

# **Stanley Cavell's Moral Perfectionist as the Post-modern Ideal of the Educated Person: an Alternative to Richard Rorty's Liberal Ironist**

**Duck-Joo Kwak\***

*City University of Hong Kong*

## **Abstract**

*The most serious problem with Richard Rorty's view of 'the liberal ironist' as the post-modern ideal of the educated person arguably lies in the thinness of common ground for public discourse, or the thinness of public morality that it implies. Being critical of this aspect of political liberalism Rorty fully embraces, yet not going back to anti-liberal traditionalism, this paper attempts to explore a third possibility from Stanley Cavell's philosophically not-trivial point of 'the private' as a new moral source in the modern individual. Captured as a highly reflective self-awareness in the form of self-acknowledgement of one's existential condition, Cavell's concept of 'the private' can suggest to us educators how its sensitization in education can foster a new form of subjectivity in the educated person. Cavell's 'moral perfectionist,' who substantiates this subjectivity in his/her everyday life, is someone who is capable of taking an ethically asymmetry attitude: accepting one's responsibility for others in relation to others while confessing one's own limitation in doing so in one's relation to oneself. In this portrayal of Cavell's moral perfectionist we find neither a moralizer nor an ironist, but a concerned liberal who knows how to be a liberal for moral reasons, not out of moral weakness.*

*Key words: the liberal, privacy, self-acknowledgement, responsibility, the moral perfectionist*

## **I . Problems with Rorty's View of the Liberal Ironist**

There have been persistent criticisms against Rorty's "liberal ironist" as the post-modern picture of the educated person in a liberal utopia. While the modernist (Enlightenment) liberal Thomas McCarthy, who believes in universal rationality as the basis of public morality, criticizes Rorty's view of the liberal ironist for fostering the poverty of public discourse, the social pragmatist Richard Bernstein complains that the ironist's tendency for self-creation is likely to fall into moral relativism and self-indulgent nihilistic

---

\* Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to Duck-Joo Kwak, Research Fellow, Department of Public and Social Administration, City University of Hong Kong.  
Contact Number: Tel. 852-2788-7471; E-mail: adjkwak@cityu.edu.hk.

aestheticism<sup>1</sup>). Both criticisms seem to target the split between the private and the public, implied in Rorty's portrayal of the liberal ironist. Rorty's liberal ironist is a romantic poet in personal life, preoccupied with the personal pursuit of a new self-description, and at the same time a pragmatic liberal in public life, concerned with the well-being of ordinary fellow citizens. What has been notoriously problematic about this split is that the elitist aestheticist tendency of the romantic ironist seems to be, at best, *irrelevant* and, at worst, *antagonistic* to the egalitarian and civic-minded ethos of the pragmatic liberal. In other words, what has worried these critics is whether Rorty's liberal ironist is *liberal enough* to be an adequate citizen in a liberal democratic society<sup>2</sup>). I think this worry is well summarized by Bernstein in the following:

This is not just an abstract problem. For there is plenty of evidence that a "culture of narcissism" does in fact lead to complete cynicism about public responsibilities. It is little solace to be told that there is no necessary connection between private narcissism and public cynicism when we constantly witness this 'contingent' joining of attitude. Sometimes Rorty writes as if the ills of our liberal societies are primarily due to unbridled greed that makes us insensitive to our fellow citizens. But he never "seriously" asks what it is about rich lucky liberal societies that enhances greed and makes us so cynical about political life<sup>3</sup>).

One way of re-phrasing the problem might be: "Why would anyone (any ironist) who becomes as narcissistic as Rorty advocates be motivated to assume public responsibility?" Here Bernstein highlights the psychological implausibility of Rorty's liberal ironist: there is no *moral source* in the ironist that would *motivate* the ironist to be a liberal; subjectivist tendencies are likely to lead the ironist to be socially irresponsible. Although Rorty himself anticipates this line of critique and tries to show how his liberal ironist can psychologically work<sup>4</sup>), Bernstein's criticism is still valid in showing the lack,

---

1) Thomas McCarthy, "Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism," *Critical Inquiry*, 16 winter 1990, 355-370.

Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 231-292

2) This problem is not new to our field of education. While Rob Reich acutely pinpoints this problem and argues in detail on the inadequacy of Rorty's educational view in his essay "The Paradoxes of Education in Rorty's Liberal Utopia," Patricia Rohrer criticizes the private/public split in Rorty's liberal ironist from a feminist point of view in her essay "At What Price Individualism?: The Education of Isabel Archer." See *Philosophy of Education Year Book*, 1996.

3) Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 287.

4) Rorty would respond to Bernstein's criticism by stressing his distinction between our description for private and for the public purpose. According to Rorty, our self-description for private purposes is irrelevant to our public actions and none of others' business. What is irrelevant to public actions is our awareness of the many ways in which our conduct happens to humiliate others. Thus, contrary to Bernstein's description, Rorty's liberal ironist is a divided creature who, no matter how anti-democratic his private sentiments may be, will be stopped by his other part from acting out his socially irresponsible, anti-democratic self-image in such a way to increase others' suffering. See Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 85-95.

or thinness, of the moral source in his liberal ironist. Of course, this lack of a moral source, other than the empathic projection of Rorty's liberals<sup>5)</sup>, has to do with Rorty's overarching philosophical mantra that the hope for any philosophical foundation of morality is a metaphysical illusion from the past. But, from this philosophical point, Rorty directly concludes that becoming a good citizen is one thing and leading a good life is quite another, and ends up advocating an educationally discomfoting picture of the educated, who can avoid being cruel to others but not *being* cruel in disposition, who can avoid behaving anti-democratically in public without really having democratic beliefs. No matter how it may be psychologically possible, I find this picture of Rorty's liberal ironist educationally questionable and inadequate; there is no *inner* connection between irony and liberalism.

I think Stanley Cavell can help to modify Rorty's view of the liberal ironist as the post-modern ideal of the educated. Like Rorty, Cavell acknowledges that there are two separate realms of life which the modern individual has to deal with without much hope for a theoretical reconciliation between them: the private, concerned with how to lead a good life and the public, concerned with how to become a good citizen. But, unlike Rorty, Cavell asks us to take seriously *both* this theoretical impossibility of a reconciliation between the two realms, instead of taking it as a matter of fact, *and* our desire to unite them, instead of taking it as unnecessary energy based on illusion. For Cavell, this desire to deny the human condition or the wish to transcend history is essential to what we think of as the human, so as to turn into an irreplaceable moral source if it is properly directed, instead of being suppressed.

According to Cavell, to awaken this metaphysical desire in us is educationally productive if it can teach us how to *be disappointed with* the human condition, instead of driving us into the philosophical quest for certainty. For this disappointment will be what enables us to appreciate what we can and cannot do as humans, the kind of self-knowledge which can be exactly the moral source to motivate us to *respond* to others in a proper way: *acknowledgement of others*. In other words, for Cavell, the metaphysical desire is something to be *caused* in us for an educational purpose, but only to be *cured* by guiding us to learn how to respond to our own disappointment and to others, especially others in pain. He calls this educational device "skeptical recital." I think that the examination of Cavell's skeptical recital as a thought-experiment will show us how Cavell's alternative, i.e., "acknowledging others" is educationally more "attractive" than Rorty's, i.e., "avoiding being cruel to others" as a way to be a liberal in a liberal democratic society<sup>6)</sup>.

---

5) Rorty's definition of "the liberal" as someone who can avoid being cruel to others can be read as attributing to his liberals the capability to see our common susceptibility to pain or humiliation out of the empathic projection of her own into others' suffering. See p.91 in Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989).

6) I think that the notion of "the moral perfectionist" in Cavell is parallel to that of "the liberal ironist" in Rorty. More specifically to say, Cavell's "moralist" is parallel to Rorty's "liberal" as the description of a good citizen who deals with her sense of obligation to other human beings. And Cavell's

## II . Cavell's Skeptical Recital as a Thought - experiment

One of the most common ways of being exposed to a sense of what Rorty calls the theoretical impossibility of thereconciliation between the private and the public is when we witness the depth of radical incompatibility among various conceptions of the good life even in well-intended and fair-minded discussions over pressing social issues such as abortion and religious rights or critical ethnic and cultural conflicts. The problem, which causes me a sense of frustration, at least from the educational point of view, is not that we do not see the difference among various viewpoints. We *do* see it if we are open-minded enough to see others' viewpoints from an *objective* point of view without directly imposing our own upon theirs. We can see that I have my point and she has her point, and we can even see where and why we diverge from each other. Yet, when we try to *fully* take into account both positions, to compromise into a single vision, we find it almost impossible; the more critical the issue in question is to each of us, the more difficult it is for us to reach agreement on it. Why is that so? Is this theoretical incompatibility just a pseudo-problem which is derived merely from our misguided epistemological ambition for what is true or who is right, as Rorty says? So should we not be bothered at all?

Of course, either political negotiations to secure firm boundaries within which one is safe from interventions by others, or pragmatic ways of relieving actual conflicts between us can reasonably be sought. But, no matter how useful they may be in keeping society functioning, this cannot be the whole concern from the educational viewpoint. What is educationally more at stake, which tends to be neglected by the more socially useful approaches, has to do with *the kind of spirit* in which we take the theoretical incompatibility. No matter how reasonably and sympathetically I try to understand another's viewpoint, there is a certain point where I have to say "I cannot take your point of view anymore" because my taking my own position is what makes me *who I am* it is like saying, "I do see your point, but there is nothing I can do about it because I am I." Mutual understanding halts at a certain point and I have to helplessly turn my back on the other. There seems to be a genuine *cause* for us to be disappointed with ourselves. This is exactly the problem I take a note of as educationally relevant in relation to Rorty's idea of the theoretical irreconcilability between the private and the public.

What exactly is the nature of this (educational) problem? I think Cavell acutely expresses it by calling it "the philosophical problem of privacy":

I take the philosophical problem of privacy, therefore, not to be one of finding (or denying) a "sense" of "same" in which two persons can (or cannot) have the same experience, but one of learning why it is that something which from one point of view looks like a common occurrence (that we frequently have the same

---

"perfectionist" corresponds to Rorty's "ironist" as the picture of an individual who seeks a private way of dealing with her own finitude.

experiences-say looking together at a view of mountains, or diving into the same cold lake, or hearing a car horn stuck; and that we frequently do not have the same experiences-say at a movies or learning the results of election or hearing your child cry) from another point of view looks impossible, almost inexpressible (that I have your experiences, that I *be* you). What is it I cannot do?<sup>7)</sup>

Cavell's question above can be rephrased: Why does what I can see from an objective point of view look impossible from my subjective point of view? Why does my judgement as a third person not affect my judgement as a first person? What is wrong with me? What exactly am I missing about another's experience by being this way?

Rorty tends to take this problem of the "theoretical incompatibility" between the private (the first person concern) and the public (the third person concern) *as a matter of fact*, so as to refuse to be philosophically bothered by it. This means that, for him, there is nothing we miss about others' experience (viewpoint) because what we cannot see about others' experience, if there is anything, derives from the human limitation which we are destined not to overcome; we are incapable of transcending our locality or historicity. In this sense this problem cannot be said to be "the human limitation" at all. This is why he recommends that we accept the pragmatic turn, the complete split between the private and the public. However, for Cavell, who takes seriously this theoretical incompatibility through his lens of "the philosophical problem of privacy," Rorty's pragmatist recommendation seems to deprive us of an educationally irreplaceable chance to learn something about ourselves by blocking us from seeing one thing. That is the fact that what lies behind the theoretical incompatibility might not be merely the epistemological problem, but the existential problem, the kind of problem which will reveal *an undetected fact* about ourselves.

Thus, in seriously seeking the question above as the starting point of his skeptical recital, Cavell dramatizes Rorty's idea of the theoretical incompatibility between the private and the public in the form of the irreducibility between "my pain" and "another's pain." Thus, Rorty's phrase that "there is no way for us to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory" can be re-posed into Cavell's phrase that "we can never know another's pain the way she does." Or Cavell can be said to replace the philosophical (metaphysical) problem of the common human nature as the ground of human solidarity, with the skeptical problem of other minds: "just as we never know what common human nature is, we never know another's pain the way she knows it." However, when Cavell takes seriously this asymmetry between "my pain" and "another's" by saying that we never *know* another's pain the way she does, he does not mean to deny that we can *identify* what kind of pain she is in. Of course we can identify it by everyday criteria of pain-behaviors such as wincing, groaning or verbal expressions. Cavell agrees that we can have *descriptively* the same pain as another's, so that we would know exactly what she means when she says, "I have a severe toothache

---

7) S. Cavell, *Must we mean what we say*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 262.

at my right jaw," while wincing and groaning. In saying we never know another's pain the way she does, Cavell does not, either, mean to suspect whether the other is *really* in pain or just *pretends* to be in pain. This means that Cavell does not intend to raise the question of the other's sincerity in expressing her pain, nor to assume that there is something like an immaterial "pain-entity" underneath her skin, which is recognizable only by the first person<sup>8)</sup>. In this sense, Cavell would agree with Rorty in saying that there is nothing we cannot *objectively* know about or can possibly miss being *informed of* in another's pain. Then why does Cavell ask us to take seriously that we never *know* another's pain the way she does?

According to Cavell, seen from the fact that it is I *alone* who can *express* (or suppress) my pain, no matter how *descriptively* identical my pain is to another's, what matters in communicating pain-experience is not the *identification* of pain but *my* having it or *her* having it. In other words, even if I have descriptively the same pain as hers, I have *mine* and she has *hers*; I express (or fail to express) and suffer mine and she hers. What is crucially important about someone's having pain is *that she has it*. In emphasizing this difference in our pain-experience, Cavell asks us to pay attention to the special relation between our (private) sensation (our actual pain-quality) and its (public) name (pain-expression or *behavior*).

For Cavell, the actual pain-quality is what *evades* human language, verbal or bodily, yet what vividly *strikes only* the person who is in pain. Thus, this actual pain-quality is something only I know when I am in pain and this is why we often say "I know (feel) it although I cannot prove it." I can describe my actual pain-experience this or that way in the wish to share it with others. But no matter how hard I do so, I would end up being left alone with a deep sense of disappointment with human expression in general because I realize that our working knowledge of one another's inner sensation can reach no further than outward expression. There is a genuine gulf between the listener and me, which is unbridgeable by language. Yet, this limitation with human language in general seems to have deeply to do with the *factual* condition of human existence: we are *embodied* creatures. For the reason she cannot feel my actual pain-quality is that she is *not* my body (or my soul); we *are separated*. Thus, it can be said that Cavell's insistence that we never *know* another's pain the way the person does is meant to *disappoint* us by pointing to the limitation with human language in general, at first, and then by revealing the fundamental condition of human existence: the absolute existential *aleness*.

However, even a moment of pondering this absolute sense of existential aleness forces us to feel a strong impulse to refute it; we feel we cannot take this conclusion at face-value because it tends to shut us off from others, so as to reinforce our

---

8) Of course Cavell would not deny that there are some inner feelings which only the first person is accessible to, so as to be able to hide them from others by suppressing them or pretending otherwise. Yet, these inner feelings are in principle something expressible to others; otherwise they would be unintelligible to the first person himself. In this sense, Cavell agrees to Wittgenstein's denial of private language.

susceptibility to being denied and dehumanized. We feel there is something odd about this conclusion. It sounds odd not because it has to do with an absolute human limitation which we are destined not to overcome, but because it does not seem to tell us the full truth of the human condition. Here is a turning point where our deep disappointment with human language or the human condition leads us to see the other half truth of the human condition: the *correct* understanding of the relation between inner and outer about ourselves. Cavell says:

The myth of the body as a veil expresses our sense that there is something we cannot see, not merely something we cannot know. It also expresses our confusion about this: Is what we cannot see hidden by the body or hidden within it?.....Wittgenstein's expression "The human body is the best picture of the human soul" is an attempt to replace or to reinterpret these fragments of myth. It continues to express the idea that the soul is there to be seen, that my relation to the other's soul is as immediate as to an object of sight, or would be as immediate if, so to speak, the relation could be effected. But, Wittgenstein's mythology shifts the location of the thing which blocks this vision. The block to my vision of the other is not the other's body but my incapacity or unwillingness to interpret or to judge it accurately, to draw the right connections. The suggestion is: I suffer a kind of blindness, but I avoid the issue by projecting this darkness upon the other..... Aspect-blindness is something in me failing to dawn. It is fixation. In terms of the myth of reading the physiognomy, this would be thought of as a kind of illiteracy; a lack of education<sup>9</sup>).

Cavell's original reading above of Wittgenstein's famous phrase that "the human body is the best picture of the human soul" allows us to see the *ambiguity* with the nature of the human body(outer) in its relation to the human soul(inner).According to Cavell, the human body can be either a veil or mirror, of the human soul (inner life); what determines whether it may be a veil or mirror is not the human body per se, but *our vision* to look at it as either. Of course we are physically separate from each other in our bodies. But this does not mean that we are necessarily separated. For Cavell, if something separates us and comes between us, that can be only a *particular aspect or stance* of our mind itself, a particular way in which we relate or are related to one another, not the body per se. For another's inner experience is there to be *immediately seen* (but not to be *known*) by us. Thus, if there is something I cannot know about another's pain, what prevents me from knowing it is not her body per se. But it is rather my *unwillingness to see* it beyond her skin, that is, *to imagine* the right connection between the pain-expression and the actual pain-quality beyond her mere outward expression.

A good analogy which might help us better understand this point might be found in

---

9) Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 368.

Wittgenstein's so-called "duck-rabbit example." The rabbit-aspect is hidden from us when we fail to see it (or when we see the picture as a duck) even if it is always present to us. What hides the rabbit-aspect is then obviously not the picture per se, which would reveal the rabbit-aspect other times, but our present way of taking it, namely, its duck-aspect. What hides one aspect is another aspect, something at the same level. Likewise, what hides another's inner experience from my view is not her body per se, but my refusal to look at things from her point of view or a certain stance I am taking for myself. This is why Cavell says: "what hides the mind is not the body but the mind itself; his his or mine his and contrariwise."<sup>10</sup> Thus, what is to be blamed for my not knowing another's pain the way she **does** not lie in the *factual* limitation with the human condition (we are *embodied*). But it does rather in *the way I inhabit this condition*, that is, in *myself who has avoided* reading the other's pain through her body. For Cavell, this self-knowledge, the discovery of the undetected fact about ourselves, is exactly what is required for us to *appropriately respond to others* in the face of the asymmetry (or theoretical incompatibility) between my pain and others' pain: *acknowledgement* of others. This is the very end point of his skeptical recital.

### III. Cavell's Alternative: the Moral Perfectionist

According to Cavell, his skeptical recital prepares us for two possibilities of acknowledging others (or others' pain). One is to take another person as similar to me by making an analogy between her case and mine. The analogy goes like this: "What we know of others we know on the basis of their behavior, since obviously we cannot, as in our own case, have their sentience, that is, literally have a pain of theirs. But since I know that certain bits of my behavior and the bodies of others are like mine, analogous to mine, it is reasonable to infer from my case that others have sentience as I do." What is distinctive about this first possibility of acknowledgment is our willingness to *imagine* what it would be like *for her* to have such pain by carefully listening to her pain-expression and sympathetically interpreting it in relation to her actual sensation, no matter how inaccurate it may be. Thus, to acknowledge another's pain by analogy enables us to come to *look at* her as someone who is in pain by way of reading her physiognomy *from her point of view*.

Cavell warns us not to confuse this form of acknowledging another's pain with a pure form of the "empathic projection" of my pain into hers. While in the former I tend to imagine what it would be like *for her* to have such pain, in the latter I tend to imagine what it would be like *for me* to have it and then to directly *impose* this idea upon her pain-expression. In other words, to make an analogy enables me to be in an *indirect* relation to another's pain because it is grasped by the *mediation* of my imagination on the relation between her pain-expression and her actual pain-quality. In this mediation the empathic projection places me in a more *immediate* relation to another's pain because

---

10) *Ibid.*, 367.

I try to feel her pain as if it were my pain. Thus it can be said that while I tend to step outside my confinement in making an analogy by creating a *new idea* on another's pain, in the empathic projection I still remain within my confinement by simply *rehearsing* my own pain-experience. This is why Cavell regards "an empathic projection" still as a way of avoiding others' pain.

The other possibility of acknowledging others is to take another as *the other*, who confronts me as an *instance* of humanity (not a representative of humanity). This way of looking at another forces me to place her *in a specific relation to me*. What is distinctive about this second one is that it *calls upon* me to do something in the light of others' suffering, going beyond knowing what it is. While the first possibility of acknowledging another demands that I understand her pain from her point of view, to find in her a fellow human being in pain, the second possibility pushes me further to look at her suffering in a specific relation *to me*. The focus of my concern here shifts from an understanding of her pain to an understanding of the relation between her pain and me. Now to acknowledge another's pain seems to have more to do with how I look at myself than with how I look at the person concerned.

Cavell says: "the acknowledgement of the other calls for recognition of the other's *specific* relation to oneself, and that this entails the revelation of oneself *as having denied or distorted* that relation."<sup>11</sup>) The main point of this citation is that my capacity for acknowledging another is deeply connected to my willingness to *reveal my existence* in relation to her, especially *as someone who has denied and avoided* this relation. This means that to acknowledge another as having pain requires me to acknowledge myself *as someone who could* comfort or relieve her suffering, but who *has denied or avoided* this relation. This self-acknowledgement of my being in a certain relation to the other in pain is exactly what *motivates* me to *respond* to her pain in a certain way; it places a certain call upon me.

Each of the two possibilities of acknowledging others requires us to make a certain shift in perspective. One is a shift in perspective on *another* in pain from taking for granted her being in pain to looking at her *as someone* in pain. The other is a shift in perspective on *myself* from taking for granted how I am to looking at myself *as someone* who has denied the relation to another in pain. And these shifts in perspective are exactly what make me "a moral perfectionist" in the sense of *being ethical or good* in relation to others by motivating me to do something in response to their pain. I think that this way of dealing with our sense of obligation to other human beings necessarily *affects* our private ways of dealing with our own finitude, that is, the way we seek the good life in our personal life. This means that, in contrast to Rorty's liberal ironist, the way Cavell's moral perfectionist personally pursues the good life will be developed and shaped in such a way that it may allow her to be liberal in public not out of moral weakness but for moral reasons. To put it another way, Cavell's moral perfectionist tends to be led to be a kind of citizen who is well aware of the inevitable gap between

---

11) *Ibid.*, 428.

her own and others' senses of the good life, still trying to embrace this gap in such a way as to strengthen the pursuit of her personal ideal.

Cavell describes his moral perfectionist as "a moralist," distinguishing her from "the moralizer". While the former is willing to acknowledge others, the latter is one who wants to teach and edify other fellow human beings by speaking "in the name of a position one does not occupy" since one "confronts others in positions of which one will not imagine the acknowledgment".<sup>12)</sup> On the other hand, unlike this dogmatically assertive moralizer, Rorty's liberal ironist is too light-hearted and dismissive to acknowledge others as the moral perfectionist does. What is distinctive about the moral perfectionist is that she tends to embrace others' pain or others' views of the good life in a more *self-confessional*, rather than self-promoting or self-indulgent, manner; so, for her, self-acknowledgement is an essential part of being good to others. In other words, for Cavell, what is required for the foundation of morality is neither a concentration on the improvement of our universal moral knowledge nor the mere recognition of our common susceptibility to pain and humiliation. But it is rather a time-taking road to a reflective concern for others in an acquired willingness to be in another's position. I think this manner can be properly fostered only in connection with a due appreciation of the educational significance of our irresistible and deep desire to make sense of our own lives (or who we are) as first persons.

---

12) Ibid., 326.