

Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell

by Andrew Norris

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Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780190673949. 328 pp.

“Fame can die with you or be born with your death,” Stanley Cavell wrote, in his 2004 autobiography, after discovering that his heart was in a poor state. Cavell’s death this past June, at the age of 92, surrounded by beloved family and friends, turns the possibilities of this sentence into a question. How will Cavell, who built an examined life worth living out of the stone of institutionalized philosophy, and who forged that life in words so that all could be inspired by it, be remembered? Will the moderate fame he enjoyed be the end of it? Or will much more be born with his death?

Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell, by Andrew Norris, was published during the last year of Stanley Cavell’s life. The book maps out Cavell’s contribution to politics and practical philosophy in five chapters, although Norris’s far-reaching intellectual interests, like

Cavell’s, bend those concerns into unexpected places. The first two chapters are devoted to ordinary language philosophy and skepticism respectively, the third to more explicitly political concerns, and the fourth and fifth to Cavell’s readings of Thoreau and Emerson, particularly Emersonian perfectionism. The book is aimed at those already somewhat familiar with Cavell’s work. In a word, this book traces the political and ethical dimensions of Cavell’s thinking from ordinary language philosophy to moral perfectionism, highlighting the ethical project of “becoming who we are.”

Two earlier books on Cavell, by Stephen Mulhall and Espen Hammer, sought to give general introductions to Cavell’s work. Norris’s book, by focusing on political and ethical dimensions, marks a tendency toward specialization in scholarship and writing on Cavell. The book comes across as a harvest from years of

scholarly teaching, writing, conversation, and thinking. It's meant to be wrestled with, encountered personally, and read undistractedly – this will not appeal to all. But the density and existential quality also fits with Cavell's own understanding of philosophy. Cavell's books and essays were written to capture and transform the reader's sensibility in a kind of perfectionist conversation of reading. Scholarship which seeks to present and clarify Cavell's distinct views on philosophical problems encounters many challenges – something Norris recognizes, at least intellectually, in the introduction, where he writes that he is not defending theses so much as undertaking particular “readings” of Cavell's work. But a Cavell essay leaves its readers with an affirming sense of the separateness and inexhaustibility of the text, film, or painting he was reading and thinking about, as if making room for what others will say about it. It's not clear to me how, or when it would be appropriate to, follow that approach in writing on Cavell, or whether this question also is important for Norris.

A review will not do justice to a dense and insightful book packed with philosophical history and extensive footnotes. In what follows I will try to highlight only some of the central themes in each chapter, followed by some grateful but critical questions at the end.

The first chapter, called “ordinary language and philosophical conversion,” focuses on J.L. Austin's philosophical influence on Cavell. We begin with a sort of intellectual

biography rooted in Cavell's graduate school days: Cavell was actually smack in the middle of a dissertation on the concept of action when Austin showed up at Harvard, in 1955, to teach graduate students. By the time Austin was finished teaching on speech acts, Cavell found himself with an understanding of linguistic meaning as a form of action and so, effectively, found himself without a dissertation. Norris aims to undo a distortion in the scholarship on this point, emphasizing that Austin's teaching was a revolution in philosophy for Cavell but also that Cavell's criticism of Austin was essential for Cavell's development as a thinker. In particular, Norris analyzes the form of self-knowledge Cavell thought was implied, but not drawn out, in the constraints Austin uncovers in what we meaningfully say when – the sorts of constraints governing ordinary uses of “voluntary”, for example, and their relevance for philosophical discussions of free will. These constraints, which for Cavell are neither merely psychological nor capturable by formal logic, had been disregarded by philosophers of language as merely pragmatic aspects of meaning. Norris underscores how important it was for Cavell that Austin couldn't say *why* we hadn't paid enough attention to the background investments which make ordinary communication meaningful, as if “all of us were acting out commitments we didn't know we had made” (19). This “break” with Austin, as Norris calls it, on the seam of self-knowledge,

a seam Austin's methods implied or even relied upon but did not account for, leads Norris to trace Cavell's turn toward Freud and Socrates at the end of the first chapter for an account of why such self-knowledge might be disavowed or unacknowledged.

In the second chapter, called "Skepticism and Transcendence," Norris weaves in and out of different aspects of Cavell's broad understanding of skepticism, touching on familiar topics for Cavell's readers like criteria, grammar, and non-claim contexts. Norris unpacks one of Cavell's clearest formulations of skepticism – defined as "*any* view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge" (50) – and returns to it throughout the chapter and later in the book. A central conclusion is that "skepticism requires us to reconceive what objectivity might mean for us" (64), meaning that skepticism does reveal certain truths about our finite condition, but these are different truths than what the skeptic thinks is revealed by delimiting or denouncing our cognitive capacities. The chapter includes sustained discussions of Thompson Clarke's, Wittgenstein's, and Heidegger's influence on Cavell, particularly Heidegger's influence on Cavell through the effort to "locate" knowing among other human activities. Norris's working knowledge of these philosophers brings their individual influences into clear relief, and the approach to reading Cavell by isolating Austin (chapter one) and then Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Clark's influence (chapter two) is a

novel one, which I found engaging and useful.

The third chapter, called "Community and Voice," builds on the foundation laid by the first two chapters and Norris's earlier work to trace the political implications of ordinary language philosophy and skepticism. Norris works out Cavell's reading of Rousseau, showing how Cavell's sense of the individual, like Rousseau's, is neither atomistic nor isolated. One fascinating idea Norris unpacks is the parallel between consent to political community and consent to shared criteria. For Cavell, who takes attention to language and linguistic meaning to be philosophically primary in a number of ways, we are born into a shared understanding of ordinary terms like "chair", "house", "toothache". Our shared language presumes to reflect each of our judgements and sensibilities – unless and until we actively withdraw our consent. The structural parallel with social contract theory should be clear; in both cases, a community speaks for you unless and until you make your voice heard. "Once you recognize the community as yours," Norris writes, "it speaks for you until it doesn't" (117). But for Cavell, the act of challenging consensus in linguistic and political community is actually a positive step in self-development – it's a daily form of secular conversion, Norris wants to say – both for the community and for the development of the individual voice. When we challenge consensus, authority is not guaranteed (and we may be wrong), but rather sought

and staked in a claim to a *new* community. Norris thus traces several different senses in which, for Cavell, our deeply social nature is what makes authentic individuality possible, rather than the other way around.

The fourth and fifth chapters engage Cavell's reading of Thoreau and Emerson. In the fourth chapter, called "*Walden* and the True Foundations of Political Expression", we get a long and perhaps slightly disorganized close reading of Cavell's book *Senses of Walden* alongside *Walden*. We return to themes in the earlier chapters to show how Thoreau's bristly sentences reveal an engagement with questions of meaning, authority, experience, and authenticity at the core of ordinary language philosophy. As Norris shows, Thoreau spent two years, two months and two days at Walden and nine years writing *Walden*, and the book he composed is much more about his countrymen's relations to talking, writing, and reading than about mere living in the woods. Thoreau's sentences, like Cavell's, vibrate with condensed reflection.

The fifth and last chapter, on Emersonian Perfectionism, was in my reading the richest and most productive for future work. We begin by sweeping away some simplistic readings of Emerson, and then Norris notes that the chapter title, "Receiving Autonomy", "looks like a contradiction in terms" (193); much of the rest of the chapter aims to untangle the apparent contradiction. Here it is Norris's background knowledge of Kant which proves quite useful.

Autonomy for Cavell will be much more than the lack of determination by causal nexus, or the self's obedience to its own laws: it will be part of the siding with the next self rather than the conformist self, out of an acceptance of partiality and finitude, which constitutes Emersonian perfectionism. Norris writes that "Emersonian perfectionism or self-reliance is an interpretation of Kantian autonomy that situates it in a way that Kant himself does not, and in so doing transforms it – as it resituates and transforms the utilitarian pursuit of happiness" (189). Here Norris also unpacks Emerson's philosophical variation of the critical, Kantian framework in an illuminating way – a point Cavell insisted on, against most institutional and public knowledge, until his death.

Two general questions, neither of which negate the fact that working through this book will improve your understanding of Cavell: The first may be predictable; it concerns Cavell's recognition that he wrote for citizens of a good-enough society. One wonders whether Cavell really allowed himself to entertain some of the horrors of American history, and whether that would have changed what he took to be worth writing about. What is the status of our interest in Cavell's work when we don't believe we're in such a "good enough" society? Norris does not ask this question in a book about Cavell's political concerns. A second, narrower concern is Cavell's repeated emphasis on the difference between morality and moralizing. For those

who think that philosophy can or should have an existential quality to it, an animating sense of working through questions about how to live, how do we separate moral perfectionism's pursuit of the unattained self from – for example – U.S. Army advertisements to “become the one I am,” or from the self-help section of the local bookstore? Cavell was deeply interested in the importance of the line between debased and more authentic perfectionisms – as well as the way this question failed to be taken seriously by philosophers – for ethics. For a book with a title like this one, it seems like a question worth raising.

“Can we arrive at the place at which we know,” Cavell wrote in his autobiography, “without rancor or irony, that the relation between achievement and fame is, *especially in the short run*, variously and irreducibly arbitrary?” This sentence seems prescient. In the extensive footnotes, in the personal, sometimes gritty way in which Cavell's writings are wrestled with, Andrew Norris's book marks one way in which Cavell's achievement will be remembered. The reception of Cavell's writing on film in American and French film criticism and his influence on directorial approaches is another. But all of this is *in the short run*. What will Cavell's work count for in the long run? That question is yet to be answered.

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