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Cavell on American Philosophy and the Idea of America

RICHARD ELDRIDGE

Here is a common picture of what American philosophy looks like to and within many American philosophy departments.¹ To a considerable degree, it does not exist at all. Most departments do not feel obliged to teach American philosophy as they do modern philosophy (Descartes to Kant) and ancient Greek philosophy. It is normally not part of the requirements for a major. Of course, writings by Americans are mostly what do get taught, but they are taught as just philosophy, not as *American* philosophy. When it is taught, it is taught as a peripheral history course, typically focusing on the major pragmatist thinkers from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century: Peirce, James, and Dewey, with perhaps a turn toward Rorty to round things off. These figures are thought to emphasize the importance of paying attention to what works: to experimental science in the pursuit of knowledge and to liberal reform in politics. The only way to discern what works – in either epistemology or politics – is through trial and error. Epistemology and social theory in any more visionary sense are evaded.² Our going practices of experimental science, particularly natural science, have shown themselves to be good enough: neither in need of nor admitting of any further epistemic support from foundationalist theories of justification. In politics, liberal decency, respect for rights, and reliance on markets are about the best we can do. Larger visions of social justice are by and large fantastic and potentially tyrannical, compared to a clear-eyed understanding of how decent people mostly can and do get on socially in order to satisfy their preferences. To the extent that the pragmatist commitment to getting on with what works is taken seriously, it is not so much understood as itself a visionary discovery of the natures of knowledge and justice as it is just taken for granted. Strong voluntarist pictures of human responsibility as including the possibility of getting right what we really ought to do in

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either the pursuit of knowledge or the arrangement of social life are simply dropped.³ The naturalist stances of Quine, Rorty, and Dennett, according to which there's little point in making much of a fuss about free will (in anything other than the Humean sense of political liberty or hypothetical freedom) come to the fore. The key notion is *coping*, and emphatically not *achieving our human destiny*.

This picture of American philosophy in turn both rests on and further articulates larger images of America and of philosophy. America is understood as the place in which freedom is construed as a matter centrally, perhaps exclusively, of individual liberty (as opposed to the achievement of the power to do or be something in particular – for example, to be more fully human or properly faithful). Most Americans exercise their liberty by pursuing happiness and satisfaction in the private spheres of family life, consumption, and enjoyment. Larger workplace and public identities are taken to be instrumental to satisfactions in these more private spheres, unless, of course, some people just happen to enjoy political work or quasi-familial workplace friendships or workplace activities. The business of politics in America is the fair reconciliation of competitive individual and factional interests. There are not enough goods to go around to enable everyone to satisfy every preference. Government hence properly sets up rules of fair competition, including centrally the laws of property and person and the laws of contract, fair trade, workplace safety, and nonexploitativeness.

Philosophy is understood in relation to this picture of America as committed to the overcoming of *merely personal* interest. People *do* have idiosyncratic interests. Some people devote themselves to fly-fishing; others to cello playing; others to cooking; still others to building bridges. Some people are Methodists; others are Catholics, Jews, Episcopalians, and nonbelievers. But no set of commitments, practical or religious, works for everyone. Older, premodern philosophies were quasi-theologies that attempted to install a favored set of practical or religious commitments as mandatory. They were failed efforts to make a particular form of devotion rationally obligatory. Happily, we are, in philosophy, beyond that project and its potential and actual tyrannies. Whether as the analysis of concepts, as a defense of the achievements of science (in yielding understandings that anyone might make use of or not, as anyone wishes), or as an outline of fair terms of justice and the rule of law that favors no one set of personal interests, philosophy is, above all, *neutral*.⁴

There is a great deal of both truth and value in these pictures of America and of philosophy. It is, nonetheless, Stanley Cavell's perception that to

the extent that these pictures are true, they are *made* true by Americans and philosophers adopting them out of conformism, acquiescence, desperation, and complicity in failures to achieve our best possibilities – as philosophers, as Americans, and as human persons. All too often, Cavell proposes (following Emerson), we fail to dare to exist,⁵ fail both personally and socially to live in pursuit and achievement of genuine care and commitment.

According to Cavell, philosophy and politics and America all promise more than this. To the pursuit of happiness as the satisfaction of individual preferences, Cavell – following Emerson and Thoreau, in company with Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Plato, and Rousseau – poses a counterimage of happiness as conversion to and achievement of *freedom*, understood not as liberty, but rather as something more like full mastery in what one does and says.⁶ What is needed, then, in this view is a kind of *rebirth*: away from instrumentalism and into accession to transfigured commitment and expressive power. It is naturally difficult to describe the kind of transformation that is in question. It is something like the discovery on the part of the modernist artist in the course of work that her natural talent and instincts can be originally enacted in an intelligible way: to make new sense,⁷ against the grain of the old. The thought is that as it stands “we are not free, not whole, and not new, and we know this and are on a downward path of despair because of it; and that . . . for a grownup to grow he requires strangeness and transformation, i.e., birth.”⁸ The hope is that “we might despair of despair itself, rather than of life, and cast *that* off, and begin, and so reverse our direction.”⁹

The idea, by contrast, that philosophy should be neutral and should focus on what works – more or less well and from our present vantage point – is then a betrayal of what philosophy has centrally been and still centrally can be. “Philosophy begins with, say, in the Socratic ambition, and may at any time encounter, an aspiration toward the therapeutic, a sense of itself as guiding the soul, or self, from self-imprisonment toward the light or the instinct of freedom.”¹⁰

The catch, however, is that there are no standing terms available for specifying fully the condition at which transformation or conversion or rebirth aim. A sense of this catch is especially prominent in America, with its founding resistance to any single national religion. This sense also figures in the resistance of certain philosophers, typically the ones Cavell cites as heroes and forebears – Emerson, Thoreau, Rousseau, Plato, and Wittgenstein, most prominently – to academicism and to conclusive formulations of stance, that is, in the drift of these writers toward a certain

literariness or poetry. For them the process of discovery of the self to itself takes place in and through an ongoing course of writing. As part of the founding myth of perfectionism, as it is exemplified in Plato's *Republic* and then further inhabited by Emerson, Thoreau, and Wittgenstein, Cavell lists the sense that "the self finds that it can turn (convert, revolutionize itself) . . . [in order to achieve] a further state of that self, where the higher is determined not by natural talent [that is, not by birth] but by *seeking* to know what you are made of and cultivating the thing you are meant to do."¹¹ As it engages in this seeking, the self finds itself caught up in the movement or work of thought and of writing, resistant to what Cavell stigmatizes as "moralism" and dogma and the academic. As vehicle of this seeking, "philosophical *writing* . . . enters into competition with the field of poetry, . . . not to banish all poetry from the just city but to claim for itself the privilege of the work poetry does in making things happen to the soul, so far as that work has its rights."¹² This kind of philosophical writing – both modeled on and in competition with poetry, rather than the treatise or scientific report – expresses both an ambition for conversion in and through process and a distinctly American sense of striking out for the new, of being on the way. Philosophy, from Plato through Emerson through Wittgenstein, then *is* about happiness, but where "the achievement of happiness requires not the perennial and fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and transformation of those needs."¹³ What is sought, through transformation, is not the achievement of a final *state*, but rather "a sort of continuous reaffirmation"¹⁴ of self in activity and in relationship. To seek such a continuous reaffirmation, and to see philosophy as seeking it, out of what is perceived as a present state of acquiescence, conformity, complicity, and lack of interest is not neutrally to endorse moderately successful strategies of coping that are already in place. One might say that the perfectionist strain in the thought of Emerson and Thoreau points us toward the possibility and value of falling in love and living in love with what we do, against our present half-heartedness.

Politics, too, then is different, for political thinking and political activity are open to being informed by perfectionist aspirations. "The transformation of the self . . . finds expression in the imagination of a transformation of society . . . , where what is best for society is modeled on what is best for the individual soul."¹⁵ At the beginning of an important essay relatively early in his turn toward Emerson, Cavell cites "the following pair of sentences, attributed . . . to William James" that are set in brass in the lobby of William James Hall at Harvard.

THE COMMUNITY STAGNATES WITHOUT THE IMPULSE
OF THE INDIVIDUAL
THE IMPULSE DIES AWAY WITHOUT THE SYMPATHY
OF THE COMMUNITY¹⁶

This message, which, Cavell remarks, “may be taken [among other ways] as claiming a transcendental relation among the concepts of community and individual as they have so far shown themselves,”¹⁷ is what politics as the usual business of factional negotiation tends to forget or repress.

An image and practice of politics that embraces this message incorporates, as politics as usual does not, a role for what Cavell, following Kant, calls *reflective judgment*: “the expression of a conviction whose grounding remains subjective – say myself – but which expects or claims justification from the (universal) concurrence of other subjectivities, on reflection.”¹⁸ It is this kind of reflective judgment that might best record a perception of our present liabilities and call us to something better – for example, away from present practices of “intolerable inequality or discrimination.”¹⁹ The making of reflective judgments and the practice of reflection on them by others point toward politics not as negotiation, but as conversation, a joint exploration of joint possibilities.

The aim of such political conversation is not the satisfaction of individual interests or preferences as they stand, but rather the joining together of the private-erotic with the public-political. This is a tall order; the private and the political do not readily come together. But “while it is the nature of the erotic to form a stumbling block to a reasonable, civilized existence, call it the political, human happiness nevertheless goes on demanding satisfaction in both realms.”²⁰ What we find ourselves engaged in, with one another politically and not just one by one, alone, is “a struggle for mutual freedom.”²¹

One immediate consequence of this aim and of our standing failure quite wholly to achieve it is that our sense of being members of our society and culture is likely to take the form of a sense of compromise by and complicity with society as it stands. The social contract as Rousseau and Kant imagine it, as theorists of autonomy (not of preference satisfaction), and as it is lived in America is a matter of *consent*, where “my consent is not . . . modifiable or proportionable (psychological exile is not exile): I cannot keep consent focused on the successes or graces of society; it reaches into every corner of society’s failure or ugliness. . . . A compromised state of society, since it is mine, compromises me.”²² This experience of compromise and complicity in American society and culture is all too familiar to Americans – aware of

the depth both of their Americanness and of the failures of their society and culture to achieve their promises.

Rightly developed – as Rousseau and Kant (rather than Hobbes, say) develop it – social contract theory focuses this sense of joint membership and complicity. To consent to the social contract is then not to take up an instrument for the pursuit of personal advantage; it is to accept one's responsibility for society and its promise of freedom. Consent implies

that I recognize the society and its government, so constituted, as *mine*; which means that I am answerable not merely to it, but for it. So far, then, as I recognize myself to be exercising my responsibility for it, my obedience to it is obedience to my own laws; citizenship in that case is the same as my autonomy; the polis is the field within which I work out my personal identity and it is the creation of (political) *freedom*.²³

As Stephen Mulhall usefully puts it, Cavell's thought is that the story of a social contract makes explicit the idea that "citizenship is [and is to be] not a constraint on my autonomy but an aspect of it."²⁴ Society is, in the Rousseauian-Kantian form of social contract theory, "an artifact" to which I am "deeply . . . joined,"²⁵ both bound up in its promises and complicit in its failures.

The essential message of the idea of a social contract is that political institutions require justification, that they are absolutely without sanctity, that power over us is held on trust from us, that institutions have no authority other than the authority we lend them, that we are their architects, that they are therefore artifacts, that there are laws or ends, of nature or justice, in terms of which they are to be tested. They are experiments.²⁶

The image of America that Cavell forwards is then that it is a place of these experiments, perhaps the central place. "It had a mythical beginning, still visible, if ambiguous, to itself, and to its audience."²⁷ Out of this beginning there arose "a society whose idea of itself requires that it repudiate the hierarchies and enforcements of the European past and make a new beginning."²⁸ Unlike the countries of Europe, America has been from the beginning and remains the nation of no settled tribe or *Stamm*, of no national religion, not even of any national language. It is a place of immigrancy, a place to come to, in order then to strike off in one's own direction.

No doubt this *is* a kind of myth. The settlement and cultivation of America are in historical fact shot through with violence. There were Native Americans here before there were Europeans, and the Europeans

introduced the overwhelming disfiguration of slavery. As Cavell himself remarks,

It is simply crazy that there should ever have come into being a world with such a sin in it, in which a man is set apart because of his color – *the* superficial fact about a human being. Who could *want* such a world? For an American, fighting for his love of country, that the last hope of earth should from its beginning have swallowed slavery, is an irony so withering, a justice so intimate in its rebuke of pride, as to measure only with God.²⁹

Yet despite this withering irony, in the very face of it, this founding mythology – this mythology of a founding, a new beginning – is nonetheless lived imaginatively in America, when Americans dare to dream. It is a central part of “the inner agenda of [our] culture”³⁰ that America *is* the place where freedom is to be achieved.

Everywhere intertwined with and enacted in these counterimages of philosophy (as transformative thinking, talking, and writing), of politics (as the conversation and cultivation of freedom), and of America (as the new place for the achievement of freedom – its birthplace) is an image of the human person, fit to live in these practices and in this place. The self is not a thing that is simply given, but a power of becoming responsible for and fully invested in what one does, which power is emergent, paradoxically, through its own activity.

The fate of having a self – of being human – is one in which the self is always to be found; fated to be sought, or not; recognized, or not. My self is something, apparently, toward which I can stand in various relations, ones in which I can stand to other selves, named by the same terms, e.g., love, hate, disgust, acceptance, knowledge, ignorance, faith, pride, shame.³¹

If we do not achieve full investment or what Emerson calls Power or Self-Reliance, but instead accept complicity, conformity, desperation, and dullness, then we fail to (dare to) exist. We face, or in conformity evade,

the issue . . . of the self as a thing of cares and commitments, one which to exist has to find itself, which underlies the myth of the self as on a journey (a path in Plato’s image, a stairway in Emerson’s, a ladder in others’), a journey to, let us say, the truth of itself (not exhausted by its goods and its rights).³²

The ideas, first, that we exist in and through our cares and commitments and, second, that we are able to be variously ashamed or proud of them, or faithful in them, or disgusted by them are inflections of the Kantian idea that our consciousness is apperceptively structured. “The *I think*,” Kant

reminds us, “must *be able* to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me.”³³ That is, for any judgment that I make, it is possible for me in reflection to become aware that it is I who have thus judged. The capacity to do this is impersonal, not unique to any individual. It is possessed by all beings who are capable of judgment. That our consciousness has this structure further implies, according to Kant, that we are responsible for our judgments and the actions that flow from them. “The human being, who is otherwise acquainted with the whole of nature solely through sense, knows himself also through pure apperception,” so that he is aware of himself as possessing “reason, [which] has causality,”³⁴ that is, which can give birth to actions, for which we are responsible. When we act out of respect for the moral law, then we exercise our practical reason and power of action appropriately, thereby coming into our own as human agents.

Thoreau picks up this Kantian line of thought, according to Cavell, when he writes, in the “Solitude” section of *Walden*:

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences. . . . We are not wholly involved in Nature. . . . I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but a spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you.³⁵

We have, then, an impersonal capacity for reflecting on our judgments, and hence for evaluating what we do – for being proud or ashamed or embarrassed or (culpably) ignorant or accepting of it. Hence we should (dare to) seek to *be* proud, upright, and fully committed in relation to what we venture (never knowing whether the world will cooperate with us or not), rather than timid, acquiescent, or ashamed. Thoroughgoing commitment in and to what one does lures us, or should lure us, as we seek to wed uncertain venture to reflective endorsement. Or, as Cavell furthers Thoreau’s thought,

Our first resolve should be toward the nextness of the self to the self; it is the capacity not to deny either of its positions or attitudes – that it is the watchman or guardian of itself, and hence demands of itself transparency,

settling, clearing, constancy; and that it is the workman, whose eye cannot see to the end of its labors, but whose answerability is endless for the constructions in which it houses itself. The answerability of the self to itself is its possibility of awakening.³⁶

Emerson's sense of the human person is similar, as in "Self-Reliance" he develops Descartes' *cogito* into the thought that, as Cavell has it, "if I am to exist I must name my existence, acknowledge it. This imperative entails that I am a thing with two foci, or, in Emerson's image, two magnetic poles – say a positive and a negative, or an active and a passive."³⁷ That the self in its doubleness or nextness has active and passive sides that might be put together, that it might thus answer to itself in and through its courses of action, is our infinite task and possibility.

Thoreau and Emerson are, for Cavell, the American philosophers who (along with Wittgenstein elsewhere) take up the Kantian image of the human person. In doing so in their specific way, they point us toward the romance of expressive freedom, the romance of the pursuit of full existence, uprightness, pride, self-reliance, and answerability to self. Not that this romance is concluded or even quite concludable: far from it. Thoreau and Emerson are "philosophers of direction, orientation, tirelessly prompting us to be on our way, endlessly asking us where we stand, what it is we face."³⁸ "Emerson's writing is meant as the provision of experience for these shores, of our trials, perils, essays,"³⁹ where this experience is not already in place to be smoothly developed into happiness, but instead takes the form of trials, perils, and essays, from and through which conversion of care and commitment are required.

That Thoreau and Emerson seek new direction – a conversion of, and from within, experience as it stands, in which they are themselves all too caught up – lends to their writing (and to Cavell's) qualities of *aversiveness* to the ordinary transmission of a settled message: a certain sense of tentativeness and self-revision, a foregrounding of the writer's own starts and turns and halts. Their writing enacts a sense of *seeking* to be on the way out of present straits and toward happiness, freedom, and self-reliance. As things stand, our getting on the way is enabled, but also inhibited, by imperfect present conditions. Hence for these writers it is a matter (as it typically is for modernist artists) of getting started at all, of figuring out how to "take an interest in our lives"⁴⁰ from within present dullness, conformity, and acquiescence.

Thoreau calls this everyday condition quiet desperation; Emerson says silent melancholy; Coleridge and Wordsworth are apt to say despondency

or dejection; Heidegger speaks of it as our bedimmed averageness; Wittgenstein as our bewitchment; Austin both as a drunken profundity (which he knew more about than he cared to let on) and as a lack of seriousness. To *find* what degrees of freedom we have *in this condition*, to show that it is at once needless yet somehow, because of that, all but necessary, inescapable, to subject its presentation of necessity to diagnosis, in order to find truer necessities, is the romantic quest I am happy to join.⁴¹

Getting on our way from where we are requires, in the perception of Emerson, Thoreau, and Cavell, not escape (from the cave) into the abstract, or into scientific procedures, but engagement with the near, the low, the common, the ordinary. Emerson and Thoreau work “out of the problematic of the day, the everyday, the near, the low, the common, in conjunction with what they call speaking of necessities, and speaking with necessity.”⁴² They write out of “devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low.”⁴³ In doing so, the hope – their hope – is that we might hear “how the language we traverse every day can contain undiscovered treasure”⁴⁴ that we can work into our lives because it is already worked into our lives (albeit in ways we do not hear), unlike the false promises of ascent of more traditional doctrines.

Out of our present condition, Emerson and Thoreau (and Cavell) propose to teach or provoke us by stumbling ahead of us toward the light of freedom. They are not experts, either in the instruments or means for the satisfaction of desires as they stand or in the specifics of the end to be achieved. There is “no expert knowledge” on offer, “nothing closed to the ordinary human being, once, that is to say, that being lets himself or herself be informed by the process and ambition of philosophy.”⁴⁵ What we might best do “may not be measurable from outside,”⁴⁶ but only from within the ordinary, the cave, America. We are to be, somehow, “guided by our experience but not dictated to by it,”⁴⁷ as we seek to put the active (workman) and passive (watchman) sides of the self together and seek to compose selves together into a perfected conversational culture of freedom – all from where we are.

There are, then, no formulae for the achievement of freedom. Advice about means and instruments does not heighten or deepen commitment. Descriptions of ultimate goods to be achieved are tendentious and insupportable, in coming from ‘outside’ where we are. Because there are no formulae, there are no experts in freedom. Though freedom remains, in this perception, central to the inner agenda of our selves and culture, Americans are also skeptical about prophets. They value expertise and sound advice

about coping and getting on with the business at hand. If Thoreau and Emerson and Cavell do not offer that, but instead themselves only stumble as writers toward freedom, then Americans are all too likely to scorn them or, if touched by them at all, to be unsettled but unconvinced. This is pretty much Cavell's sense of the place of Thoreau and Emerson in American culture. Cavell notes what he calls "the extraordinary fact that those I regard as the founders of American thinking – Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau – are philosophically repressed in the culture they founded."⁴⁸ Given the pragmatist strain in American culture, in competition with its inner agendas of freedom and perfection, this fact is perhaps not so extraordinary after all. Americans are generally not terribly attentive to their history, especially to their philosophical history. When they do pay attention to it, they are, as pragmatic individualists, perhaps reasonably inclined to pay attention to Jefferson, Madison (especially *Federalist* No. 10 on faction and the separation of powers), and Lincoln. These thinkers offer political solutions – deep and abstract, but still political – to political problems, not conversion.⁴⁹

Cavell, however, nonetheless argues that Emerson and Thoreau are *specifically* repressed. "I am taking precisely that condition to signify their pertinence to the present: I do not, the culture does not, *repress* the thought of Schopenhauer or Kierkegaard or Spengler; they were simply not part of our formation."⁵⁰ Emerson and Thoreau are "threats, or say embarrassments, to what we have learned to call philosophy"⁵¹ and to what in our acquiescence we have come to think of as America. This is *because* the inner agenda of freedom that they forward, and as they forward it in their specific ways (out of allegiance to America, to its future, and to philosophy's) is itself in specific competition with America's pragmatist, competitive individualist, "get on with business" strands of life. They offer "a continuous rebuke to the way we live"⁵² from within the contested insides of the way we live (and of themselves).

Cavell's talk of rebuke, prophecy, and conversion to freedom is likely, however, to seem itself empty, tendentious, and "cracker-barrel," especially to Americans naturally suspicious of settled terms of religious and cultural achievement. Such talk seems to monger shame and to do so without telling us much about what, specifically, to do. Emerson and Thoreau seem to undo our sense of ourselves as innocent, without outlining any particular route of recovery or restoration, hence to cast our lives as tragic. Their writings can feel like jeremiads. No doubt we should regret American slavery, and no doubt we face many problems of persistent unfairness and lack of opportunity that should be addressed through political means. But should we

feel shame toward our past and our selves, and is conversion the most apt response to the problems we face?⁵³

In light, therefore, of this worry about emptiness and shame mongering, it is especially worth noting that in his own faithfulness to the near, the low, and the common Cavell himself traces the achievement of a genuinely honorable American romantic happiness and freedom. In *Pursuits of Happiness* – his happiest book – Cavell follows the careers of the principal pairs in six American movies made between 1934 and 1949. His thought here is that the principal characters in these movies – Jean (Barbara Stanwyck) and Charles (Henry Fonda), Peter (Clark Gable) and Ellie (Claudette Colbert), David (Cary Grant) and Susan (Katherine Hepburn), and so on – “take the time, and take the pains, to converse intelligently and playfully about themselves and about one another.”⁵⁴ Among the questions that they ask themselves and each other – most explicitly in the case of David in *Bringing Up Baby*, but implicitly throughout – is “What am I doing here, that is, how have I got into this relation and why do I stay in it?”⁵⁵ Cavell emphasizes continuously that the asking and answering of this question are figures for consent to the social contract, that the achievement of settlement in the relationship of marriage is a figure for settlement of and with one’s country and culture and self (and vice versa). As though, then, to make the rebukes and promises of America’s prophets other than empty and tendentious, these pairs *do* achieve a settlement. Among other things, they discover – on their ways with one another and to their continuous surprise (in the sense that what they turn out to want is not what they had thought they wanted) – that “what they do together is less important than the fact that they do whatever it is together.”⁵⁶ Above all, they talk and acknowledge and have fun with one another. To be sure, at least one of the pair in each case has money, so that these couples are not in the end constrained by the pinch of necessity (though often one of them has been thus constrained). They do not have to get on with business. They have time for conversation and exploration. This can make their careers seem like fairy tales or fantasies for many of us.

But then the question that these movies raise and honorably answer is: What – survival apart – is getting on with business *for*? Most of us, Cavell argues, find their answer to this, their achievement of a kind of ongoing purposiveness (with one another) without settled purpose (no external aim, room left for continuing exploration) to be something worth endorsing. They achieve an “honorable . . . happiness”⁵⁷ in and through their pursuits. “The pair is attractive, their wishes are human, their happiness would make us happy. So it seems a criterion is being proposed for the success or

happiness of a society, namely that it is happy to the extent that it provides conditions that permit conversations of this character, or a moral equivalent of them, between its citizens.”⁵⁸ Since the criterion of happiness is satisfied by these pairs, and hence proleptically for Americans as a people, the wages of prophecy and conversion need not be only admonishment, rebuke, and shame. Acknowledgment intertwined with fun is possible.

To be sure, even though it anticipates a more general happiness, the happiness achieved by these pairs is achieved pairwise. The stateroom door closes at the end of *The Lady Eve*, leaving Mugsy (and us) outside the happiness of Jean and Charles; at the end of *It Happened One Night*, the camera pulls away from the outside of the cabin as the lights go out and the trumpet sounds, leaving Ellie and Peter inside their happiness, us outside.

Partly, however, this division of the private, erotic happiness and intimacy of these pairs from larger social life is a function of the fact that there is, unlike what Plato imagines the ideal city might accomplish, no one final achievement of happiness and freedom that is possible for us. Each of us must begin from where we are, all at once within our tangled culture, from our individual talents and possibilities, and with certain specific others, in engagement with the near, the low, and the familiar. This is an American pursuit of happiness and freedom, not a Platonist⁵⁹ pursuit of a standing good. Both selves and language-culture are, always, on the way, seeking always a further settlement. Improvisation, exploration, and wit are not to be bypassed in this seeking in favor of submission to a final theory. As Stephen Mulhall usefully comments, Emerson and Thoreau (and Cavell) are committed to “writing in a way which acknowledges the relative autonomy of both language and its individual speakers, their simultaneous dependence upon and independence of each other.”⁶⁰ Between self-speaker and culture-language there will be interaction, always, including possibilities of departure and return.

Writing that acknowledges this condition, as the writing of Emerson and Thoreau does, then “presents itself” not as the statement of a theory but as “the realization of [Friedrich Schlegel’s] vision . . . of the union of poetry and philosophy.”⁶¹ It will include narratives of departure and return, accounts of rehearsals and efforts, and of partial (or pairwise) successes and failures. The thoughts about our condition and possibilities that occur within such writing will be provisional. They will aim, and will sometimes succeed partly (but only partly), at offering us terms in which to do better from where we are. Cavell captures this point by focusing on Emerson’s sentences from “Self-Reliance”: “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected

thoughts. They come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.” As Cavell goes on to comment, these sentences propose that

If the thoughts of a text such as Emerson’s (say the brief text on rejected thoughts) are yours, then you do not need them. If its thoughts are *not* yours, they will not do you good. The problem [– or possibility? –] is that the text’s thoughts are neither exactly mine nor not mine. In their sublimity as my rejected – say repressed – thoughts, they represent my further, next, unattained but attainable self.⁶²

To commit oneself, as Cavell does, to the cultivation of such repressed thoughts (of America, of the self, and of their possibilities of freedom) is to adopt what Simon Critchley has usefully characterized as a “weak messianism,” wherein one engages in “‘a passive practice’, that is, a way of inhabiting the actual everyday with one eye on the eventual everyday.”⁶³

Are the thoughts to which Cavell (after Emerson and Thoreau) proposes to return us *our* repressed ones? Is freedom – as acknowledgment, and self-reliance, and mutuality, and achieved Power, and happiness in all of this – central to the inner agenda of our selves and our American culture? There *are* some reasons to be doubtful about this. Narratives of possible conversion, however weak, do carry with them risks of authoritarianism, hypocrisy, and the illegitimate repression of our natural and naturally divergent wants and desires. There is good reason, in order not to wallow in guilt and shame, to accept ourselves as just wanting what we want and just getting on with the business of life as best we can. If America promises us no more than the chance to do that, as individuals, perhaps it is not so bad: better this weak promise than the tribalisms and authoritarianisms of Europe and its philosophies and religions. Why should I feel embarrassed that I like, say, Robin Williams, and my wife, and my house, and you don’t? Perhaps it is important to me, and should be to you, that these likings are *mine*, not, or at least not necessarily, to be shared.⁶⁴ Why should we not, as pragmatism seems to suggest, just go absolutely with what *works*, from where we are, without worrying about mysterious conversion to a higher pursuit of freedom and happiness that might anyway make us too much like one another?

But then – just as with Emerson and Thoreau – it is not clear that this kind of worry is not already internal to Cavell’s own perfectionism and commitment to the pursuit of freedom. Perfectionism, as Cavell pursues it, “does not seek to impose itself by power”; “the project of Emersonian Perfectionism demands no privileged share of liberty and of the basic goods.”⁶⁵ To say

this is to say that democratic equality and fairness and political liberty matter and, further, that they matter specifically for the sake of the divergences, explorations, and developments of individual interest and ability and commitment that they enable.

Cavell's sense here – a sense shared with Emerson in his own continuing efforts to join in an American conversation of differing voices, without mastering it – is that there are certain “arguments that must not be won”⁶⁶ – among them the argument between the perfectionist, conversion- and freedom-seeking voice in American life and the voice of the tolerant, the divergent, the useful, the acceptance of ourselves as good enough as we stand. “The conversation over how good [the] justice [of a good-enough democracy] is must take place and must also not have a victor, . . . not because agreement can or should always be reached, but because disagreement, and separateness of position, is to be allowed its satisfactions, reached and expressed in particular ways.”⁶⁷

What we seek, as individual selves, as friends and couples, and as Americans, is “consent to our present state as something we desire, or anyway desire more than we desire change.”⁶⁸ Sometimes this will require just acceptance: acceptance of liberal political arrangements, of divergences within them, of the sheer difference of people other than oneself or of difference within oneself. Sometimes it will require conversion in the form of openness to and commitment to a certain route of cultivation and expressiveness – sometimes for oneself, sometimes for several, sometimes for the nation – in order to overcome present dissatisfactions. After all, “you never know. I mean, you never know when someone will learn the posture, as for themselves, that will make sense of a field of movement, it may be writing, or dancing, or passing a ball, or sitting at a keyboard, or free associating.”⁶⁹ Cavell himself expresses some sense of being pulled between his particular Jewishness and his more general Americanness, as they “inflect each other,” suggesting that Thoreau and Emerson are of interest to him precisely because they keep open this mutual inflection of particular and national (in him, and in the nation) by providing “a philosophy of immigrancy, of the human as stranger”⁷⁰ – seeking settlement, but never quite finally arriving at it.

So you never know. I would not want the American settlement to continue without furthering America's and our sometimes repressed inner agenda of freedom – without continuing America's romance – just as I would not want that inner agenda to be administered in comprehensive (nonliberal) political enforcements that would always betray that very agenda.⁷¹ You never know.

Notes

1. This way of opening the subject is adapted from Russell Goodman, "Cavell and American Philosophy," archived at (<http://www.american-philosophy.org/archives/2000%20conference%20papers/Goodman1.htm>).
2. See Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), for a reading of a central evasion of epistemology in American philosophy, coupled oddly with the thought that religiously inspired social prophecy is pursued nonetheless. Though West is right that both of these tendencies are in place in American thought, there is more tension between them than he supposes, as the evasion of foundationalist epistemology pushes toward the rejection of social visions and in favor of utilitarianism, while the pursuit of social prophecy seems to require an epistemology of larger visions in order to be credible.
3. Though this is the standard picture in American departments of philosophy, it bears noting that it is in many ways unfair to the richness and visionariness of the actual writings of Peirce, James, and Dewey, among others. On James see, for example, Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); on Dewey, see Goodman, "Cavell and American Philosophy."
4. Compare Jay Bernstein's similar picture of professional philosophy in his essay in this volume.
5. See Stanley Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even: Descartes, Emerson, Poe" in his *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
6. See Richard Eldridge, *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), passim, for an elaboration of the relevant concept of *expressive freedom*, and especially also pp. 108–12 on Cavell in relation to this concept. The pursuit of expressiveness comes to the fore in Cavell's discussion of Thoreau in *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), pp. 55, 57.
7. For a reading of Cavell's understanding of artistic modernism, as the pressure toward it and the possibility of it are described by Wordsworth and by Kant, see Timothy Gould, "The Audience of Originality: Kant and Wordsworth on the Reception of Genius," in Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer, eds., *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 179–93.
8. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, p. 60.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
10. Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 4.
11. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 6–7, emphasis and interjection added.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

13. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 4–5.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
15. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 7.
16. Cavell, “Being Odd, Getting Even,” p. 105.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. xxvi.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, pp. 64–5.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.
22. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, pp. 107, 28.
23. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 23.
24. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 58. Interjection added.
25. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 25.
26. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, p. 82.
27. Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” in his *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1969), p. 344.
28. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 156.
29. Cavell, “Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 141.
30. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 17.
31. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, p. 53.
32. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, p. 142.
33. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), B 131–2, p. 246.
34. *Ibid.*, A 546–7 = B 574–5, p. 540.
35. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Chapter 5, para. 11, “Solitude,” cited in Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, p. 102.
36. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, pp. 107–8.
37. Cavell, “Being Odd, Getting Even,” p. 106.
38. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, pp. 141–2.
39. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, p. 92.
40. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, p. 67.
41. Cavell, “The Philosopher in American Life,” in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, p. 9.
42. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, p. 81.
43. Cavell, “The Philosopher in American Life,” p. 4.
44. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 43.
45. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 9.
46. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, p. 142.

47. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 10.
48. Cavell, "The Fantastic of Philosophy," in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, p. 181.
49. Ted Cohen pressed me, rightly, to strengthen this point.
50. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, pp. 82–3.
51. Cavell, "The Philosopher in American Life," p. 14.
52. Cavell, "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant," in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, p. 35.
53. Again, a worry aptly urged on me by Ted Cohen.
54. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 5.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
59. I specifically note, however, that Plato's texts, with their dramatic structures of conversation, their allegories, and their frequent inconclusiveness are richer and more "literary" than a Platonist doctrine of the good sometimes takes them to be.
60. Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 252.
61. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, p. 21.
62. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 57.
63. Simon Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 130.
64. For an eloquent expression of this thought, balanced against the contrary thought that we also need to and can care about some things together, see Ted Cohen, "High and Low Thinking about High and Low Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (Spring 1993), pp. 151–6.
65. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. xxii.
66. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, p. 22.
67. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, pp. 24–5.
68. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 465.
69. Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even," in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, p. 115.
70. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, p. xv.
71. Here, along with Russell Goodman, I have the sense that Cavell and Cavell's Emerson and Thoreau are perhaps less far from Dewey and James, and from Rorty's Dewey in *Achieving Our Country*, and from Cornel West's "prophetic pragmatism," than is sometimes thought to be the case. Dewey and James and Rorty and West, rightly read, *do* urge the perfectionist pursuit of freedom, in and through continuing uncertainties, not just "coping." Situating these figures within the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau will mean, however, moderating their voluntarism and utilitarianism and noticing how they remain haunted by skepticism, even when and where they seek to deny this haunting.