

Immanent Problems

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One of the most powerful insights of Cavell and Deleuze, in my view, is that if they come to see old (and new) forms of philosophical, metaphysical, and historical doublings of the world as increasingly problematic and unconvincing, they also emphasize that such fading away of transcendence rather than bringing *this* world closer to us, or us closer to it, seems to deepen the distance, to make the world even more elusive and out of reach. And for this reason, they understand the critical task of philosophy to become that of exploring what inhabiting the world would look like under, let us call it, the condition of immanence, that is to say the acceptance that the world has no beyond or that, if it does, it is a beyond that will not take care by itself of the task of living (in) the ordinary.

Deleuze and Cavell do not quite understand the “acceptance of immanence” along the same lines, mainly because the very idea of immanence resonates differently for them, but they certainly agree that “acceptance” should not be confused with consent given to society and culture as they stand, or to ourselves as we are. Cavell’s insistence, for example, that Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* do not have politically conservative overtones clarifies what acceptance is truly about and how it does not stand in the way of moral or social transformation, but actually sustains a call for change. When Wittgenstein talks about the need to accept forms of life as the given, he may strike readers as having a pronounced conservative bent, but this is because one emphasizes the idea of “form” and understands “*form of life*” in an *ethnographical* or horizontal sense, as referring to different forms of economy, kinship, government and the like whereas, for Cavell, Wittgenstein’s emphasis is on the *biological* or vertical dimension of life and its different scales, on what separates humans from other living beings.¹ Thus the “given” that has to be accepted is not any particular form of social arrangement, but the fact that we are animals of a certain kind:

I have suggested that the biological interpretation of form of life is not merely another available interpretation to that of the ethnological, *but contests its sense of political or social conservatism*. My idea is that the mutual absorption of the natural and the social is a consequence of Wittgenstein’s envisioning of what we may as well call the human form of life. In being asked to accept this, or suffer it, as given for ourselves, we are not asked to accept, let us say, private property, but separateness; not a particular fact of power but the fact that I am a man, therefore of *this* (range or scale of) capacity for work, for pleasure, for endurance, for appeal, for command, for understanding, for wish, for will, for teaching, for suffering. The precise range or scale is not knowable a priori, any more than the precise range or scale of a word is to be known a priori.²

¹ “What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life.”Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, p. 226.

² Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989, p. 44. Emphasis added.

Accepting that we are humans, for Cavell, does not come without some constraints among which the effort not to project illusionary realms of transcendence, but it does not imply obedience to any particular social institution that happens to exist, no more than it dictates any normative version of “human nature” given that the “precise range or scale” of human capacities can never be known in advance.

No less emphatically than Cavell, Deleuze insists that the affirmation of immanence should not be mistaken for the consent given to any present configuration of power. Or, to be more precise, Deleuze does not even need to insist on the disjunction between immanence and social conformity or political conservatism, because the very way in which he thinks immanence is from the beginning antithetical to any form of philosophical or political commitment to established values. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze links his philosophy of immanence to the need for a different image of thought than the one that makes “recognition” the paradigm of all forms of knowledge and intellectual experiences, thus simultaneously avoiding to take into account the more adventurous, and risky, nature of thinking and compromising Plato’s idea that philosophy, no matter how we understand it, begins with the desire to break from the realm of opinions.³ And throughout all his later work Deleuze will continue to emphasize the critical vocation of philosophy up to describing *shame* toward society, and toward the compromises we constantly pass with it, as one of the main motivations for this strange practice we call philosophy.⁴

Rather than implying some peaceful or resigned consent to the present state of culture and society, Deleuze and Cavell take the acceptance, or the affirmation, of immanence as a call for resistance and dissent, for transformation and becoming. This is not to say though that immanence provides the “answer” to our ethical and political predicament, but instead that it raises new problems and challenges for a critical philosophy.

The idea that projecting a world beyond ours – be it in form of an eternal realm of values or in that of a reassuring teleology of history – is no longer truly compelling for us opens up two separate, although intertwined, sets of problems when it comes to our moral and political attitudes and commitments. The first one can be described in somehow classical terms as the problem of what morality and politics look like when no transcendental – let alone transcendent – ground is available to justify, or even guide, what we say and do, feel and see in our personal and collective lives, when neither universal rules of reason nor natural or social norms can dictate all the steps along the way. Deleuze’ and Cavell’s distrust of the explanatory power of universals – of reason, language, communication etc. – and, more generally, their aversion to foundational strategies that pretend to discover or construe in advance the unshakable rules of any human endeavor converge here with their sense that modernity is largely the experience –and the denial – of a world with no doublings and hence shape their understanding of what inhabiting this world requires from us from an ethical and political standpoint.⁵

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, tr. P. Patton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 134–136.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* tr. J. Tomlinson and G. Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 103.

⁵ See in particular, Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990 and Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* tr. J. Tomlinson and G. Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

The second set of problems turns around the question of what sustains, or awakes, our desire for moral and social change and transformation *from within* such a world. Even Kant, who more forcefully than any other philosopher, insisted that the moral law should be respected for its own sake and its own sake *only*, was nevertheless aware that the question of human happiness could not be completely forsaken. For Deleuze and Cavell, who do not even believe in the capacity of reason to give us a universally valid moral law, the question of happiness and desire becomes strictly unavoidable. It is no longer a matter of an eventual reward for “dutiful actions,” but the problem of what motivates the quest of a better self, and a better world, of what inspires resistance to the present, to debased forms of democracy and false needs, as Cavell says, or to the stupidity and meanness of our culture and souls, as Deleuze puts it. Hence their attention to the pervasive role that affects and emotions play in politics and society as well as in thinking itself, an attention that always aims at acknowledging their positive and negative power alike, rather than pursuing the illusory task of purifying reason from the all range of affects and inclinations and setting up ideal models or regulative ideas of what the just city and soul would look like under the rule of reason alone.

Spinoza’s description of the opposite effects of joyful and sad passions, along with Nietzsche’s distinction between active and reactive forces are the main references for Deleuze on these matters, whereas Cavell finds in Emerson’s a privileged entry into the analysis of the moral and political significance of emotions. All these authors share not only the idea that reason cannot be separated from temperament, as William James noticed in his description of what is ultimately at stake in philosophical differences, but also the sense that affects are dynamic and competing, that the absence of joy, for instance, is not just the lack of something (emotionally) desirable but the presence instead of something utterly destructive like sadness. Hence the necessity for philosophy to be simultaneously *critical* and *clinical*, or therapeutic, to pair the critical stance toward the present with the care of the self, with the attempt to cultivate the attitudes and sensibility better suited to resist resentment, toward ourselves, one another, and toward life.

It seems to me that such an understanding of the task of philosophy – inside and outside the institutions devoted to the teaching, practice, and transmission of this odd discipline –, of the challenges that the acceptance of immanence imply as well as of the dangers of its avoidance, constitutes an important contribution to our topic.

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