: his reinterpretation of skepticism and the role played by the philosophy of ordinary language “in the midst of the temptation of skepticism.”

Next, Alice Crary takes up yet another thread that runs through Cavell’s explorations of numerous themes. It is, to be sure, a thread that has received less attention than the aforementioned two, namely, “a preoccupation with what it is to be a responsible participant in a democratic polis”.

Third, Nancy Bauer contributes with her own perspective on the difficulty of getting to feel confident about one’s own tastes, especially after having studied and worked with an author like Cavell who had an iron trust in his own tastes, despite being, or perhaps because they are so, idiosyncratic. And she does this by telling us how she came to read Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe*¹ “in the rather unusual way that [she] do[es].”

In the fourth paper of this collection, Gordon Bearn carries out two interesting and commendable tasks: the first is to try to understand what Cavell means exactly

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997).

when he says that the writings of Thoreau and Emerson underwrite the procedures of ordinary language philosophy characteristic of the work of Austin and Wittgenstein. Secondly, he wants to suggest that this underwriting could be further secured by including what Whitman calls “the merge” and “the outlet,” i.e., a type of mysticism that redeems ordinary words through an abundance of experience.

The collection ends with yet another exploration of the consequences of Cavell’s continuation of Ordinary Language Philosophy. In her paper, Sandra Laugier makes good on her well known insistence that “ordinary language philosophy is from the outset oriented toward social matters” by exploring the connections between Ordinary Language Philosophy and the ethics of care. Thus, her “goal is to use [Cavell’s] work to interpret ordinary language philosophy in such a way that it can serve as a basis for re-defining ethics as attention to ordinary life and as care for moral expression.”

For my part, in what follows I would like to make my own modest and very brief contribution, both to the homage and to what lies ahead after Cavell.

2. Some years ago I was commissioned to translate into Spanish Cavell’s *Contesting Tears*.² The most difficult decision I had to make, in a task that itself was full of difficult decisions, came down to the following: how to translate the word “contesting” without missing any of Cavell’s intended meaning. In Spanish and in the context of the movies discussed by Cavell, “contesting” can mean many things: from tears that are “challenging”, to tears that are shed as a complaint, or as an alternative to an ominous situation that requires rebutting, etc. I considered several options, but I was not satisfied with any of them. Professor Cavell was kind enough to discuss with me each of the many alternative and suitable translations I proposed to him one after another in my increasingly desperate e-mails. Finally, we went for a not so literal translation. And that’s how we came to the final title of the Spanish translation: “Más Allá de las Lágrimas,” literally “Beyond Tears.” Not only is it not a literal translation of the original English title, but it implies a no less important difference: the Spanish title stops qualifying the object, i.e., the tears that the unknown women shed at some point, and goes on to tell us something

2. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

about these women. And what it says is that they have all gone through a moment of revelation, or as Cavell puts it, they have at last formulated their own *cogito*, i.e., they exist because from that moment on they will speak by themselves. These women, unlike their sisters from the comedies of remarriage, don't need to be educated, but rather to accept who they are, what they think. In other words, they vindicate their right to have a voice in their own lives. In this sense, they clearly perceive that the world in which they had lived until that very moment has nothing to offer them; therefore, when they decide to leave that world behind, they are leaving nothing worth crying for. They have reached a level of "spiritual existence" far higher than those who used to be part of their (not so) ordinary world. In this situation, the tears caused by the different sacrifices that these unknown women are forced to make, are due not so much to the fact that they are resigned to the sad and ominous needs that they have been forced to accept, but to the sadness and even shame that they start feeling as soon as they realize that until that very moment they never had a voice in their own story. At last, then, they claim for themselves the right to judge the world that has forced them to sacrifice themselves in this way. The transformation that they experience from that moment requires, paraphrasing Cavell, that they break with what they had previously accepted as necessary and seek other needs that are more necessary. Be that as it may, these women are clearly beyond tears.

3. In his unmistakable style, Bertrand Russell begins his "Logic and Ontology," originally published in 1957, with the following remark: "My purpose in this article is first to discuss G. F. Warnock's 'Metaphysics in Logic' [...] Mr. Warnock belongs to the 'Philosophy-Without-Tears' School, so named because it makes philosophy very much easier than it has ever been before: in order to be a competent philosopher, it is only necessary to study Fowler's *Modern English Usage*; post-graduates may advance to *The King's English*, but this book is to be used with caution for, as its title shows, it is somewhat archaic."³

The good connoisseur would have immediately realized that when Russell says "Philosophy-Without-Tears" he is actually referring to Ordinary Language Philo-

3. Bertrand Russell, "Logic and Ontology," *The Journal of Philosophy* 54, no. 9 (1957): 225.

sophy at large, and to (the later) Wittgenstein in particular, a philosopher that Russell was convinced had thrown his talent overboard and, in doing so, had philosophically degraded himself to common sense.

In my opinion, Russell's remark hinges on two stereotypes underwritten by, say, the Philosophy-*with*-Tears school. On the one hand, philosophy's traditional search, say, for purity, is an epic quest that demands effort and involves suffering and, therefore, can cause tears. On the other hand, it is considered common sensical, leaving everything as it is, and therefore takes neither the traditional problems of philosophy seriously enough, nor does it say anything epic but, rather, it makes philosophy too easy. In both cases, the Philosophy-*with*-Tears school acknowledges our tragic condition—that “nothing comes with a guarantee”—but doesn't accept it.

Russell is definitely right when he suggests that Wittgenstein belongs to the “Philosophy-Without-Tears” school, but he is completely wrong in thinking that Wittgenstein makes philosophy all too easy. I think it is rather the opposite. According to Wittgenstein, (1) “the crystalline purity of logic, was, of course, not a *result of the investigation*; it was a requirement”;⁴ because (2) Wittgenstein is concerned “about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, and not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm”;⁵ and (3) the requirement is “in danger of becoming empty,”⁶ that is to say, Russell's philosophy is not epic after all, but rather its constant quest for purity hides or is an answer to its unwillingness to accept the tragic nature of our real condition; therefore (4) “[t]he *preconceived idea* of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole examination round.”⁷ In a nutshell, Wittgenstein's is a philosophy-without-tears not because it is easy, but rather because it does not miss anything—i.e., guarantees, justifications, epistemic certainty...—we, philosophers, should be looking for; instead it seems to destroy anything that philosophers of the Philosophy-*with*-Tears—i.e., Russell's—School have deemed important (Ibid., §118). In this sense, then, Wittgenstein's is, no doubt about that, a philosophy-without-tears because it is *beyond* tears.

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, rev. 4th edn., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §107.

5. *Ibid.*, §108.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, §107.

As a would-be member of Wittgenstein's School of Philosophy-Without-Tears, if that school had existed, Cavell's too is a philosophy beyond tears.⁸

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8. This is a question in which I have been working intermittently over the last few years and which I won't explore in further detail here. See Pérez Chico, "Filosofía sin lágrimas", in *Stanley Cavell, mundos vistos y ciudades de palabras*, ed. A. Lastra (Madrid: Plaza y Valdés Editores, 2010), 57-85; Pérez Chico, "Filosofía más allá de las lágrimas: Stanley Cavell a partir de los melodramas de la mujer desconocida", in *Cine y Filosofía*, Athenaica, ed. H. Muñoz, forthcoming. Furthermore, it is the main topic of a book in preparation on Cavell and Wittgenstein that is intended to be a vindication of the importance of Ordinary Language Philosophy.