

Harvard University Press
Belknap Press

Chapter Title: PREFACE

Book Title: *Cities of Words*

Book Subtitle: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life

Book Author(s): STANLEY CAVELL

Published by: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press. (2004)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c84cw9.3>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Harvard University Press, Belknap Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cities of Words*

P R E F A C E

The book of letters you have before you follows the course of a course of lectures called Moral Perfectionism, which I gave a number of times over the last decade and a half. The book differs from the lectures most notably in the circumstance that the secrets of its ending and the mysteries of its beginning are here fixed, for you and for me. It is the same man saying “I” here as said “I” there, but the you, whom I address here, unlike the students and friends in the classroom, are free to walk away from any sentence or paragraph of it without embarrassment to either of us, and indeed to drop the course at any time without any penalty other than its own loss.

I lectured twice a week. The Tuesday lectures concerned central texts of moral philosophy, early and late (Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Kant, Mill, Nietzsche, Rawls) or literary texts presenting moral issues bearing on perfectionist preoccupations (Shakespeare, Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw), or philosophical presentations of texts by writers not usually considered by professional philosophers to be moral thinkers (Emerson and Freud). Thursdays were devoted to masterpieces (according to me) of American film from the so-called Golden Age of the Hollywood talkie (the earliest dating from 1934, the latest from 1949).

The idea of the book is to keep in the published chapters something of the sound of the original classroom lectures, as distinguished from the sound of a presentation to a scholarly organization or a formal talk to a general public, for several reasons. First, I am not (I know of no one who is) a scholar in all the fields touched upon in this book: ancient and modern philosophy, moral and aesthetic philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis, American transcendentalism, and the aesthetics and history of film. If teachers confined themselves to ideas and texts about which they considered themselves experts, some of the best courses I ever took would not

have been given. Second, I love the sound of interesting, which means interested, academic lecturing. Third, I have had in mind, in writing about my experience of the course, an audience that extends to those past their college lives who have retained, or returned to, an interest in a college classroom.

Because, when the suggestion came from Lindsay Waters of Harvard University Press to think about publishing a version of my Moral Perfectionism lectures, some four years had passed since I last gave the course at Harvard, to get back into the spirit of the course I accepted an invitation to commute to the University of Chicago to present it in a format that beneficially doubled the period of time allotted to each lecture and that stretched the span of the lectures over a full academic year. When I confided to the class gathered at Chicago that for my Tuesday lectures (on works of philosophy or of literature) I proposed to read them texts that would, if things worked out, become part of a book, they were encouraging, and even interested in the idea that what I wanted to arrive at was not simply a transcription, smoothed out, of lecture notes but some kind of written equivalent of the experience of *giving* the course. For the Thursday lectures I would write out less material in advance in order to leave time for discussion, which itself would variously be incorporated into chapters.

As I sat in Boston, more precisely in Brookline, one street from the Boston city limits, within earshot of Fenway Park, which mattered in October and would matter again in April and May, writing out documents of a certain intimacy to be delivered, a day or two after I completed them, to a shifting audience living a two-hour plane ride away, I came to think of these documents as a sequence of pedagogical letters, although I do not insist on referring to them that way in the book (since the idea of a chapter, as marking a segment of a life, is an equally apt and interesting concept). Speaking of the segments as letters invokes an illustrious precursor in the line of moral perfectionism, Friedrich Schiller's "series of letters" *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*—although Schiller's views of perfectibility and of the authority of philosophy and, for that matter, the nature of morality and of aesthetics are at variance with those advanced here.

In the Introduction I say more about the difference between attending a course of lectures and following its progress in a book. Here I anticipate an immediate difference. The Introduction, though it goes over some material

that would occur in the opening lecture of a course, is more detailed than the orientations and confusions and general nervousness of a first day in a new class would allow. If you do not like reading introductions, or prefer postponing them—I confess I never skip them—a book frees you to turn at once to Chapter 1, or, for that matter, to any other.

Preface

xi

I know that the world I converse with in the cities and in the farms, is not the world I *think*.

—*Emerson*

Furthermore, the idea of a pure intelligible world as a whole of all intelligences to which we ourselves belong as rational beings (though on the other side we are at the same time members of the world of sense) is always a useful and permissible idea for the purposes of a rational faith.

—*Kant*

—The man of sense . . . will avoid both public and private honors which he believes will destroy the existing condition of his soul.

—He will not then, he said, if that is his concern, be willing to go into politics.

—Yes, by the dog, he will, I said, at least in his own kind of city, but not in his fatherland perhaps, unless divine good luck should be his.

—I understand, he said, you mean in the city which we were founding and described, our city of words, for I do not believe it exists anywhere on earth.

—Perhaps, I said, it is a model laid up in heaven, for him who wishes to look upon, and as he looks, set up the government of his soul. It makes no difference whether it exists anywhere or will exist. He would take part in the public affairs of that city only, not of any other.

—That is probable, he said.

—*Plato*

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

—*Emerson*

Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost.

—Henry James

In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, everyone lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves, what do I prefer? Or, what would suit my character and disposition? Or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? . . . It does not occur to them to have any inclination except for what is customary . . . conformity is the first thing thought of . . . until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own. Now is this, or is it not, the desirable condition of human nature?

—J. S. Mill

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.

—Thoreau

But even if Protestantism was not the true solution, it did pose the problem correctly. It was now no longer a question of the struggle of the layman with the priest outside himself, but rather of his struggle with his own inner priest, with his priestly nature.

—Marx

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live.

—Thoreau

If you can't stand the coldness of my sort of life, and the strain of it, go back to the gutter . . . Oh, it's a fine life, the life of the gutter . . . you can taste it and smell it without any training or any work. Not like Science and Literature and Classical Music and Philosophy and Art.

—G. B. Shaw's *Professor Higgins*

So far I have said very little about the principle of perfection . . . There are two variants: in the first it is the sole principle of a teleological theory directing society to arrange institutions and to define the duties and obligations of

individuals so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, science, and culture.

—*John Rawls*

This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man. Here are the materials strewn along the ground.

—*Emerson*

For the question is this: how can your life, the individual life, receive the highest value, the deepest significance? How can it be least squandered? Certainly only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars, and not for the good of the majority, that is to say those who, taken individually, are the least valuable exemplars . . . for culture is the child of each individual's self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with himself. Anyone who believes in culture is thereby saying: "I see above me something higher and more human than I am; let everyone help me to attain it, as I will help everyone who knows and suffers as I do."

—*Nietzsche*

Every Man being . . . naturally free, and nothing being able to put him into subjection to any Earthly Power, but his own Consent; it is to be considered, what shall be understood to be a sufficient Declaration of a Man's Consent.

—*Locke*

He who marries, intends as little to conspire his own ruin as he that swears allegiance; and as a whole people is in proportion to an ill government, so is one man to an ill marriage . . . For no effect of tyranny can sit more heavy on the commonwealth than this household unhappiness of the family. And farewell all hope of true reformation in the state, while such an evil as this lies undiscerned or unregarded in the house: on the redress whereof depends not only the spiritfult and orderly life of our grown men, but the willing and careful education of our children.

—*John Milton*

What marriage may be in the case of two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in

them—so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can have alternately the pleasure of leading and of being led in the path of development—I will not attempt to describe.

—*J. S. Mill*

Helmer: Nora—can't I ever be anything more than a stranger to you?

Nora (picking up her bag): Oh, Torvald—there would have to be the greatest miracle of all.

Helmer: What would that be—the greatest miracle of all?

Nora: Both of us would have to be so changed that . . . our life together could be a real marriage. Good-bye.

—*Ibsen*

The finding of an object is in fact the refinding of it.

—*Freud*

Moreover, friendship would seem to hold cities together, and legislators would seem to be more concerned about it than about justice. For concord would seem to be similar to friendship and they aim at concord above all, while they try above all to expel civil conflict, which is enmity. Further, if people are friends, they have no need of justice, but if they are just they need friendship in addition; and the justice that is most just seems to belong to friendship.

—*Aristotle*

The untold want by life and land ne'er granted,
Now voyager sail thou forth to seek and find.

—*Walt Whitman*

