

properties of real infants. Yet in Mann's all too plausible opinion, Tolstoy was all too capable of sharing them.

*David Hills*

Stanford University

*Philosophical Review*, Vol. 118, No. 1, 2009

DOI 10.1215/00318108-2008-038

Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh, eds., *Reading Cavell*.  
New York: Routledge, 2006. x + 262 pp.

In their introduction to this collection of essays on Stanley Cavell—some new, some previously published—the editors announce two main aims: “to discuss a wide and representative range of the topics explored in Cavell’s writings and . . . to display the internal unity of Cavell’s thought across his treatment of these topics” (1). The first aim is certainly met. Several major Cavellian themes are here: there are essays on J. L. Austin and ordinary language, skepticism, the difficulty of philosophy, moral perfectionism, Hollywood “remarriage comedies,” and the philosophical significance of the idea of America. The internal unity mentioned with respect to the second aim is, the editors suggest, Cavell’s Wittgenstein-influenced “vision” of language, which they gloss as follows: “the language and concepts we use are invariably ‘ours’ in the sense that they reflect human interests and, further, that this fact about them doesn’t undermine their rational authority” (1). Each contribution, they add, “at least tacitly presupposes” (2) this view of language. Appropriately, therefore, the introduction is followed by “The Wittgensteinian Event,” an adapted excerpt from Cavell’s *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (2005), in which he reflects on his debt to Wittgenstein’s later work. This is important: since the collection expresses its hope to address relatively new, as well as experienced, readers of Cavell, it seems important to include some direct encounter with Cavell’s very distinctive voice and a significant theme of his writing, namely, the complex interrelationship of the “philosophical” and the “literary.” Given that Cavell stands in many ways outside the philosophical mainstream (to the latter’s loss), the new reader may be interested to connect this to what Cavell says of his encounter with the *Investigations*:

Its changed expectations of philosophy liberated me to think philosophically (according to my lights) about anything, in any medium, in which I found an interest. . . . In freeing me to explore whatever

experiences or texts (in whatever medium) genuinely interested me, seemed to call for my attention, it prompted me into regions that my participation in the English-speaking institutionalisation of philosophy over the past half-century has seemed sometimes . . . to wish precisely to forbid me. (10, 24–25)

There is indeed something liberating about discovering that one's interests in literature, film, psychoanalysis, and figures such as Emerson and Thoreau, often dismissed as not being "proper philosophers," have philosophical import in ways one may not have realized, so there are those who in this sense owe to Cavell what he owes to Wittgenstein.

The scene thus set, the next three essays draw, in very different ways, on Cavell's long-standing engagement with J. L. Austin and "ordinary language" philosophy. Both Stephen Mulhall and Alice Crary draw our attention to Cavell's recent (2005) criticism of Austin's account of "perlocutionary utterances" such as persuading, convincing, or impressing, and his introduction of a new class which Cavell calls "passionate utterances." A major part of the significance of this, for Mulhall, is that it underlines a rejection of Austin's assumption that it is possible to grasp the meaning of an utterance without any necessary reference to its effects. Whereas for Cavell, Mulhall argues, "the path of passion" opens up from "each and every utterance" (31); perlocution is "as internal to any genuine speech-act as are its locutionary and illocutionary dimensions" (31). Crary explores this theme too, though she rereads Austin in such a way as to argue for a greater compatibility between Austin and Cavell. Her main purpose is to explore Cavell's claim that Austin provides support for the kind of moral perfectionism that the former sees in Emerson and Thoreau. Focusing on Cavell's discussion (in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* [1990]) of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Crary argues that "Cavell hears Nora's demand for an education as a demand for a kind of self-cultivation that is simultaneously emotional and cognitive" (59). This illustrates a central aspect of moral perfectionism: "the idea that particular modes of affective response are necessary for moral understanding and . . . [that possibly] new modes of response will bring fresh moral insights within reach" (3). In other words, the perfectionist acknowledges his or her emotional contacts as "capable of making a direct contribution to moral understanding" (58). One potentially interesting parallel this suggests—though it is not one Crary mentions or explores—is between this aspect of Cavell's thought and similar claims made in the work of Martha Nussbaum, for example, in her treatment of the moral development of Maggie Verver in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (Nussbaum 1990).

The third Austin-related essay is one of the most interesting in the whole book: Nancy Bauer's "How to Do Things with Pornography." Bauer is concerned with the strategy of some contemporary feminist

philosophers—her chief examples are Rae Langton and Jennifer Hornsby—who want to appropriate Austin in the service of an argument that pornography violates women’s civil rights. Their method, she claims, is both “a very bad way to do feminist philosophy” (70) and a misreading of Austin. The kind of argument to which Bauer objects proceeds roughly as follows. Against the liberal defense that curtailing the sale of pornography would amount to violating the right to freedom of speech, it is argued—enter Austin, stage left—that pornography is a speech act, and thus not only *expresses* but *acts*. It acts “both to *subordinate* women and to *silence* them,” and because it thus “inherently and differentially harms women” (74), it should be actionable under sex discrimination legislation.

Against the fact that the evidence for pornography’s causing direct harms such as increased incidences of rape and sexual assault is notoriously inconclusive, it is sometimes retorted that the issue is not whether pornography *causes* such harms against women, but the fact that it *is* harm against women. What is interesting about Langton and Hornsby in this context is that they are offering an argument for a view that is often expressed as a mere slogan. But I found Bauer’s counterargument compelling. First, she challenges their claim that pornography has the *authority* necessary to subordinate women, on the grounds that for their argument to succeed, “authority” must mean far more than just “very strong, even exclusive power to shape certain of people’s beliefs and attitudes about the world and particularly about how we should construe sex difference” (87). She argues that it is implausible to suppose that pornography possesses this stronger sense of authority, in which “pornographers can be seen to enjoy exclusive power to *fix* the conventional signification of pornographic images and words” (88). Secondly, Bauer challenges the widespread assumption—typically held by both sides of the pornography debate—that pornography is a kind of *speech* (75). And this is where Cavell enters the picture. In light of the obvious fact that “much pornography consists in photographs, still or pixelated, of actual human beings on display before a camera” (75), talking about “the performative effects of pornography” requires paying attention to what Cavell calls “the ontology of photography and film” (75). In a brief exploration of the erotic power of photography and film, Bauer notes Cavell’s claim in *The World Viewed* that because film presents us with the human body as something that is “*dressed* . . . hence potentially undressed” (Cavell 1979, 44), film is “inherently pornographic (though not inveterately so)” (89; quoting *ibid.*, 45). But this section is disappointingly brief: one wants to see these rather startling claims explored in more detail, so it is frustrating to get just a promissory note claiming that matters would be made clearer by a comparison between Cavell’s work on photography and that of the film critic Linda Williams on pornographic film. (Insofar as this essay both grabbed my attention but left me wanting more than it provides, perhaps it has learned something from the genre that is its focus.) Nevertheless,

Bauer's thought-provoking essay certainly succeeds in showing something of the problems inherent in discussing pornography exclusively under the heading of a kind of speech.

In "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," Cora Diamond discusses a number of diverse examples, the most extended of which is J. M. Coetzee's Tanner Lectures *The Lives of Animals*. Coetzee's lectures take the form of a story, in which the fictional philosopher Elizabeth Costello gives an endowed lecture at a U.S. college which shows how she is "haunted by the horror of what we do to animals" (99), a lecture discussed with Costello by various members of the audience at a dinner afterward. In the published version of Coetzee's lectures, there is an introduction by the political philosopher Amy Gutmann and reflections from various other contributors (such as Peter Singer). Diamond objects to the way in which the various contributors to this debate—in supposing Costello to be presenting a position on "animal rights" or some such, and engaging with her putative arguments—fail to engage with the way in which Costello is herself presented as a "wounded animal." The character should not be treated, Diamond argues, as simply "a device for putting forward . . . ideas about the resolution of a range of ethical issues, ideas that can then be abstracted and examined" (100). Such an approach involves being "deflected"—as Cavell puts it in "Knowing and Acknowledging"—from a "difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity" (104). But Diamond's answer to the question of whether there can be a form of philosophy that is not so deflected remains somewhat slippery, in part because the question of what constitutes "philosophy" here is left largely unanswered.

Diamond mentions Cavell on skepticism, and Cavell's long-term Harvard colleague Hilary Putnam contributes the first of two pieces more explicitly on that topic. In a short essay highly appreciative of his colleague, Putnam, in a way that follows on from Diamond's central concern, notes that reading Cavell involves "enter[ing] into a conversation with him, one in which your entire sensibility and his are involved, and not only your mind and his mind" (119). Putnam's essay is quite personal, as he reflects critically on some earlier remarks of his own on skepticism in order to bring out how Cavell helped him to see the sense in which skepticism is a "deep issue" (125). Skepticism about other minds, at least in certain contexts ("Do I *really* know that Bob here is in excruciating agony?"), would involve refusing to acknowledge the other as a human being and "manifest a failure of humanity" (126). Putnam shows his appreciation for Cavell's message that our fundamental relation to the world is "acknowledgment" rather than knowledge (127). Relatedly, in the second essay on skepticism, coeditor Sanford Shieh asks what Cavell's response to skepticism is if it is not an attempted refutation and what exactly the "truth of skepticism" that Cavell hints at amounts to. Shieh takes issue with other interpreters of Cavell and focuses on the significance for skepticism of Cavell's

account of how ordinary language philosophy seeks to produce the “attunement” on which a linguistic community is founded.

Two further essays focus on Cavell’s relation to Kant and his legacy. The first of these continues with the theme of skepticism about other minds. Paul Franks presents Cavell as a post-Kantian: Kantian in the sense that he recognizes the importance in the history of philosophy of Kant’s account of human finitude; *post*-Kantian in the sense that he sees Kant’s own response to this as inadequate. Through his account of the *Ding an sich*, Kant presents human finitude as “an insurmountable failure of the human,” whereas Cavell seeks “a positive conception of human finitude that does not understand the human as a privation but rather accepts or acknowledges our finitude” (167). Franks then considers one of Kant’s critics, Fichte, with whom he finds some surprising parallels with Cavell. The Kantian theme continues with Eli Friedlander, who draws on the *Critique of Judgment* to trace Kant’s notion of exemplification, a key theme in Cavellian moral perfectionism. This is interesting, but one wonders whether Friedlander’s essay doesn’t underplay the difference between an *example*, in the sense of a mere specimen, and an *exemplar* in the Cavellian moral perfectionist sense: someone who discloses, and inspires one to strive for, one’s “higher self.”

Given Cavell’s singular contribution to the field of film and philosophy, the inclusion of a piece from Stuart Klawans, film critic of *The Nation*, is an inspired choice. In an interesting, witty, and energetic essay, Klawans puzzles over why Cavell doesn’t discuss Preston Sturges’s 1942 movie *The Palm Beach Story* in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981b), his book on what he terms the “Hollywood comedy of remarriage.” Klawans’s reading of the film focuses on its female lead, Claudette Colbert, and compares this later movie to an earlier Colbert film, *It Happened One Night* (1934), which Cavell does discuss in detail. Klawans eventually reaches the conclusion that despite the prima facie case for including *The Palm Beach Story* in the genre, Cavell was right to exclude it: it is a “comedy of disillusionment” (229) rather than a comedy of remarriage. In his discussion, part of which is something of a eulogy to Colbert, Klawans makes the interesting observation that despite his insistence upon the importance of the particular star of these movies, Cavell does not “inquire into an actor’s performance or looks” (220). (What impact does the latter have, one might wonder, on Bauer’s observations about the relevance of Cavell’s work on film to pornography?)

The final essay of the volume is also one of the most interesting. In “The Recovery of Greece and the Discovery of America,” James Conant compares some remarks of the Greek poet George Sefaris to the effect that “Greek Hellenism’ . . . has not yet been created” with Cavell’s gnomic remark in *The Senses of Walden* (1981a) that “America exists only in its discovery” (230). I shall focus on the latter. In unpacking the wider context of Cavell’s remark, Conant argues that “Cavell takes Thoreau to take ‘America’ to name

something that those who wish to think of themselves as American must work to make happen" (235). He compares "America" as an ideal to Kierkegaard's remarks about the "monstrous illusion" of Christendom, in which people think of themselves as Christian simply in virtue of living in a "Christian country," regardless of any inner relation to the claims Christianity, properly understood, makes on the individual. Similarly one is not American, in the Thoreauian-Cavellian sense, simply in virtue of living on a particular land mass or being entitled to possess a particular kind of passport. So what is America as a philosophical ideal? Conant explains:

It is constitutive of America as originally conceived that it be open to everyone and that it can claim to exist only to the extent that a nation exists in which each American's claim to be an American does not depend upon his or her rootedness in the particularities that constitute *most other national communities*—particularities of language, or creed, or race, or place of birth or ethnic heritage. 'America' therefore is both the name of a very particular people with a very particular history and the name of a certain ideal of national community—one that is to be an example to the rest of the world—that not only is able to transcend the parochial ties that previously bound together other peoples, but that . . . is able to transform the world's understanding of what a nation should be. (240; my emphasis)

But for all the differences in our nations' histories and origins, this British reader could not help but wonder how different this ideal of nationhood is from that of any modern democracy in western Europe, for instance. (Conant raises, but leaves unanswered, related questions at the very end of his essay.) There is a debate in the United Kingdom at present about the nature of "Britishness," given the contributions made in Britain, like the United States, by sizable ethnic minority communities, most of whom report thinking of themselves as British as well as Asian (for example). Is it being claimed that to be British in this sense one needs to be American in Cavell's sense? That would be a peculiar form of cultural imperialism indeed.

Conant discusses the complex relation between "America" and "Europe" in Cavell's thought, but perhaps the most interesting question is the one which Cavell says predated his obsession with *Walden*—"Why has America never expressed itself philosophically?"—or rather, its refinement into the question of why, each time a "distinctly American cultural voice emerges, America fails to acknowledge it as such" (243). This explains, for instance, Cavell's interest in remarriage comedies, which he views as some of the greatest achievements of Hollywood, yet which he also considers typically to be devalued by "American intellectuals" as something of less than permanent value (250).

In short, this is a very valuable collection of essays that certainly illustrates the wide-ranging nature of Cavell's interests and something of the quirkiness that makes him one of the most fascinating contemporary philosophical voices—on any continent.

**References**

- Cavell, Stanley. 1969. "Knowing and Acknowledging." In *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 44–72. New York: Scribner's.
- . 1979. *The World Viewed*. Enl. ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1981a. *The Senses of Walden*. Ex. ed. San Francisco: North Point Press.
- . 1981b. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1990. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2005. *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1990. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.

*John Lippitt*

University of Hertfordshire

*Philosophical Review*, Vol. 118, No. 1, 2009

DOI 10.1215/00318108-2008-039