Responding to "The Scandal of Skepticism": Levinas and Cavell

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My paper interrogates Levinas's and Cavell's responses to skepticism. Contrary to Cavell's reading of Levinas, I argue that Levinas's reading of Descartes is closer to Cavell's reading than

Cavell might admit. I show that Levinas's account of the "saying" of "illeity" contributes to a moral language which aligns with Cavell's non-theistic concept of "passionate utterance" which likewise informs his concept of "moral perfectionism." For Levinas, illeity refers to the absent condition of an encounter with another; it is the very act of effacement, the act of undoing which indirectly accounts for responsibility. For Cavell, passionate utterance is a form of language which reveals a self moving between a self-conforming "attained self" and a self moving against itself toward an "unattained yet attainable self." As "doubled and divided", there is an inherent failure or absence obtaining to subjectivity, which for both Levinas and Cavell paradoxically provides an opening for moral responsibility.

Key Words: Illeity, The Third, Saying/Said Relation, Passionate Utterance, Moral Perfectionism

Odziv na »škandal skepticizma«: Levinas in Cavell

Ta članek prevprašuje Levinasove in Cavellove odzive na skepticizem. V nasprotju s Cavellovimi branje Levinasa, trdim, da je Levinasovo branje Descartesa bližje Cavellovemu branju, kot bi to Cavell morda želel priznati. Članek prikaže, da Levinasov opis »ubesedenja« o »utelešenju neosebnega sebstva« prispeva k moralnemu jeziku, ki se ujema s Cavellovim neteističnim konceptom »strastnega govora,« ki prav tako oblikuje njegov koncept »moralnega perfekcionizma.« Za Levinasa se utelešenje neosebnega sebstva nanaša na pomen odsotnosti v srečanju z drugim; gre za samo dejanje izbrisa, dejanje razveljavitve, ki posredno predstavlja odgovornost. Za Cavella je strastni govor oblika jezika, ki razkriva sebstvo, ki se giblje med samoskladnim »doseženim sebstvom« in sebstvom, ki se giblje proti »nedoseženemu, a dosegljivemu sebstvu.« Kot »podvojena in razdeljena« je subjektiviteta inherenteno obsojena na opustitev ali odsotnost, kar tako za Levinasa kot za Cavella paradoksalno ponuja točko odpiranja za moralno odgovornost.

Ključne besede: utelešenje neosebnega sebstva, ubesedenje, strastni govor, moralni perfekcionizem

In the essay "What is the Scandal of Skepticism," Stanley Cavell remarks that Emmanuel Levinas's pivotal use of Descartes' "Third Meditation" resembles his own use of the very same passage in his work, *The Claim of Reason*: however, much to Cavell's consternation, he and Levinas derive what seem to be opposite conclusions. Cavell likewise suggests that Levinas's account of alterity implies a condition, if not a proof, of the existence of an infinite metaphysical being which requires "religious responsibilities I do not know are mine." Contrary to Cavell, I argue that the conclusions that Levinas draws from his reading of Descartes are closer to Cavell's own interpretation than Cavell might like to admit. While Cavell argues that one has infinite responsibility for oneself yet finite responsibilities for others, he claims that Levinas draws the opposite conclusions. I show, however, that Levinas problematizes Cavell's distinction by introducing an ambiguous relation between the "third" person and what he terms "illeity." I show that according to Levinas it is precisely on account of the finitude and proximity of the "third" that one is infinitely obligated both to the claims of another as well as to limited, that is, finite claims of others on oneself. Rather than relying on a proof of the existence of an infinitely transcendent God, Levinas develops his concept of the "third" in conjunction with that of the non-phenomenal *event* which he terms "illeity." Levinas refers to "illeity" as that which is paradoxically traced through its absence; for Levinas, "illeity" is the absent condition of an encounter with another, and, as absent, is beyond or outside all relation. Accordingly, I explore Levinas's conceptual coupling of "illeity," the "third," and the "saying/said" relation" and argue that Levinas's discussion of these critical concepts provides us with a non-volent account of the constitution of responsibility which strongly echoes that of Cavell's account of moral perfectionism.

For Levinas, illeity refers to the *absent* condition of an encounter with the other, and as absent, is beyond or outside all relation: "The relation which goes from the face to the Absent is outside every relation and dissimulation, a third way excluded by these contradictories."[1] It is because illeity is beyond being, not as a transcendent being, but as the movement of a "coming toward

1 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 61.

me which is a departure" that illeity opens up the space of time for what Levinas ascribes the movement of "saying/said" relation which takes place in the proximity of the third person. Levinas accordingly suggests that it is the very act of effacement, the act of undoing that is critical to the establishment of moral responsibility. For Levinas, the movement of disruption, that is, the unsaying or the absolution of the absolute, is positively required in order to establish peace through conversation.

I next argue that Cavell's notion of "passionate utterance," understood as within the context of Cavell's theory of "moral perfectionism," is consistent with Levinas's discussion of illeity, the third, and the saying/said relation. I show that Cavell, echoing Levinas, develops a transformative notion of moral conversation which is accomplished by a self who learns to translate, and thereby transform herself, through a form of moral language which Cavell identifies as "passionate utterance." For Cavell, passionate utterance takes place within a self which is both doubled and divided against itself, a self which is defined by a self-conforming "attained self" and by a self which moves against itself as an "unattained yet attainable self." By highlighting the inner tension of the subject, who makes herself vulnerable through language and thereby exposes herself to that which is essentially non-conforming, Cavell points to risk and desire as destabilizing factors of one's moral ground and as conditions of moral conversation.

Accordingly, I suggest that Cavell's description of the movement of the self between the "unattained and the attainable self" closely resembles Levinas's description of the event of illeity within the movement of "saying." While Cavell's theory of passionate utterance specifies a form of language which is meant to nourish the best of human conversation and through which the ideals of "moral perfectionism" might be ushered in, Cavell, nonetheless, identifies an underlying problem, namely, the fact that "I carry chaos in myself. Here is the scandal of skepticism: I am the scandal."[2] For Cavell, it is on account of an inner chaos that one fails to move outside of oneself, to make "an investment of a certain kind in a particular finite other."[3] I suggest

2 Cavell, *The Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 151.

3 Ibid.

that for both Cavell and Levinas, it is this very short coming that forms the "basis for recognizing one's infinite responsibility toward the other" and which for both philosophers paradoxically provides the opening necessary for a limited reparation and forgiveness of this very same failure.

Levinas – Illeity, The Third, and the Movement of Non-Violent "Saying"

In the essay "What is the Scandal of Skepticism," Stanley Cavell interrogates Levinas' description of a "breakup of consciousness," asserting that "Levinas's idea of an openness to the other – to a region "beyond" my narcissism - requires a violence," which breaks in upon the self. Because Cavell reads Levinas' description of an infinite "other" ontologically as transcendent to the self, Cavell concludes that the origin of the "breakup of consciousness" according to Levinas must originate from a metaphysical being which "promises to require philosophical and religious responsibilities I do not know are mine."[4]

Cavell not only expresses his uncertainty regarding Levinas' conclusion that "it is infinite responsibility for this other that is revealed when the infinite is put in me, rather than… (as Cavell suggests) infinite responsibility for myself, together…with finite responsibility for the claims of the existence of the other upon me." Cavell further suggests that the existence of a finite other is sufficient to make such a claim and that locating a source of the infinite as an ontological entity which transcends the self entails a certain violence which he wishes to avoid. Contrary to Cavell's reading of Levinas, I understand Levinas to suggest that it is precisely the finite – or singular other – which does in fact create claims of infinite responsibility for oneself; accordingly, Levinas develops his concepts of illeity and the third to provide us with a non-violent model for responsibility.

4 Ibid.

In lieu of the Cartesian argument which appeals to an infinitely transcendent source of the "monstrosity of the fact of the Infinite put in me,"[5] Levinas presents an account of the constitution of responsibility positively in terms of his concept of the event of "illeity." In his discussion of Descartes' "Third Meditation," Levinas is not so much interested in proving God's existence or the existence of some external source of the idea of infinity; rather he is primarily interested in highlighting the *limit* of the human constituting consciousness. I therefore understand Levinas use of Descartes' discussion of the idea of the infinite in the "Third Meditation," primarily as an opportunity to highlight the fact that a finite ego is ontologically unable to account for the idea of infinity on its own. As such, the finite constituting ego is bound to come up short – or in Cavellian terms, to fail. Levinas's account of illeity provides us with an alternative account to the Cartesian model requiring the "breakup of consciousness" as an "opening to the other" by appealing to an ambiguous form of singularity. Levinas's formulation of his idea of illeity, thereby, provides him with an opportunity to present a new relation between the self and the other, one that is independent of the relational power – and hence, violence – of a constituting consciousness and one which does not rely on metaphors which might require metaphysical 'commitments' of the sort which Cavell likewise resists.

In *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*,[6] Levinas argues that the original constitution of the subjectivity of a self depends on a non-phenomenal encounter with an other which is described neither as finite nor infinite; rather, Levinas refers to this encounter with alterity as "illeity." For Levinas, illeity refers to the *absent* condition of an encounter with the other, and, as absent, as beyond or outside all relation: "The relation which goes from the face to the Absent is outside every relation and dissimulation, a third way excluded by these contradictories."[7] It is because illeity is beyond being, not as a transcendent being, but as "a coming toward me which is a departure" that the movement of illeity opens up the space of time for what Levinas refers to

5 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 136-138.

6 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 153-162.

7 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 60.

as "saying of the said." In effect, illeity tips the scale; it secures the height or radicalness of the other, beyond the other, thereby, precluding the reduction of the other to the same while opening the time - for the "saying" of the "said." What is crucial to Levinas is that the relation to the other is one of movement which allows for moral transformation. By bringing illeity to weigh in on the face-to-face relation, Levinas not only sets up the parameters for the movement or the asymmetric of the face-to-face relation, but he articulates conditions for the temporal opening necessary for the "saying of the said."

In the essay, "Meaning and Sense," Levinas develops the relation between illeity and the third person. He states that, "through the trace, the irreversible past takes on the profile of a "he" (*il*). The pronoun 'il' expresses its inexpressible irreversibility…the illeity of the third person is the condition for the irreversibility."[8] I show below that two critical areas of ambiguity arise in conjunction with the association of illeity with the third person. The first concerns the ethical responsibilities of a self who also discovers herself as another for the other, and the second occurs in the tension between the unsaying of the said and the desire to thematize the saying of illeity.

With the entry of the third person, the face-to-face relation is refigured: "The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other…." [9] It is on account of the third that "I am approached as another by the other, that is, "*for myself*."[10] No longer do I find myself solely for the other, but I find myself as another for the others. With the entry of the third, my responsibility for the other now comes to include care for myself. Hence, for Levinas, "the reciprocal relationship binds me to the other man in the trace of transcendence, in illeity."[11] By positing a reciprocal othering the neighbor becomes a face that is at the same time both comparable and incomparable, becomes a neighbor in proximity, both for whom I am responsible as well as who is responsible for me. It is precisely on account of the ambivalence and the finitude of the other that "(t)here is

8 Ibid., 61.

9 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, 157.

10 Ibid., 158, (my emphasis).

11 Ibid.

weighing, thought, objectification, and thus a decree in which my anarchic relationship with illeity is betrayed."[12] With the entry of the third person, the experience of an ambiguity of allegiance in introduced and with it the requirements of justice and community. In addition to the tension resulting from one's absolute responsibility for the other and the realization that one is likewise responsible for oneself, the third also introduces another source of tension, namely, that of language.

For Levinas, the third person betrays illeity insofar as the third carries with it an inevitable thematization of the "saying" into the order of the "said." For Levinas, such thematization is unavoidable if there is to be meaning in the world of community.

"(The) Said…receives its meaning from testimony…by introducing it into a system of language into the order of the Said, wherein its expression immediately inter-dicts itself…. (illeity) is obliged to interrupt the essence of being, to reach the world even while signifying the beyond of being. It needs ambiguity…."[13] Yet in what sense can illeity "need ambiguity?" In what way does illeity need the third person?

In the collection of essays, *Beyond the Verse*, Levinas rhetorically asks, "Does not the transcendence of the Name of God, in comparison to all thematization, become effacement, and is not this effacement the very commandment that obligates me to the other man?"[14] Levinas suggests that it is the very act of effacement, the act of undoing, which is critical to the establishment of one's responsibility to the other. This movement of disruption, this unsaying, is prior to and gives precedence to establishing peace in the world. It is the unsaying or the absolution of the absolute, which is positively required in order to establish peace. For Levinas, "Humility, discretion, forgiving of offences…must not be taken solely as virtues; they 'turn inside out' the ontological notion of subjectivity in order to see it in renunciation, effacement and a total passivity."[15]

12 Ibid.

13 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 107.

14 Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 124.

15 Ibid., 125.

According to Levinas, the ontological notion of subjectivity is not only disrupted, it is "turned inside-out"; that is, subjectivity is transformed through humility, through discretion, through the concern for the welfare of others, through establishing peace in the world, through the presence of the third person. Hence it follows that illeity needs ambiguity in order to enact a "productive ambivalence": an ambivalence that points beyond itself to the responsibility for the other as well as for the other's other, an ambivalence that exists in the tension between the unsaying of the said and the thematization of the said, as well as an ambivalence which belongs to an ethical community where "(h)umility is higher than greatness."[16]

Cavell – Passionate Utterance, Moral Perfectionism, and Non-Conforming Conversation

According to Diane Perpich's insightful commentary on Levinas, (There) are tensions that remain irresolvable within the terms of Levinas' thought…. Even so, when we attend carefully to the manner in which two meanings or two senses struggle against one another in these tensions, we discover that the tension itself, the friction of conflict is constitutive of the very meaning of the ethical.[17]

In a similar vein to that of Perpich, Cavell highlights the paradoxicality which Levinas articulates in *Difficult Freedom*: Levinas describes the *vulnerability* of one's eyes which "nonetheless offer an *absolute resistance* to possession… in which the temptation to murder is inscribed." After making this observation, Cavell state that, "If I sought a solution to the skeptical problem of the acknowledgement of the other…I feel that I could not do better than to respond (echoing Levinas) 'You shall not kill.' – But in the everyday ways in which denial occurs in my life with the other…."[18] The problem for Cavell, however, is to recognize oneself as denying another, to understand that "I

16 Ibid.

17 Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 13-14.

18 Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 151.

carry chaos in myself. Here is the scandal of skepticism: I am the scandal." For Cavell it is due to this inner chaos, that one fails to move outside of oneself, to make "an investment of a certain kind in a particular finite other." Yet paradoxically, Cavell suggests that it is this very same failure which provides the "basis for recognizing responsibility toward the other" and which Cavell suggests opens the door for the reparation of forgiveness.

My understanding of Cavell is that, like Levinas, our inability to know the other and the other's suffering is just that – a *limit* to our epistemic powers; however, our sense of responsibility to others can be traced to a certain coming up short, an absence, a failure not only of knowledge, but a failure to be open to what Levinas refers to as "sociality," the forgiveness of which entails the acknowledgement of the other.

In response to such human failings, Cavell calls our attention to a specific form of language which he highlights in the hope of combating such human tendencies. Cavell develops this theory of "passionate utterance" as specifying a form of language which he hopes will nourish the best of human conversation wherein the ideals of "moral perfectionism" might be ushered in. In order to unpack Cavell's concept of passionate utterance in relation to his thought on moral perfectionism, I first explore his distinctive understanding of conversation in its relation to his theory of moral perfectionism. I next show how passionate utterance through the coupling of desire and aversion is key to securing the 'weight of a mother's voice within the world of language.

Cavell articulates a perfectionist notion of "moral conversation" by highlighting the vulnerability which the self exposes itself to in confronting the other.[19] According to Cavell, there is an element of risk and of destabilization of the moral ground on which one takes a stance which is crucial to this type of conversation. According to Cavell, conversation also provides an occasion through which the "rights of one's own desires" are given words, through which they are acknowledged.[20] Rather than implying a form of cooperation or the goal of getting to know others, conversation functions differently for

19 Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 173-174.

20 Ibid.,182.

Cavell. Namely, *con*versation involves an *a*version, "a continual turning away from society" *and* "a continual turning toward it".[21] The entangled movements "toward and away" never converge into a fixed point. Rather, the imperfectability of our words requires us to keep testing our words together in the form of conversation. Yet, in what way is such conversation "perfectionist"?

In Cavell's theory of moral perfectionism, which is largely informed by Emerson's perfectionist theory, he asserts that it is not the constraint of the moral law that guides us in the moral life, but the presence of another, someone who represents the "standpoint of perfection."[22] In other words, the constraint is given by the "recognition and negation" of someone else, through the success or failure of acknowledgment.[23] Hence what is at stake in the perfectionist view is not an "ought" derived from a moral imperative but rather the question of how one is to confront another, who is another self; how a person can be drawn beyond the present state of an independent self to aspire to a further state of one's self.[24] Cavell's Emersonian self is already involved in the encounter with the other or in a relationship in which the acknowledgement of the other is principal. This is why conversation plays such a key role in moral perfectionism. Let us address how passionate utterance finds its place also in Cavell's moral perfectionist scheme, so that we might better understand what constitutes the moral authority or weight of a mother's voice.

In Cavell's development of his theory of passionate utterance, he is concerned to defend a type of voice which he fails to find in J.L. Austin's theory of performativity.[25] Cavell's notion of passion in Passionate Utterance is not meant as the negation of reason (as in the argument of emotivism); nor does it abolish thinking, but instead it appeals to our *desire* to think, to bring passion to speech and to take expression seriously.[26] It is a form of language

21 Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 59.
22 Ibid., 58-59.
23 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 263.
24 Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 59.
25 Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 163.
26 Ibid., 156.

through which the acknowledgment of others exposes my vulnerability; it also expresses that which I am willing to stake out for a relationship.

In acknowledging a mode of speech in or thorough which, by acknowledging my desire in confronting you, I declare my standing with you and single you out demanding a response in kind from you, and a response now, so making myself vulnerable to your rebuke, thus staking our future.[27]

In the essay, "Performative and Passionate Utterance," Cavell focuses on the question: what can speech acts actually *say*? Because Austin "seems unable to do much with the field of the perlocutionary comparable to his mapping of that of the illocutionary," Cavell suggests that Austin's theory must "re-begin… going back to the fact of … expressiveness and responsiveness of speech."[28] Cavell takes up this challenge in his theory of passionate utterance, in which he explores what we mean *by* our words.

Performative speech acts can be identified by the formula, "to say x is to do x" or by "what is done *in* saying something." The corresponding formula for the perlocutionary act would be, "by saying, y is effected" or "by not saying, y is effected." By examining the formulaic characterization of these different speech acts, we can see that in the structure of the performative act, the verb is "built into the performative,' and the action of the verb belongs to the subject, which explains why performatives are always in the first-person present case. "I promise…", "I bequeath…", and "I bet…." Performative speech acts are restricted, at least by Austin to account for speech acts which reflect primarily on the first person, "I". However, according to Cavell, in perlocutionary acts, the "you" comes essentially into the picture. I suggest that the asymmetric structure of the perlocutionary act helps explain why it is more suitable for relational, unconventional, and creative interactions than that of the performative speech act. An example which Austin provides to clarify the distinction between these two different speech acts is "ordering someone to stop" (which is performative) and "getting someone to stop by saying or doing something alarming or intimidation" (which is perlocutionary). It

27 Ibid., 185.

28 Ibid., 17.

follows that for Cavell, "a performative utterance is an offer of participation in the order of law. And perhaps we can say: A passionate utterance is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire."[29]

Unlike Austin, who considers linguistic convention as a roadmap for determining appropriateness of an expression, Cavell relies on articulating the role which desire and acknowledgement play within our shared life to provide us with guidance. By doing so, Cavell not only moves beyond social convention in passionate utterance, he also moves past linguistic convention as well. Passionate Utterance, according to Cavell, is the idea of speech which is "designed to work on the feelings, thoughts, and actions of others coevally with its design in revealing our desires to others and to ourselves."[30] As such, Passionate Utterance is that form of language in which expression is not repressed and in which passionate feelings are not considered as separable from the words used in its expression. Because words reveal our desires to others, they also reveal our tacit desires to ourselves. Thus, in order to be mindful of the effect that desires might have on our actions, Cavell provides us with parameters or 'rules' which rather than inhibiting or dismantling our desires and emotions, instead, assist in helping us filter the delivery of our expressions.

In "Performative and Passionate Utterance,"[31] Cavell presents the seemingly anti-passional example, "I'm bored," as a primary example of what he identifies as a Passionate Utterance. In this essay, Cavell makes an explicit claim for what he describes as the expressive or passional aspect of speech. This claim is in response to what Cavell regards as a missed opportunity or failing in Austin's theory of the performative utterance. In order to build on his previous work which champions the individual voice over conformism, Cavell unveils the possibilities presented by passionate utterance, recognizing that its power lies in its unconventional and somewhat confrontational nature. With a nod to Austin's original conditions for performative utterance,

29 Ibid., 19, 185.
30 Ibid., 186.
31 Ibid., 179.

the conditions which Cavell presents in order to define passionate utterance mirrors Austin's own list of conditions for illocutionary acts.

Cavell's list of conditions for passionate utterance includes several conditions or guidelines. The conditions which Cavell sets out include:

> Condition 1): There is no accepted conventional procedure and effect. The speaker is on his or her own to create the desired effect.
> Condition 2a): I must declare myself to have a standing with you.
> Condition 2b): I, thereby, single you out.
> Condition 3): In speaking from my passion, I must actually be suffering the passion in order to rightfully demand from you a response in kind, one you are moved to offer
> Condition 4): now.
> Condition 5a): You may contest my invitation to exchange, for example, deny that I have a standing with you and walk away.[32]

According to Cavell, Passionate Utterance is characterized by rules or conditions on which we stake our relationship with one another. Unlike performative speech acts, such as promising, the stakes of passionate utterance do not conform to any social or legal expectations. Nevertheless, by stipulating the condition that one puts one's word at stake, Cavell highlights the binding quality of passionate utterance and, thereby, drawing out its similarity with conventional promising. Cavell explains that if I refuse to claim to have a "standing with you in order to confront you," then my utterance would be merely reflection of the authority of a particular institution, with its own rules for morality. By *not*, singling you out, I risk succumbing to moralism. Again, if I "generalize my standing" with you, whereby, I fail to respond to you as an individual, or if I group you into a class which I differentiate from and oppose to other classes, I risk partaking in "political oratory." Political oratory, for Cavell, fails to reflect a speaker's concern for the individual being addressed, and, therefore, fails to qualify as Passionate Utterance. Further, if I decline to demand a response from you, or if I speak in order to stifle your speech, then my discourse would amount to "hate speech" or "branding." Here, Cavell draws a sharp distinction between Passionate Utterance - the

32 Ibid., 181-182.

intention of which is filtered - and perlocutionary utterances, such as hate speech and branding, which have no such filter. Cavell, recognizes the liability that unguarded speech carries with it for enacting violence, and, therefore, consciously identifying Passionate Utterance as a form of language which refuses this outcome. Finally, regarding the last condition, Cavell specifies that for all the preceding conditions, it is essential that one be able to break up or exit from any such exchange at any moment; no one is guaranteed the final word.

Cavell suggests that if we choose to ignore the above conditions, our expressive speech is more likely to succumb to debased forms of language, namely, moralism, political oratory and hate speech. When Cavell provides us with his list of conditions for the perlocutionary, he is providing us with ways to filter our language such that we do not fall into debased forms of speech, while at the same time, he is calling for a sensitization on the part of the listener, to become attuned to how things are said, to what is not said or is yet left unsaid, thereby, learning to interpret, translate, and find her "perfect pitch"[33] in the world of language. The skill of interpretation and improvisation in one's response to the world consists in a talent which gives one a voice and position in the world, which allows one to change the meanings which one reads in the world and to which one responds. This ability to attune one's self to others, however, does not come 'naturally;' it takes work and a certain type of education. "These (above) conditions for felicity, or say appropriateness, are not given a priori but are to be discovered or refined…."[34]

Before broaching the subject of education, I would like to return briefly to Cavell's conditions of passionate utterance which anticipates my upcoming discussion of maternal promising and pay special attention to the last condition Cavell stipulates regarding Passionate Utterance:

Condition 5b): You may contest my invitation to exchange, at any or all of the points marked by the list of conditions for the successful perlocutionary act, for example, deny that I have that standing with you, or question my

33 Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 3-51.

34 Cavell, *The Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 18.

consciousness of my passion, or dismiss the demand for the kind of response I seek, or ask to postpone it, or worse. I may or may not have further means of response. (We may understand such exchanges as instances of, or attempts at, moral education.)[35]

Cavell's final condition underscores the significance that one is free to disrupt or overturn or walk away from a passionate exchange. By incorporating this condition into his theory of passionate utterance, Cavell effectively opens the door for subversion and or disruption. One can walk away or subvert any speech or gesture that is directed her way. Just because another person requires something from me, it does not follow that I have an obligation to respond. In fact, it is quite the other way around. I can ignore their request or provocation. Cavell's last condition, nevertheless, requires that one acknowledge another, even if one decides to ignore their request. We thus see clearly that in addition to his interest in defending passionate utterance and, likewise, moral perfectionism, Cavell so disdains any possible association with those who moralize, that he insists on this escape valve for inappropriate conversation. Passionate utterance, for Cavell, is a tool to combat those who partake of debased language, where desire is left unrestricted and becomes harmful.

At this juncture, I suggest as a possible candidate for passionate utterance, a statement which has received little if any attention within the philosophic community, namely, "I am your mother." I demonstrate below how this statement may or may not meet the conditions of passionate utterance. Because interpretation is crucial to understanding the meaning of this statement, I hope to illustrate that by distinguishing between what qualifies as passionate utterance and what does not, the listener is able to refine her response to the speaker: First, let us imagine that a mother when issuing this statement uses it to claim authority over her child and refuses to acknowledge her child's "standing." According to Cavell's standards, such a statement would reek of "moralism" and would, accordingly not be a passionate utterance.

Second, let us imagine a mother who is addressing several of her children and is in the process of reminding them that as her family, they are to be

35 Ibid., 182. – comparable to my Condition 5a, above.

identified in terms of her identity and as such, are different from all the other children. For Cavell, this runs the risk of exclusion, preferential treatment, or entitlement, thus qualifying loosely as "political oratory."

Third, let us imagine that a mother says "I am your mother" because she does not want her child to talk back or even answer her. In this scenario, the mother is clearly speaking in order to "stifle" her child's voice, which again fails the test of passionate utterance.

In any of these cases, the mother is saying more than what her words reveal. Either differences in the context, her inflection, or her body language can cause this comment to be interpreted as demeaning or abusive and, therefore, disqualifies it from Cavell's sense of passionate utterance. If, however, the child who is on the receiving end of such an exchange decides to walk away or ignore the comment, then something of the spirit of 'positive' passionate utterance is salvaged. By intentionally not cooperating or by disavowing the mother's pronouncement, the child is acting with a passionate spirit.

Let us return, however, to other possible scenarios of this example. I suggest that, contrary to the above examples, "I am your mother" can be meant as a promise of solidarity, protection, or intimacy. It can likewise be meant as a healthy notice of separate limitation or identification. And finally, saying "I am your mother" can be a way of staking out a relationship as meaningful. In each of these cases, Cavell's criteria of passionate utterance are met, and each of these interactions likewise qualifies as passionate in spirit.

I believe that Cavell is highlighting the formalistic differences between the meaning content of an assertion which is understood merely as a locution and that same assertion when it is understood as potentially passionate utterance. Cavell is reclaiming and stressing the significance of emotional expression, all the while, drawing attention to how emotive statements run the risk of debasement when they are presented as meaning too much, (as an arrogation of power or by stifling the listener), or might end up being that which empowers a mother's relation with her child. Without appropriate interpretation, communication, when taken literally, falls short of conveying the appropriate meaning. By ignoring the context of the effect of saying "I am your mother" and focusing rather on the truth content of

such a statement, "Is it true or false that I am your mother?" one misses the emotive and ethical significance which words carry and which are intended by speaking subjects. However, acknowledging the context and the style in which words are spoken gives one some traction in understanding one's own motivations and desires when speaking with others as well as those desires and actions of others who affect oneself:

> Here is the sense of language I am trying to articulate…. From the root of speech, in each utterance of revelation and confrontation, *two paths spring*: that of the responsibilities of implication; and that of the rights of desire…. In an imperfect world the paths will not reliably coincide, but to show them both open is something I want of philosophy. Then we shall not stop at what we should or ought to say, nor at what we man and do say, but take in what we must and dare not say, or have it at heart to say, or are too confused tor too tame or wild or terrorized to say or to think to say.[36]

Should we infer then that, for Cavell, in a perfect world, that the "paths of responsibility of implication and…of the rights of desire" will coincide? Cavell does not make this claim. Rather, he wants philosophy to make both paths clear, so that we can move ahead in our quest for the "unattained but attainable" self and not to be intimidated by closures in our paths. For Cavell, the power of passionate language supports the openness of both paths; it asks that one responds to the demands of another to be recognized as it asks one to be willing to risk one's standing and to risk exposing oneself in acknowledgement of one's own desires.

Cavell's rules for passionate utterance also speak to the boundaries which he makes between conventional utterances which have perlocutionary effects and non-conventional passionate utterance which also produce effects. Simply put, those perlocutionary utterances which do not meet the conditions Cavell lays out are in danger of being hurtful, preachy, or arrogating forms of speech. The problem with 'plain' perlocutions is that their effect is largely unpredictable and can be quite damaging, thereby, contributing to debased language in general. By contrast, Cavell wants passionate utterance to provide an alternative means to combat uses of debased language, "the means, and

36 Ibid., 185. (my emphasis)

authorization, to deflect both unfair rejection and suspect concern"[37] all the while providing us with a language form which encourages the expression one's own desires.

Although some might object that passionate utterance consists of a 'wild card' or a 'loose cannon' in language, the condition of mutual acknowledgment within passionate utterance minimizes this danger insofar as it encourages one to take heed of careless speech. In addition, some might object to the confrontational nature of passionate utterance, complaining that such speech only leads to further discord and conflict in relations. Cavell would respond that an openly confrontational demeanor (without the desire to 'win') leads rather to resolutions of the actual point of conflict, rather than to a further "covering –up" of fundamental issues. Confrontation is healthy as long as it is in the spirit of reconciliation rather than assertion of control. For those worried about a loss of civilized speech and etiquette, they can be conciliated by the possibility of there being a comfort in acknowledging one's own desires and the enactments of them as well as in being attuned to the desires of others. While we may not be able (or want) to claim that we fully understand another's full intent and desire, we can claim that we know more than the bare or conventional sense of one's words. This source of shared knowledge is critical to the coherence of community and family; in fact, it is what defines their very possibility. As Cavell insists, "I might say that my view of the role of ordinary language in relation to the imperative of expression is that it is less in need of weeding than of nourishment."[38]

Finding one's voice is a matter of how one relates oneself to culture, conforming to constraints and yet producing something new from within them. As Emerson notes, "the deeper (one) dives into his privatest, secretest, presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true."[39] Emerson suggests that this is accomplished only by the self who learns to translate herself into what is beyond the self. The experience of

37 Ibid., 187.

38 Ibid., 188.

39 Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 47.

this form of translation is best captured through the expression of passionate utterance within the parameters of moral perfectionism.

Stanley Cavell's moral perfectionism thus recalls a self which is both doubled and divided against itself. For Cavell, our selves are defined both by being partially that which conforms to itself, as an "attained self," and by being partially that which moves against itself toward an "unattained yet attainable self." Cavell elaborates on this distinction in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome,* where he appeals to the Emersonian distinction between two ways of reading; for Emerson, one reads either as an "attained self" or as an "unattained yet attainable self." Reading as an "attained self" is a complacent way to read. It involves no movement away from preconceived ideas and assumptions; rather, such reading becomes a form of self-reflection where one reinforces and buttresses one's own given opinions, building up and maintaining one's own ideas without investing oneself in the text. Because such reading encourages us to "learn nothing new," it is what underlies the tendency for our conformity and complacency. Because "[o]ur position is always already that of an attained self…,"[40] we are always what Cavell refers to as "partial." In contrast to the habits of the attained self, Cavell, with Emerson, presents the reading of the unattained yet attainable self as that type of reading which is potentially transformative, a reading where "we are brought to recognize our own idea in [the] text …."[41] By reading a text or engaging in conversation, the unattained self is opening herself up to a "constitution of words" which has the potential to transform her very self through the engagement with the text. Cavell does not understand Emerson to be saying that there is one unattained yet attainable self that we repetitively fail to arrive at. Rather for Cavell, *having* a self is itself a process of moving to and from, between future possible "next selves."

Cavell likewise conditions his description of our attunement and our mutual accommodation on our experience of shared experiences with others.[42] For Cavell, "on the whole we do not *have* to accommodate ourselves to

40 Ibid.,364.

41 Ibid.,363.

42 Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 137.

one another in speaking – we *are* accommodated, attuned I have said…. [T]his attunement is based on nothing more than our sharing… interests, judgments, impressions, needs, inclinations…."[43] Such sharing takes place on a stage where words do not say everything, and, therefore, acting and judging additionally require a form of language which brings to light one's desires and passions, namely, passionate utterance. Passionate utterance is situated to allow for the expression of one's desires and passions, initially in private encounters; however, according to Cavell's perfectionism, it is through non-conformist encounters that the private voice enters into that of community:

> In philosophizing, I have to bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself along the lines in which it meets in me.[44]

Accordingly, I submit that for Cavell the non-conformist perlocutionary speech acts of passionate utterance play a critical role in communication as is reflected in the ubiquity of its presence in discursive interactions. As such, passionate utterance is distinguished by the effect it produces and the demand which it places upon the recipient or observer. Accordingly, I conclude that Stanley Cavell's notion of passionate utterance is marked not by the denial of cognitive, emotive and ethical elements, but echoing Levinas, by the unspoken movement of illeity within the proximity of the third.

43 Ibid.,139.

44 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

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