# Cavell on the Ethical Point of the *Investigations*

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1. In this paper, I will explore Stanley Cavell's account of the ethical point of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Cavell argues that we should locate Wittgenstein's later work within the tradition of what he himself has described as "moral perfectionism". Though Wittgenstein's philosophy is clearly a major influence on Cavell's understanding of perfectionism, Cavell tends to focus on other authors – most notably on Emerson – when he explicitly articulates this moral outlook. In what follows, I will try to rearrange certain themes from Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, with the hope of making the connection of such thoughts with moral perfectionism more straightforward. In this way I aim to illustrate the way in which, in Cavell's perspective, we can make sense of the ethical significance of the *Investigations*.

A convenient place to start, in order to flesh out such an account, is the following passage of Cavell's:

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of book of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life". Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. (Cavell 1969:52)

One might begin to account for the moral relevance of this vision of language by asking why Cavell says that this vision is *terrifying*. A possible line of answer here stresses the idea that, for Cavell, Wittgenstein's vision makes us *responsible* in a peculiar way. We fear this responsibility and we want to avoid it; but since Wittgenstein is reminding us of this responsibility, we find his conception of language terrifying. Cavell writes for instance:

> We understandably do not like our concepts to be based on what matters to us (something Wittgenstein once put by saying "Concepts…are the expression of our interests" (§570)); it makes our language seem unstable and the instability seems to mean what I have expressed as my being responsible for whatever stability our criteria may have, and I do not want this responsibility […]. (Cavell 1990:92)

Let's look first of all at the idea that our concepts are expression of our interests, of what matters to us. This is really the core of Wittgenstein's vision of language, as Cavell reads it, and I can't go through the details of his reading now. One might convey very sketchily what Cavell is getting at by saying that all the complicated modes of natural response that belong to our form of life are not a matter of our psychology, separated from what is, properly speaking, the logic of our concepts. All these natural facts about us belong the *meaning* of our concepts, and their normative dimension cannot be grasped apart from them: to *understand* a concept is to be involved in the relevant forms of life, in a natural set of interests, reactions, needs, etc.

Now, as we saw before, Cavell says that this vision of language entrusts us with a *responsibility*. How can one account for this striking remark? Just consider again the idea that our concepts are expression of interests, needs, reactions that are natural to us. The fact that we react as we do, that our form of life is the way it is, is internal to the logic of our concepts – but on the other hand is *just* a fact, a contingent fact, and it could be otherwise. In this sense, Cavell remarks that Wittgenstein's vision of language seems to deprive our concepts of their stability. Our agreement in language is an agreement in our mode of natural response: but then again there is no reason why we *must* go on responding as we do, finding interesting what we find interesting, or feeling the way we feel – there is no reason, apart from the fact that all of this is just natural to us. And *is it* really natural for us? This is, in Cavell's perspective, a *question* that Wittgenstein's vision of language imposes on us – on *each* of us *separately* – and there is no way to answer the question in advance. You must continuously try to understand whether those mode of responsiveness that make our concepts possible are really natural *for you*, are really expressing your interests, your needs, or your feelings. This constant examination of your form of life defines for Cavell the *responsibility* with which Wittgenstein is burdening us. In this sense, Cavell writes that I am responsible for whatever stability our criteria may have: each of us must face the question of whether one wants to keep on using concepts in agreement with others. We must understand whether we find natural, for instance, to call a "reason", an "inner process", a "virtue", a "marriage", a "democracy", an "illness", a "work of art", etc. what others call like that. In the application of such concepts the interests of a form of life are revealed, so we must ask ourselves whether we really share these interests: in other words, we must ask ourselves whether the form of life we inherited is really *ours*.

2. This idea of a responsibility towards one's mode of life – of a permanent examination of one's interests, desires, and needs – may in turn account for the *moral relevance* of Wittgenstein's vision of language. This moral relevance may be understood, as we've already said, through Cavell's notion of *moral perfectionism*. Cavell's use of this notion is meant to cover a broad variety of moral outlooks, and involves a complicated and elusive set of ideas: what I'll say in the remaining of this talk will therefore only scratch the surface of this concept. One might begin by noting, at any rate, that moral perfectionism individuates for Cavell a particular register of moral life, which has been widely overlooked in contemporary ethical thinking. Contemporary deontological and teleological theories, and even contemporary virtue ethics, tend to understand the question about one's mode of life in terms of a question about *what course of action* one should take. In moral perfectionism, instead, questioning one's mode of life means asking whether your mode of life is really *yours*.

The issue, in other words, is not one of finding which principles, or which conception of the virtuous character, will lead us to the right action. The issue is rather that of understanding whether the principles you follow, the character you've been inculcated with, your mode of life in general, are really yours or have been adopted out of conformity, blind habit, or illusion. Cavell expresses this point by saying that a perfectionist investigation is called for «when what is problematic in your life […] is not the fact that between alternative courses of action the right has become hard to find» but when «in the course of your life you have lost your way» (Cavell 1990:xxx).

Now, the kind of question that Wittgenstein's vision forces on us might be seen as a version of the perfectionist question. What Wittgenstein suggests, in other words, is a peculiar way of giving content to the question whether my mode of life is really mine. In the context of wittgensteinian perfectionism, this question becomes the question of whether the form of life that is revealed in my use of concepts is really natural for me. By attending to my natural conceptual responsiveness, I might discover an access to myself that will enable me to evaluate whether my mode of life is really mine. In this sense, the responsibility that Wittgenstein's vision confer on us may be said for Cavell to have an ethical relevance, accountable in perfectionist terms.

From what has been said so far, one can make sense of the idea that this sort of perfectionist responsibility might be, as Cavell says, *terrifying*. The question whether a given concept is natural for us is not just a question about *words*, but involves all the responses, the habits, and the desires that shape our ordinary life. If one thinks about the depth that such questions may assume, one will see what Cavell means when he remarks that we fear perfectionist responsibility, that we don't want it and we constantly try to escape it.

Since this responsibility is, according to Cavell, a feature of our form of life as language users, the impulse to escape this responsibility manifests itself as an impulse to escape our form of life with language altogether. Cavell calls this drive to transcend our form of life with language *scepticism*. The refusal will present itself with particular force in certain forms of philosophical thought. In philosophy we attempt to construct impersonal frameworks of rules, or to postulate the grasp of transcending universals, with the hope of fixing in advance the circumstances in which the application of a concept is warranted. This attempt is interpreted by Cavell as a manifestation of a sceptical desire: we want our words to mean something independently of our natural mode of response; and this, for Cavell, is a way of protecting us from the fact that, in order to apply a concept, we must rely on reactions, needs, and interests that are natural to us. Our desire to protect ourselves from this fact, in turn, depends on our wish to escape the responsibility towards our life with concepts that Wittgenstein's vision of language implies.

3. According to Cavell's diagnosis, then, philosophical problems should not be seen as merely intellectual puzzles: our inclination to fall into such problems has also an ethical root, describable through the language of moral perfectionism. What drives us into philosophy, in this perspective, is a refusal of our form of life, motivated by a fear for the responsibility that this form of life evokes. On the background of this set of thoughts, one can see how Wittgenstein's philosophical practice in the *Investigations* – a practice that aims at the dissolution of philosophical problems – can acquire a moral significance. By pointing to the fact that we've incurred in philosophical nonsense, Wittgenstein doesn't just intend to bring out that we've been misled by certain analogies between our modes of expression, and that therefore we've been inattentive, unscrupulous and the like: in our attraction for philosophical theorizing, rather, a deep orientation of the will is revealed. The fact that we are drawn to make philosophical assertions, in this perspective, shows that we are in a peculiar relation with our form of life: one might describe such a relation by saying that we're refusing the very fact that we share certain interests, needs, and feelings with other human beings. Wittgenstein's practice of elucidation, then, aims at a reorientation of our relation with our form of life: by showing that this sceptical denial is preventing us from making sense, such a practice may lead us to recognize that, if we want to be intelligible, we are to accept our form of life, our natural mode of response.

It is important to note, though, that for Cavell the acceptance of our form of life doesn't indicate a condition in which we are not exposed anymore to philosophical questioning. Cavell remarks in this sense that «Wittgenstein's motive […] is to put the human animal back into language and therewith back into philosophy». (Cavell 1979:207). Cavell's position, in this respect, is at odds with many discussions of the ethical point of the *Investigations*. Several interpreters, in fact, have argued that the moral significance of Wittgenstein's work lies in its envisaging a state in which we are cured of the impulse to question philosophically our mode of life. James Peterman has claimed, for instance, that Wittgenstein's therapeutic activity presupposes a teleological conception (See Peterman 1992: 23). Such conception «emphasizes the undesirability of the specific forms of life that support traditional philosophical thinking»(Peterman 1992:107): the good life, in this perspective, is then seen as a mode of life in which we are not shaken anymore by philosophical anxieties. James Edwards argues, in a similar vein, that «Wittgenstein is trying to identify and to root out the very impulse of philosophizing itself» (Edwards 1982:7), leading thus the philosopher «to live a radically new sort of life, in which the very standards of human excellence […] are radically altered» (Edwards 1982:157).

According to such readings, the ethical point of the *Investigations* lies in our acceptance of a *particular* mode of life, characterized by a specific set of interests, needs, and feelings. A life marked by a craving for philosophy is supposedly bad, and we should therefore adopt a better mode of life, in which such philosophical impulses are overcome. In Cavell's perspective, instead, recognizing one's form of life doesn't mean recognizing a fixed set of desires, interests, and needs: it means recognizing *that* we have such a natural mode of response, and that this fact exposes us to a constant examination of our way of life. Through this idea of an examination of one's mode of life, Cavell is recalling one of the most ancient ambitions of philosophy, an ambition Cavell sometimes describes in terms of «self knowledge» (see Cavell 1969: 68-69). Wittgenstein's later work should be seen as providing a particular access to this philosophical ideal, and not as promoting a way of life in which we are eventually dispensed from such questioning. In this sense, the *Investigations* can be seen as standing in the tradition of moral perfectionism: their idea of a responsibility towards our life with concepts individuates a new way of assessing one's relation with oneself.

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