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Crossing the bounds of sense: Cavell and Foucault

In his (partly) critical discussion of Rawls's theory of justice, Stanley Cavell uses Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as an example to show the inherent limitations of the liberal idea of the social contract. Emphasizing the conditions of possibility of consensual debate, Cavell frames this idea as being 'the idea of our living under conditions in which we are enabled to say something to another and the idea that what we are enabled to say is that we agree, or would agree' (Cavell, 1990, p. 106). Cavell is not the first to make the criticism that this idea (or ideal) of consent is not as neutral as it presents itself as being. It presupposes the possibility to participate in such a 'conversation of justice', as Cavell terms it, a presupposition that masks the manifold social barriers which *de facto* and often enough *de jure* exclude dissenting voices. But Cavell's perception of the problem runs deeper, or it is, if one likes, more paranoid. For him, the case of Nora Helmes, the central character of the play, goes beyond the mere possibility of exclusion through simple denial. Torvald, Nora's husband, does not just ignore her voice and thus her potential contribution to a common conversation of justice. In treating her 'like a doll', as Nora begins to realize, and in having treated her like a doll for years, Torvald excludes her completely from the sphere of *any* rational moral conversation. Nora, the 'doll', might be able to 'say' something, like the dolls of our time with their speech devices – but neither Torvald nor her father would ever consider her as being a *part* of a conversation where words, and the exchange of words, matter. Since her reasons have no power, she has no power of reason. Nora is virtually unable to even begin the conversation of justice by simply saying something to another – though capable of speech, she is mute, with no voice of her own and no position from which to speak.

A Doll's House exemplifies a problem Cavell has been grappling with right from the beginning of his career as a philosopher: The philosophical significance of the inability to express oneself, a subject-matter which Cavell discovered first in Wittgenstein's discussion of the private language (which is for Cavell 'a fantasy of inexpressive privacy or suffocation') and then successively in Emerson and Thoreau (Cavell, 2001, p. 256). Nora's voice has been suffocated, so her problem is not the content of her reasons – just as, for Cavell, the skeptic's true problem is not the epistemic status of the content of his claim, but his practical relation to it. Challenging 'the social order as such' with her moral outrage, Nora puts herself beyond the accepted forms of what is taken to be reasoning (Cavell, 1990, p. 109). Accordingly, Torvald accuses her of being childish and of being 'out of her senses' – which is, as Cavell puts it, not a 'refusal of conversation', but 'the denial that conversation has been offered' (Cavell, 1990, p. xxxvii).

The case of Nora shows that the 'social nature' of reason, its dependence on the way we treat each other, is not just a professional philosophical insight. It touches the very idea of what reason is or actually can be, and especially highlights our own implications in it – the question of how we can and should lead our lives, and in what relation we stand to the words we can use. In taking this seriously, as Cavell does, one is immediately confronted with the methodological problem of how the philosopher can assume a critical stance towards the dominating possibilities of articulation. Can we really assume Nora's position, and if so, how can we claim to be comprehensible? Isn't one condemned to silence (as the early Wittgenstein claimed), or at least to senseless staggering? Cavell: 'In investigating ourselves, we are led to speak "outside language games"' (Cavell, 1979, p. 207).

The challenge of philosophy, which Cavell accepted so admirably, is to continue the work of continuously crossing the bounds of sense without succumbing to the typical philosophical arrogance of not sharing Nora's problems of intelligibility. I assume that in his discussion of 'moral perfectionism' there is a consequence and articulation of this sensibility, since it concentrates on the struggle to gain intelligibility (to oneself and to others) in the light of these structural difficulties. It is in this way that perfectionism 'precedes, or intervenes, in the specification of moral theories' (Cavell, 2004, p. 2). The way we treat ourselves and others can neither be fully derived from reason (that is, moral theories), nor is it by consequence irrational. The Emersonian 'attained but unattainable self' is but one expression of this paradoxical position that life and reason cannot be separated as neatly as, for example, Kant had hoped.

My contention, now, with Cavell concerns the way he frames the problem of intelligibility. He takes what I would like to call a 'hermeneutic' stance towards it. Concentrating on our linguistic (in)capacities, his subjects are dialogue and

conflict, articulation and clarification, justification and its skeptical discontents. Philosophy being always essentially tied to the *logos*, this approach is very productive in order to elucidate the *philosophical* problem of the assumed 'liminal position'. But it obscures, I think, its real political dimension. In order to show this, I will compare and contrast Cavell's view on intelligibility with Foucault's perception of this issue.

It has often been noted, for example by David Owen or Arnold Davidson, that the tradition of 'perfectionism' bears close resemblances to what Foucault has called 'practices of the self'. Cavell himself describes perfectionism as an emphasis of an 'aspect of moral choice having to do … with being true to oneself, or as Michel Foucault has put the view, caring for the self' (Cavell, 2004, p. 11). In contrast to Cavell, though, Foucault is interested in the *genealogy* of the idea of 'being true to oneself', which always includes an irreducible dimension of struggle and power. His late studies are part of his general project to understand how forms of reasoning and subjectivity are established and upheld through procedures of exclusion, marginalization and physical coercion, and thus his engagement for those who speak 'outside language games' focuses on madmen, delinquents and rebels rather than on skeptical philosophers.

In a late interview, Foucault states that '[i]t is through revolt that subjectivity … introduces itself into history and gives it the breath of life' (Foucault, 1981a, p. 8, cited in Owen, 2006, p. 152). Nora's conflict – her not being allowed to be a real subject – is here put in terms of *power*. Schematically put: Where Cavell sees a confrontation of voices, Foucault's use of the term 'revolt' signifies a confrontation of bodies and forces, of coercion and pleasures. It is true, for Foucault as well, that these revolting subjectivities amount to an unintelligible uproar of 'confused voices', as he notes in the same interview. As early as 'The Order of the Discourse', he was well aware of the fact that 'a proposition must fulfill complex and heavy requirements before it can be called true or false, it must be "in the true", as Canguilhem would say' (Foucault, 1981b, p. 60).

For Foucault, subjectivity – and consequently the intelligibility of the subject – has to be produced and kept alive through these 'complex and heavy requirements'. This perspective turns the attention to a wide array of material and discursive practices, disciplinary exercises, bodily trainings and even architectural arrangements such as the *Panopticon* or the 'big confinement' of madmen. Metaphysics is, if anything, an *ex post* reflection of these historical and material conditions. What is important is that these practices are not just external obstacles which impose themselves upon some prior 'subject'. For Foucault, subjectivity cannot be detached from these material and practical conditions. Think of the Aristotelian notion of 'capacity', or of Gilbert Ryle's use of the idea of 'skills': the exercises of reason and language are, on these

views, bodily-practical abilities. Consequently, *every* form of subjectivity has to be acquired through forms of training and conditioning which are by implication also exercises of power – as Foucault puts it: Being a subject, means also being subjected. In my view, this is also Wittgenstein's position: 'Here the teaching of language is not explanation, but training *[abrichten]*' (Wittgenstein, 1986, §5).[1]

This is why, for Foucault, the central philosophical problem is not the individual's struggle to make herself intelligible. Or rather, the way he understands this struggle puts it in a completely different light. First of all: Foucault's methodological concentration on the *practical* side of the formation of the self does not exclude the possibility of a rational discourse in which one tries to liberate oneself. But it reveals a tension between these discursive aspirations and the mostly silent procedures which seem to uphold *both* the aspiration and its practical constraints. Intelligibility, for Foucault, is not only a problem of finding (and thus founding) a language. In his 'What is Enlightenment?' he diagnoses a 'paradox of the relations of capacity and power'. In order to acquire a free subjectivity, Western societies have always tried to increase individual capabilities (Foucault alludes to the institution of education, the growth of economic wealth and the improvement of the means of communication). But this 'growth of capabilities' did not, as Foucault notes, result in a corresponding growth of freedom. Rather, it led to 'an intensification of power relations', an entanglement of the subject within these disciplinary, normalizing or discursive practices. The problem of intelligibility thus becomes an eminently *political* problem, which is always aiming at some *specific* form of subjectivity and its genealogy.

To summarize: I believe that Cavell's perception of the problem of the intelligibility of the self to itself and to others offers important insights; and to me, it seems to be especially fruitful within the realm to which Cavell deliberately confines it: limited to 'these in positions of relative advantage', which includes the modern academic philosopher (Cavell, 1990, p. xx). But somewhere on the way from Wittgenstein to Emerson, the idea that the logic of language is always constituted in 'games' – in concrete spatio-temporal material practices – got lost. (Cavell's early essay on *King Lear*, for example, still displays a heightened sensibility for the importance of material arrangements, in this case: the stage and the audience.) This leads to an implicit exclusion of those to whom the perfectionist's task 'to make even justified anger and hatred intelligible' is simply out of reach; those who cannot but 'express' themselves through madness, delinquency or revolt (Cavell, 2004, p. 26). The claim is not, as Foucault emphasizes, that these 'confused voices sound better than the others' or even 'express the ultimate truth' (Foucault, 1981a, p. 8, cited in Owen, 2006, p. 152). But their struggles point to the fact that there is something worth discussing beyond the opposition of

'understanding' and 'suffocated voice', namely, power and non-discursive practices.

Note

1 I elaborate this reading of Wittgenstein in Volbers (2009).

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Cavell's 'forms of life' and biopolitics

Stanley Cavell's well-known obsession with skepticism is concerned with how conventionalism might readily turn into a slippery slope leading us to (mere) ethnocentrism. His particular twist on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* – his emphasis on not '*forms* of life but forms of *life*' – is meant to mark this difference from a reading of Wittgenstein that, in Cavell's view, would find in the latter's putative conventionalism not just a refutation of skepticism but also a kind of political conservatism (Cavell, 1989, pp. 42–43). Cavell's basic argument is that this emphasis on the human form of *life* gives us something irreducible to the pure immanence (forms, conventions) of language games, and it thus provides a kind of background against which they may be judged