

Why Cavell's Philosophy Is Useless Against Tragedy

Al Neiman

University of Notre Dame

Let me begin with the following hypothesis: Philosophy is the child of loss. That is, Platonism begins with the death of Plato's own "father" Socrates. From out of his bereavement, and in response to a tradition of Greek tragedy that would mark loss as unavoidable, Plato created a system of ideas and practice in which the human condition as understood by tragedy could be transcended. According to philosophy, this earthy veil of tears described in fear and trembling by the tragedians, this sphere in which (as Socrates is made to point out in the *Phaedo* (60c)) pleasure and pain, loss and gain, are as inseparable as "two heads attached to the same body," is not the end, is not even real.

What is real is a world of immutable objects, preexistent and eternal forms. For Plato, if not for the real Socrates, the point of philosophy was to learn to die to this false world of tragedy, in order to be reborn into "a place" that consists only of safe and stable objects of desire. As Socrates puts it in Plato's *Symposium*, who, upon confronting not this or that perishable beauty, but beauty itself, would not seek to become a lover of wisdom?¹

But not every reader of Plato has endorsed this philosophical solution to, this rejection of, tragedy. Most famously, it was Nietzsche who brought forward a critique of philosophy (and what he considered Platonism for the masses, Christianity) which for many educated people still rings true. According to this self-proclaimed "anti-Christ," it may be that the best that the sick and needy "mob" of humankind can manage is an evasion of tragedy, that is, the sort of infantile escapism espoused by Socrates and his most powerful disciple, St. Paul. But it is Nietzsche's hope, a hope that inspires his entire corpus, that at least some special few of his readers will be capable of facing the most terrifying yet liberating truth: If any Gods have created the world, it is we who are those Gods!

But not every attempt to avoid philosophy has required such hubris. Concentrating on an educational dialectic of gain and loss, Nicholas Burbules has recently made a stir by attempting to engage tragedy in a way that avoids not only philosophy and philosophical religion, but also Nietzsche's own brand of bizarre metaphysics. Well aware of the dangers of Nietzsche's anti-democratic irrationalism, Burbules, in his battle with the tragic, selects John Dewey as his exemplar.

Burbules champions a pragmatism in which the hitherto unfortunate dichotomy of "Tragedy or Philosophy" is rendered harmless. This dissolution follows from the imperatives set out in Dewey's model of embodied praxis, or practical reason. According to Burbules, Dewey's method of "creative intelligence" provides a means by which we can practice an education in which both absolutes, Tragedy and Philosophy, are brought down to earth. The promise of Dewey's pragmatism, then, is not as a once and for all solution to "The Tragic Condition" but, rather, as an ongoing means by which this and that loss can, as much as possible, be understood and

restored. In this account, the Platonic longing for the absolute is domesticated through an education in the value of meliorism. In this way, he claims, we can, as teachers, move all the way through tragedy by putting it in its place, within a human condition which is constantly changing and adapting, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.

René Arcilla, in response to Burbules, has questioned the worth of pragmatism as a response to tragedy. Arcilla cannot imagine that the consolation provided by Dewey and his followers can suitably match the terrifying condition we call human life, a Pascalian life of Gods who shit. But if critics such as Megan Boler are right, this demand for restored vision puts Arcilla in an unfortunate situation. According to Boler, Arcilla's suggestion, in response to tragedy, that we seek redemption through a renewed sense of "the miracle and mystery of existence," contains within it only the seeds of a new transfiguration of post-structuralist nihilism.

I wonder if, out of modesty, Naoko Saito has hidden the true aim of her provocative essay: To redeem her former mentor by uncovering in his own work a way out of tragedy that both corrects the work of Burbules and defeats the criticism of Boler. Revising Burbules's position in the light of Arcilla's criticism, she suggests that pragmatism can provide only part of what is needed for such a resolution. The rest, the other part needed, she believes can be found within a revision of pragmatism which Arcilla himself explores in his critique of Burbules and elsewhere.² This pragmatism, of course, is the one that has been so pervasively championed by Stanley Cavell, that is, Emersonian Perfectionism. Perhaps the goal of Professor Saito's essay is to do what Arcilla perhaps tried and failed to do, or at least do it more decisively, that is, provide a renewed sense of being through the parameters set out by Cavellian pragmatism.

What then is Emersonian Moral Perfectionism (EMP)? And how can it help us deal with tragedy, both in and out of education? Following Arcilla's own discussion, the doctrine Saito describes shares a good deal with the sort of pragmatism espoused by Burbules. In fact I would read her version of EMP as a potential means by which that pragmatism can be completed rather than replaced. But what is it in EMP that can complete pragmatism? At the very least it must be something that can allay Arcilla's doubts about pragmatism *per se*.

Saito finds within EMP a kind of working as writing which amounts of self-creation, something Cavell has described as "finding as founding." Here Saito's hero is Emerson rather than Dewey, Emerson as a corrective or better, a complement, to Burbules's Dewey. According to her nuanced account, EMP, like Dewey, seeks "a middle way of living," between (or perhaps better, beyond, in the sense of being disposed of) absolutes. Following Emerson, EMP emboldens the Deweyian minded to seek their own heroism in acts of self-creative growth, growth neither preexistent or preordained, the kind of acts that will, in Cavell's phrase, create and continue to create this "new yet unapproachable America." In the face of loss, philosophy and Platonic religion in the classroom can yield only paralytic fatalism or unjustifiable escape in the face of loss. On the other hand, the education practice of EMP, as Saito so engagingly describes it, will provide occasions for "autobiological exercises" that

aim at “the transfiguration of mourning as grief into morning as dawn.” Perhaps Saito means to say that it is through such classroom occasions that students will transcend tragedy through a recognition of Arcilla’s “miracle and mystery of existence.”

I believe that it is precisely through a more extended discussion of concrete educational proposals that Saito can do the most to make Arcilla’s theoretical remarks most precise and most impressive. Therefore, any adequate examination of Saito’s proposals would need to include a careful and sympathetic presentation and examination of the particulars of EMP in the classroom. But in the little space I have left I will simply express my rather *a priori* doubts about her project. I will try to persuade both Saito and Arcilla to leave EMP behind.

What is wrong with EMP? It is not that I do not agree with Saito and Arcilla that pragmatism *per se* can never satisfy us. By us I mean, more precisely, the sick souls described in William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*.³ I, for one, cannot imagine that any mere addition or subtraction of purely natural gains and losses can satisfy those in need of a second birth. What kind of second birth? According to James, it must be a true redemption, a birth whose ground is a recognition that in the end we are ultimately powerless, that it is only because of the intervention of “powers greater than ourselves” that even now we live and breath, espouse and reject philosophy, measure our lives within the parameters of eternity. That it is no sin to espouse absolutes, even a God, if that God is more a living presence than an explanatory principle (the God of Levinas rather than analytic philosophy of religion), and if one’s religion is less a set of beliefs meant to correspond to some philosophical reality and more a set of disciplines aimed towards the practice of saintliness. In fact, it is the lesson of James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* that nothing is more needful, especially so soon after the most murderous century in history, than such a practice, a practice of death and rebirth, of true freedom through love and self-sacrifice, a practice exercised in our time by great souls such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Can Cavell provide us with such a practice? I have my doubts. But what is wrong with EMP? In all its twaddling about self-creation I find a flirtation which, according to my admittedly sick soul, lies behind every refusal to accept a need for grace. This is the kind of preference that Emerson flirts with in “Nature,” where, as in EMP, philosophy raises its irksome head once more in the form of metaphysical idealism and Nietzschean self-idolatry. But, happily I would say, Emerson himself in the end sees through this garbled preference. He himself approaches James’ second birth.

In “Threnody,” written four years after Waldo’s death, Emerson can, indeed, exhibit gratitude for a grandeur of nature:

The South-wind brings
Life, sunshine and desire
And on every mount and meadow
Breathe automatic fire...

But in this elegy in honor of a lost son, written a full two years after “Experience,” Emerson could, thank God, mourn again:

But over the dead he has no power,
 the lost, the lost he cannot restore;
 And, looking over the hills, I mourn
 The darling who will not return.

If we would read William James nowadays with anything like the (misguided) fervor we now devote to Cavell, we might learn, as Emerson in fact (in spite of Cavell's misreading) did learn, that a yearning for redemption is no sign of weakness but rather the prerequisite for everything that can reasonably count as human creativity. That tragedy can find its true match only in the kind of gratitude that is still capable of mourning. That although one can never go all the way through tragedy, one can learn to mourn in a way that provides the power necessary to serve something greater than oneself, can learn by really and truly dispensing with philosophy to live redemption by learning how to die.

1. This story of the birth of philosophy has been well told by Martha Nussbaum in her magisterial *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

2. See René Arcilla, *For the Love of Perfection* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

3. For more on William James see Jim Garrison and Al Neiman, "Pragmatism and Education," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Nigel Blake (New York: Blackwell, 2003).