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The Fate of Hair and Conversation
On moral identity and recognition in
The Man Who Wasn't There

1. Moral Perfectionism

When Ed Crane, the leading character in the Coen Brothers movie *The Man Who Wasn't There*, is convicted of murder and finally placed in the electric chair, he catches a glimpse of the shape of his life, which had always seemed quite obscure to him. “While you’re in the maze,” he muses as his vision becomes clearer and clearer, “you go through willy-nilly, turning where you think you have to turn, banging into dead ends, one thing after another.”¹ Ed had been an unhappy barber who wanted to be a dry cleaner or, put another way, who had clutched at the futile hope that he might make his life better by investing in dry cleaning. This plan, however, had turned out disastrously, carrying in its wake the death of quite a few people, including his wife. Now, doomed to die, Ed for the first time clearly realizes what he had always missed. He has what to him amounts to a religious discovery: that there is no reason to be sad, since what he is about to lose cannot, strictly speaking, be called *his* life. Somehow he had never claimed, never appropriated his own existence, but rather had haunted his life like a ghost. And he also feels that this strange existence, this not being *there* in his life,² was due to a profound lack of conversation; he never found words to express himself to another human being, to truly share a language. Thus, thinking of death, in a reversal of the ancient vision of the realm of the dead as a vague and blurred kind of existence, arouses his long-suppressed hopes of clear vision and mutual understanding:

“Maybe the things I don’t understand will be clearer there [...] And maybe I can tell [Doris] all those things they don’t have words for here.”

The Man Who Wasn't There draws on a well-known western tradition, starting with Plato that pictures conventional social life as a more or less ghost-like existence, ensnared in conventional phrases pretending to mean something but actually barring expression and communication of individual experience. Within this tradition, hopes are pinned on conversation – or, more specifically, on an explorative

¹ Coen & Coen 2001.

² Rather obviously the Title of the Coen’s movie is evocative of Martin Heidegger’s expression for human life: *Dasein/Being There* in his *Sein und Zeit/Being and Time*.

and anti-conventional form of conversation like the Socratic dialogue – which is considered the source and means of moral self-realization. By moral self-realization I mean the realization of the kind of self-knowledge and self-recognition that is necessary to be able to take responsibility for one's own life, like knowing what matters to oneself, what kind of person one could be and wants to be, with whom one wants to be together, and the like. Stanley Cavell has called this tradition *moral perfectionism*,³ for it is based on the view that we are *not* yet what we pretend to be, namely, free and responsible persons living together on the grounds of justice and fairness. To avoid misunderstandings, let me add that perfectionism in this sense does *not* mean striving to be perfect. Moral perfectionism encompasses both optimistic and melancholic attitudes: One cannot be a moral perfectionist without melancholy – without considering the world and oneself as imperfect – but judging things as imperfect, on the other hand, implies the wish that things should – and could – be better.

In what follows I will not undertake a profound analysis of the bundle of ideas associated with moral perfectionism in the Cavellian sense but, taking Plato's myth of ER as a starting point, confine myself to giving this worldview a certain outline, for two reasons. First, the outline serves to bring out a thematic connection between a number of movies of quite different genres. Second – and more importantly – it emphasizes certain *real* intersubjective conditions of self-knowledge, freedom and responsibility that since the time of Hegel (with the exception of Nietzsche and the American pragmatists) have been rather neglected by academic philosophy. For while the dialogical forms of communication – both as form and content of philosophy – seem to be intimately connected with the beginning of philosophy (the dialogues of Plato featuring Socrates in conversation with his fellow citizens), today most moral philosophers discuss self-consciousness, rationality and responsibility rather as if they were qualities of the individual which could be understood and assessed without reference to his or her relations to others. We have by now resigned ourselves to regarding moral philosophy as a highly professionalized intellectual debate about abstract properties of this abstract individual like the so-called free will (and its compatibility or incompatibility with other abstract ideas like determinism), or, as far as the content of our will is concerned, about no less abstract ideas like the deontological, utilitarian or whatever principles of moral reasoning. True, within the last decades philosophers like Stanley Cavell, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, Bernard Williams and many others have persistently challenged the one-sidedness of the modern paradigms of moral philosophy, emphasizing the need for a philosophical examination of the real (cultural, emotional, intersubjective) conditions of understanding who we are and what we do.⁴ It seems rather odd that this should even need to be said, let alone to require philosophical argumentation. However, it is a fact that thinking along the lines of moral perfectionism has largely shifted to the popular arts. Today the arts seem more suited to addressing these issues. Why this is so should become clear if we look at the gestalt the issue of moral perfectionism takes in its original philosophical context. For

³ Cf. Cavell 2004, p. 2.

⁴ Cf. Murdoch 1970; Blum 1994; Rorty 1989; Nussbaum 1986, 1990 and 1995; Williams 1993.

moral perfectionism is reliant on forms of expression fundamentally different from abstract and systematic thinking. Consequently, Plato, in his first outline of the subject and perspective of moral perfectionism, chooses the form of a myth, the myth of Er.

2. Plato

For my purpose I will take the myth of Er as a kind of extended Pythagorean thought-experiment about what kind of risks and obstacles one may encounter in the process of deciding who one wants to be. (Naturally, I do not claim that this is the only possible interpretation; there is many a moral to be drawn from it.) The story – originally told by the so-called Er – is retold by Socrates to Glaucon at the very close of Plato's famous *Republic*. It tells of a group of souls who have already spent many lives in different bodies and, depending on their behavior in their former life, have resided the last thousand years in either heaven or hell. Now they enter a situation in which all their future life will depend on their own choice: they are allowed to select their own life from among a multitude of so-called *paradeigmata* which seem to represent rather abstract outlines of lives. Rather obviously, this setting invites the reader to think about what it means to be responsible for one's own life. Responsibility must somehow include being able to choose. But what does it mean to choose your own life? What is essential for this choice and what is not? For example, Plato (via Socrates via Er) seems to allow for social inequalities by a special opening: Before the souls may choose among the multitude of outlines, they have to draw lots that determine the succession of choice. Thus, pretty much as it is in real life, in Plato's Pythagorean myth the options for choice are not the same for everybody. Nevertheless, Plato's relater is informed by a divine personality that nobody but the soul herself is responsible for the success or failure of her own life, since there are enough options left for everybody. Choices fail not due to a lack of outer opportunity but rather by reason of the difficulty of recognizing the outlines for what they are, and especially of recognizing how they would turn out for *you*. For what kind of life the paradigm leads to depends not (only) on the abstract nature of the paradigm but also on the personality of the chooser.

This is the basic problem, and in what follows Plato reflects upon it from two perspectives. *First*, he analyzes what *should* be taken into account in order to reach a reasonable decision. *Second*, he examines with regard to several individual cases the psychological causes of wrong decisions – that is, of decisions leading into disaster or, at any rate, to a life well short of the best.

With regard to the first question, Plato lets the relater describe the task as immensely difficult, although not more difficult than it is in real life. For, like Plato's souls, we cannot foresee in detail how the options among which we choose when we decide, for example, in favor of a certain career will turn out for us. We can never rely on a concrete vision of our future in detail, but only on some more or less abstract idea – something like the *paradigmata* of the myth of Er. The mere paradigm as such, however, is neither good nor bad, nor does it necessarily lead to

happiness or unhappiness. The consequences deriving from choosing it depend on the special talents or inabilities, the temper, the aversions and attractions that make up the personality of a soul. And in addition to that, as Plato's relater emphasizes, further factors like poverty or affluence, disease or health might play a decisive role in the process and thus should also be envisaged and taken into account. In sum, a reasonable decision requires a soul possessing sufficient knowledge of herself, including the ability to realistically assess her own talents and disabilities rather than overestimating or underestimating them, and also including sufficient experience or knowledge of how certain types of careers may turn out.

However, with regard to the likelihood of choosing well – our second question – Plato's relater seems to be rather pessimistic. Actually, most people do not decide reasonably, for quite diverse reasons. First, there are the cases of people who are more or less traumatized or daunted by certain experiences they had undergone in their former lives, the examples being taken from Greek mythology. For example, many former heroes preferred the life of an animal, for the simple reason that in their former life they had suffered a gruesome death and lost confidence in their human fellows. Thus Agamemnon, who had been murdered by his wife, chose the life of an eagle, another hero preferred that of a swan.

Nonetheless, these examples are obviously not meant to suggest that people who have not experienced disaster are better prepared to realize how their choices are likely to turn out for them. On the contrary: the most unreasonable decisions are actually made by persons who had no personal experience of violence or injustice, who had done nothing wrong in their former lives, and who had, therefore, spent the last thousand years in mythological heaven. How could that be? As the unburdened and light-hearted do not possess sufficient experience of their own behavior in adverse living conditions, they have no idea of their own complex psychology and easily fall prey to their own unconscious passions. Seen from this angle, it is not as extraordinary as it may seem at first sight that the morally spotless fellow who happened to extract the first lot, chooses promptly the highest – autocratic – position of political power without anticipating its possible consequences, thus ending up as one of the typical tyrants of the Greeks' beloved fantasies of horror who murders and eats his own children. With the benefit of hindsight, one could see that this naive mind could have chosen better had he only thought of the extraordinary virtues an autocrat must possess to keep sight of the requirements of fairness and justice.

In fact, among all the individual cases of choice described in the myth of Er there is only one person who takes a truly reasonable decision: clever Ulysses, who happens to draw the last lot and, having taken the time to contemplate every remaining possibility, finally decides for the inconspicuous life of a man far removed from politics.

Now, these observations by Plato's relater are far below the level of abstraction typical of modern philosophical discussions of responsibility. Instead of postulating human capacities like free will, he talks about the various difficulties that prevent individuals from knowing what they let themselves in for. Of course, this raises the question why it is claimed that all these souls are responsible for their decisions, including the very unreasonable ones. Plato never answers this question

directly but lets Socrates give us some hints. For after having described the many difficulties and obstacles which may prevent a happy decision, Socrates reveals what, nevertheless, may be an option for everybody. Everything, he says, depends on finding a person who can help one to acquire both self-knowledge and knowledge of the world:

Here, it seems, my dear Glaucon, a man`s whole fortunes are at stake. On this account each one of us *should lay aside all other learning, to study only how he may discover one who can give him the knowledge enabling him to distinguish the good life from the evil, and always and everywhere to choose the best within his reach, taking into account all these qualities we have mentioned and how, separately or in combination, they affect the goodness of life.* Thus he will seek to understand what is the effect, for good or evil, of beauty combined with wealth or with poverty and with this or that combination of the soul, or of any combination of high or low birth, public or private station, strength or weakness, quickness of wit or slowness, and any other qualities of mind, native or acquired; until, as the outcome of all these calculations, he is able to choose between the worse and the better life with reference to the constitution of the soul, calling a life worse or better according as it leads to the soul becoming more unjust or more just. (Platon, *Politeia* 618b, Jowett translation).

Since by conversing with the appropriate persons even the dumb and uneducated could attain the required knowledge, and since everybody should be able to enter into conversation, the human being – if we follow this line of thought – appears to be responsible even for his very unreasonableness. While the heroes of Homer had often pleaded “not guilty” for their actions, on the ground that they had acted in a state of bemusement they did not feel responsible for (they transferred responsibility for their states of bemusement rather to the gods), Socrates does not accept this excuse, since everybody can work on and refine his power of judgment by serious conversation.

Seen from this angle, the problem of responsibility looks quite different from the discussions of modern philosophy. It turns out that real responsibility is based not only on the capacities of the single mind but first and foremost on the willingness to share one`s own experiences and examine one`s life by entering into serious conversation. (Of course, this raises the question how a serious conversation differs from types of conversation which are not suitable for examining one`s life – I will come back to this question when discussing the movie *The Man Who Wasn't There*.) This is why Plato lets the storyteller describe the task of looking for such persons, for such conversation, as the most important task of all.

3. Nietzsche: The Emotional Grounds of Perfectionist Rationality

Who would be the person capable of assisting me in examining myself, for the sake of attaining a clear view of who I could be and what I could do in the world? This question cannot be simply answered by the person possessing the greatest

amount of reason in the sense of wisdom or intelligence. For, as even Plato, the author of western rationalism, knew only too well, in most cases there are emotional obstacles to knowledge that cannot be overcome by logic alone. Many people favor a conventional image of themselves over a realistic view. But even a person interested in knowing herself may take pains to preserve her self-delusions. Maybe she is afraid of the truth, maybe she somehow knows that the clear view would not be nearly as flattering as she would hope it to be, maybe she believes herself not to be strong enough to confront her anxieties. That is why, generally speaking, the process of understanding oneself involves emotional and – from the point of view of the person who wants to be deluded – somehow irrational elements, too. Thus, the dialogue partner must be a person who, to me, exhibits the full value of an individual capable of arousing wishes for transformation. If we follow this line of thinking, it turns out that the concept of reason or reasoning, with regard to moral perfectionism, seems intimately linked with the theme of the recognition of other persons as individual selves who matter to me, by whose words I can be deeply touched. With regard to themes of personal concern, reason can only address you through the individual voice of a person you cannot but listen to because she has some standing with you. Its impact derives from the very importance the individual attaches to his dialogue partner, for it is only this high personal esteem, bringing in its wake a vulnerability to feeling inferior and being overpowered by shame, which also engenders a strong motivation for self-transformation.

The emotional and intersubjective grounds of perfectionist rationality are well articulated in Nietzsche's "Schopenhauer as Educator", one of his early *Untimely Meditations*. By choosing the example of Schopenhauer rather than one of his friends, Nietzsche suggests that the transformation, in some cases, is possible even on the grounds of a purely fictive relationship between pupil and educator which he describes as the pupil's *recognizing* the educator as possessing *what he is still lacking*, namely, a consciousness of his distinctive identity and the willingness, free from fear, to express it. Thus, the recognition of the other person as an individual of value and the recognition of one's own identity (in the sense of what truly matters to me) go hand in hand. On one hand, the idea of expressing myself through language does not dawn on me until I experience that sharing a common language, conversing with one another, does *not* necessarily mean repressing one's own identity, but could also mean expressing individual differences. On the other hand, the recognition of the other person as expressing her own different identity is fueled by the desire to claim my own identity, as Nietzsche suggests:

It is difficult to put someone into the state of an undismayed knowledge of herself, since it is impossible to teach love; for by falling into love the soul not only gains the clear, analytical and contemptuous vision of itself but also becomes ambitious to look beyond itself and to do her utmost in the search after a higher self which is hidden somewhere. Thus only the person who sets her

heart on some great human being thereby receives the first consecration of culture ... (Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Ch. 6)⁵

This process involves emotions of a sort one usually would prefer not to have and which, on the surface, look rather destructive. Nietzsche describes a “hatred of one’s own narrowness and shriveled nature”, but also a “feeling of shame without distress”. The shame one feels when faced with one’s “shriveled nature” is not distressful as shame usually is, because it is directed to the kind of self one is now determined to leave behind. Thus, these emotions do not express desolation or masochism, but rather serve as means for the destruction of those aspects of one’s own personality that hinder its moral self-realization.

4. The Comedies of Remarriage

Whereas Plato and Nietzsche consider the intersubjective relationship fundamental to moral perfectionism as necessarily one of inequality (specifically, the inequality between educator and educated), Stanley Cavell has suggested a version of mutual education between equals exemplified by a genre of Hollywood movies (starting in the late 1930`s) he calls the *comedies of remarriage*. The manifest theme of these comedies is the separation and coming together again of a couple. They have been together, have experienced certain happenings which led to their separation and now they have come to a point where they have to find out what they really want (which invariably turns out, according to this genre, to be spending their time together). Within the narrative this means finding out whether the particular nuisances that led to their separation can be overcome, but also realizing what they really want and how important it is for them to be together.

Now, the deeper theme underlying the funny twists and turns of these screwball comedies, according to Cavell, concerns the more general problem of how a person, by the aid of other persons, can develop a sufficient understanding of herself to make a responsible decision. Thus, these comedies are not only about the particular decision of marriage or remarriage but about existential decision in general. According to Cavell, they fulfill the same function that the myth of Er fulfills for Plato, which is to provide a kind of experimental setting that precludes the usual complex external influences from entering the scene and thus allows focusing exclusively on the inner obstacles to self-fulfillment and the good life. At the same time, they explore the kind of relationship that, according to Nietzsche, is necessary for understanding oneself, and thus, for approaching a higher form of self-consciousness, which also means a higher – or less ghost-like – form of moral existence. What speaks in favor of Cavell’s interpretation is that it accounts for the ways in which the lives of the couples in the comedies of remarriage differ from the average life. For example, they are no longer overcome by erotic passion (the leading characters are always a somewhat older and experienced couple), they are rich (and thus financially independent of the partner) and they do not have children. These peculiar features of the comedies may be interpreted as fulfilling the

⁵ See Nietzsche 1980, p. 385.

function of keeping the decision unencumbered by the kind of moral and material pressures which more often than not impinge on separation processes in real life. In Freudian terms one might say that the comedies of remarriage are based on a script that excludes both pressures by the superego and the id. Thus, the persons have to decide for themselves – which means they have to get rid of the self-delusions that prevent them from becoming responsible beings. Moral perfectionism, as Cavell describes it, “detects irrationality in failing to act on one’s desire, or in acting in the absence of sufficient desire, in the case where an act has value (positive or negative) essentially as a function of whether one desires it.”⁶

The twists and turns of both the remarriage comedies *The Philadelphia Story*⁷ and *His Girl Friday*⁸ can be understood as such a process of detecting irrationality as, at the beginning, the leading female character seems firmly convinced that she desires nothing more than getting rid of her former husband (invariably Gary Grant) and starting a new life with the right companion. Within 24 hours, however, after having been tossed around by a somehow accelerated pace of life including certain stormy encounters with her former husband and some initially unwelcome or seemingly unwelcome discoveries about herself, she realizes that she has been deluded in making up her mind to quit and to start something new. Thus, the *Philadelphia Story* starts with a prequel showing Tracy not finding a good word to say to (or for) her despised former husband Dexter who, during their marriage, seems to have turned out an alcoholic and is now thrown out of the house (which gives her the opportunity to see that he is, in addition to his disgusting alcoholism, prone to fits of violence). And two years later, when the narrative starts, she seems no less convinced that she wants to marry the self-made man George. However, in the course of a single day she finds herself performing numerous actions that do not mesh well with what she imagines her feelings and wishes to be. For example, on the eve of her wedding, after an angry and humiliating exchange with her father which led to her having far too many drinks, she doesn’t seem quite her (former) self. She starts a romance with a third person, Mike, and on the next morning, feeling somehow shaken but not unhappy, she bids her fiancé George farewell, declines Mike’s proposal of marriage and remarries her former husband Dexter. And although all these actions and decisions are spontaneously, if not rashly made, not to mention partly induced by drink, by perfectionist standards they are not irrational. It is rather the soberly planned marriage with George that appeared irrational to the sympathetic audience, for it is clearly Dexter and not George (or Mike) who is capable of “opening her eyes” and who, for her, could fulfill the function Plato ascribes to the ideal dialogue partner. For while George admires her for her statuesque beauty and her social finesse but feels annoyed by her newly-discovered tendency toward giddiness and slightly unorthodox behavior, conversation with him is likely to reinforce Tracy’s type of bourgeois statuesque conventionality, while Dexter, *because* he likes her complex and lively personality, does not resign himself to what he considers a susceptibility to self-delusions and moralizing un-

⁶ Cavell 2004, p. 42.

⁷ 1940, directed by George Gukor, starring Katherine Hepburn, Gary Grant and James Stewart.

⁸ 1940, directed by Howard Hawks, starring Rosalind Russell, Gary Grant and Gene Lockhart.

worthy of her. Like Plato's Agamemnon when he chose the life of an eagle, her initial decision in favor of George could hardly be understood as choosing the real person. Maybe she had imagined an abstract idea of a person that appeared attractive for the very reason Agamemnon felt attracted to the life of an eagle: the desire not to repeat the unhappy experiences of the past.

Seen from this angle, the mutual exchange between the leading characters of the comedy of remarriage looks kind of *magical*: It not only brings to light what was hidden to the person herself, thus enabling her finally to overcome falling victim to her own delusions and manipulations of herself, but by that very means serves to *transform* the person, to elevate her to a higher form of self-knowledge and, thereby, of responsibility. Conversation in these comedies is invested with a Hegelian power of transformation: It appears as the medium by which a consciousness is transformed into a new form of self-consciousness representing a somehow higher stage of moral existence. Seen from this perspective, moral perfectionism relates to contemporary discussions of free will somewhat comparable to the way Hegel's philosophy of law relates to Kant's moral philosophy. Hegel, too, criticized the abstractness of Kant's concept of freedom. To say that – in a purely metaphysical sense – it is possible to assume freedom of will, and that it, moreover, is necessary with regard to social and moral purposes, seems highly insufficient, if we want to know to what degree persons like you and me, real persons, are *really* free. According to Hegel, to answer this question one has to consider, on the one hand, the social institutions that create some kind of real freedom – for example, a system of law that bestows a kind of real freedom upon the citizens because it takes away their fear of being attacked by others. This freedom consists in being able to plan one's life in ways quite different from people living in a lawless state. Also, the freedom to do what would make our lives worthwhile according to Hegel's conception of *Sittlichkeit* are dependent on social relations both of justice and of mutual recognition and sympathy. What differentiates moral perfectionism from a Hegelian perspective is, in my eyes, a matter of emphasis; whereas the late Hegel emphasized social institutions, moral perfectionism focuses on conversation between individuals.

5. The Man Who Wasn't There

The examples discussed so far illustrate how both optimism and melancholy are part of the world-view of moral perfectionism. Now, notwithstanding this ambitious nature of all moral perfectionism, with respect to the arts moral perfectionism usually appears in the shape of *either* an optimistic or a melancholic variation. Both complement each other because they fulfill different functions. All versions are based on the idea that we are neither self-sustaining, nor self-transparent beings, but depend essentially on conversation and mutual recognition if we do not want to spend our life, like Ed Crane, as a sequence of incomprehensible happenings – shortly, if we want to understand who we are, what matters to us and what can be done about it. However, the optimistic variation seems to be based on the assumption that perfectionist ambitions can be fulfilled, provided that you are ca-

pable of entering into the kind of mutual exchange with dialogue partners that may enable you to escape from your self-made or conventional entrapments. Thus, typical of the optimistic version is a highly simplified and idealized setting as exemplified by the *comedies of remarriage* mentioned above, a setting that focuses on the exchange between two persons. This exchange is not to be imagined as restricted to a married couple or to friends. As the thriller *Collateral*⁹ illustrates, the perfectionist relation can even hold between a hit man and his hostage or unwilling helper, provided that the setting is appropriately simplified and allows an intensive emotional and intellectual exchange.

In contradistinction to this experimental setting, the melancholic outlook of moral perfectionism is directed to the complexity of real life, thereby complementing the optimistic version. Novels and movies exemplifying this outlook concern (more or less) attempts to realize perfectionist ambitions that turn out abortive, for a wide and complex variety of reasons. For example, the main character in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, or some of the male heroes in the novels of Wilhelm Genazino, represent such a melancholic variant of moral perfectionism. They are perfectionists in the sense that they cannot say yes to a life that they more or less consciously seem to regard as something that has befallen them like an epidemic disease encroaching upon every human contact. All the same, they feel unable to overcome this state of unworthiness, because for the things worth saying they “don't have words for here” (Ed).

Stanley Cavell has called attention to the fact that it can be hardly accidental that around the forties of the twentieth century, at the time when the *comedy of remarriage* reached its highest peak of popular artistry and fame, there evolved another no less artistic genre of rather melancholy movies he called the melodramas of the unknown woman. Now, I will pass on these melodramas here, for the sole reason that they are already discussed in detail by Cavell himself.¹⁰ Instead, in what follows I will focus on the Coen Brothers movie.

To have or not have words decides for Ed the question of being or not-being (in the sense of a mere ghost-like existence, an existence I cannot claim to be my own). But what exactly does he mean by asserting a lack of words? *The Man Who Wasn't There* is about life in a community in which conversation never really seems to go beyond the scope of communicating some elementary facts and somehow filling the time (although people do, indeed, sometimes make some half-hearted attempts at expressing their thoughts). Of course, Ed, his wife Doris, Frank and the other characters talk to each other – in a sense. Actually, there is quite a lot of talking going on. But they do not go to great lengths to communicate – let alone examine – what really interests or disturbs them. For example, somebody will start to speak but leave the sentence unfinished as if it were obvious – or as if it did not matter – what he was going to say.

Thus, Ed and his wife Doris can be taken as the reversal of the couples of the comedies of remarriage. They never separated because they were never really to-

⁹ *Collateral* (2004), directed by Michael Mann, starring Tom Cruise, Jamie Foxx and Jada Pinkett Smith.

¹⁰ Cf. Cavell 2004, Ch. 6, Ch. 12, Ch. 14.

gether. They hardly knew each other before they married, and they remained unknown to each other ever after. But some perfectionist ambitions are indirectly expressed in their melancholy attitudes toward life. They are rather latent than manifest, making a negative appearance in their *dissatisfaction* with life as it is. Doris cannot stand (empty) talk and benumbs herself by drinking; and Ed, for his part, evades talking as much as possible – this mute companionship being the very quality his wife appreciates in him and apparently the reason she has married him. Thus the couple differs from other people by their dislike of conversation. (The only conversation she somehow “likes” seems to be the bullshit hero stories of her boss and lover Dave, which bring some diversion and glamour into everyday life.) They constitute a mute island within a sea of more or less meaningless talk. For most other people around them prefer empty talk, for various reasons. Some talk to occupy space, to draw attention to themselves; others talk for business reasons, because talk serves them as a means to insert certain ideas into the confused minds of potential buyers or clients; and a third group talks incessantly, for angst of emptiness and speechlessness or whatever unknown reasons. Naturally, their jabbering serves to reproduce the feeling of emptiness that may be the cause of their angst.

It is only after the suicide of his wife, when people avoid talking to or looking at him, that Ed realizes clearly for the first time that the lack of being listened to or really spoken to renders his existence somehow ghost-like: “[I]t was like I was a ghost walking down the street”. Still, his former life had not actually been different, since nobody ever noticed him as an individual person. If it happened that somebody approached him, looked him straight into the eyes and seemed to warm up to the occasion to talk to him, it turned out to be a sales representative who wanted to sell something. He had always been the man who wasn’t there: neither there for others, nor for himself; he was not talked to, although he always had to listen to the ceaseless jabbering of his fellows.

The idea of another form of conversation enters the movie in the form of the piano playing of a young girl Ed feels deeply touched by. “That was quite something”, he says to Birdy Abundas, but he never finds out what it was, what it might mean to him. At the beginning, he interprets the strong impression of the music on him somehow as the girl communicating her feelings through her music. And after the sequence of unfortunate happenings has reached a critical point where he realizes his impasse, Ed tries to be for her the perfectionist companion he never had, the companion capable of advising her in time before the traps of conventional life snap shut. “Life has dealt me some bum cards”, he explains, “or maybe I just haven’t played them right, I don’t know.” Now he wants her “to start making opportunities for herself. Before it all washes away.” But when he, much against her own wishes, drags her along to an expert on piano playing, it turns out that it was not her but Beethoven who made himself felt through her dutiful but uninspired playing which, by the expert, is judged “without soul”. Apparently she lacks any perfectionist ambitions at all but rather thinks in terms of being nice. While the idea of another form of life somehow lingers by the knowledge that there exists something like music, the hope for another soul seeking to express herself has turned out a mere projection.

The sequence of events leading to disaster starts when a traveling businessman enters this scene of mute desperation, looking for investors into dry cleaning. Ed spontaneously decides to invest, clutching at straws that let him imagine a possible way out of his dreary life. Thus, it is precisely his unconscious perfectionist ambition that causes the kind of fatal decision Plato's storyteller described as being made without due foresight as to its implications. For in order to obtain the required funds, Ed blackmails Dave, the boss and lover of his – Ed's – wife. This first step, however, triggers off the unforeseeable sequence of events mentioned above, which carries with it that Ed kills this friend in self-defense, leading to Doris's being accused for first-degree murder which in turn ends up with her killing herself in prison. But there is more to come, including Ed's being himself accused and convicted for the murder of the dry cleaning representative who actually had been murdered by his friend Dave.

Since from the conventional perspective of legal proceedings Ed is to be considered quite a sane and responsible person who possesses free will and is capable of distinguishing right from wrong, and since, on the other hand, his (alleged) crimes appear rather cold-blooded and horrifying, the prosecutor, in his pleading, depicts him as a criminal mastermind in a "scheme of diabolical cunning." In contrast to this, Ed's defense counsel Riedenschneider bases his defense strategy upon the obvious fact that he is quite an ordinary person. Ed cannot be a criminal monster, he argues to the jury, because he is just the barber, a common man like you and me:

"He said that I wasn't the kind of guy to kill a guy, that I was the barber for Christ's sake, ... I was just like them, an ordinary man ... Modern Man, and if they voted to convict me, well, they'd be practically cinching the noose around their own necks."

Thus, the defense counsel Riedenschneider appeals to a new kind of barber paradox that suggests something along the following line of thought:

1. Ed is an ordinary simple man like all of you.
2. Ordinary men cannot be not cunning criminals, since cunning criminals are the exception.
3. Thus Ed cannot be a cunning criminal.¹¹

Ed does in fact seem to be a rather ordinary man. Seen from the perspective of moral perfectionism, the sequence of crimes he initiated happened to him like the crimes of the person who, in Plato's myth, drew the first lot. Since Ed never had a chance to enter into real conversation, to find out what he could do to change his life so as to be able to approve of it, he was never really there but felt rather like a ghost haunting his life.

¹¹ Consequently Riemenschneider hints that the crimes must be due so something bigger, something higher, some great conspiracy or the like.

6. The Fate of Hair and Conversation

The destiny of conversation, in this movie, is symbolically reflected in Ed's profession of haircutting, which rather depresses him. Once, Ed makes a futile attempt at expressing what disconcerts him most about his life as a barber:

Ed has been cutting the hair of an eight-year-old boy who reads a comic.

Ed (addressing his boss and brother-in-law Frank): Frank.

Frank: Huh?

Ed: This hair.

Frank: Yeah.

Ed: You ever wonder about it?

Frank: Whuddya mean?

Ed: I don't know ... how it keeps on coming. It just keeps growing.

Frank: Yeah, lucky for us, huh, pal?

Ed: No, I mean, it's growing, it's part of us. And we cut it off. And throw it away.

Frank: Come on, Eddy, you gonna scare the kid.

Ed shuts off the clippers and gives the apron a flap.

Ed: OK, bud, you're through.

The kid hops down, still reading his comic, and ambles out the door. Ed gives Frank a considering stare.

Ed: ...I'm gonna take his hair and throw it out in the dirt.

Frank: What the...

Ed: I'm gonna mingle it with common house dirt.

Frank: What the hell are you talking about?

Ed turns back to the counters to hang back his clippers.

Ed: I don't know. Skip it.

Now, what seems to make Ed feel ill at ease with regard to the hair seems to be the symbolic dimension of the totally indifferent way this very personal, very private thing is thrown away, into the garbage. Somehow the fate of the hair represents their fate as human beings, which is to be cut off from human community the way hair is cut off of the human body, and put away into a grave. Moreover, the conversation about the hair suffers the same fate: it is something personal, something which comes from Ed's personality, an effort to express himself which is not taken up and answered, since Frank has no use for this kind of talking; to him it is bullshit.

Much like the hair, which is a natural adornment of the human body that would be expressive of the difference of bodies and the individuality of persons were it not, by barbers like Ed, cut back to some four or five standard hairstyles, the rest being thrown away, conversation is cut back to some standard communication for practical and conventional purposes. Of course, as I said before, there is also talk going on that does not serve an immediate practical purpose, but this kind

of talk comes to nothing, partly because it was never intended to be more than empty talk, partly because the awkward efforts at expressing oneself are not listened to, not recognized, as in the scene between Ed and Frank. Thus, in Ed's little world, conversation – apart from serving practical everyday purposes – would drift into vacuity.

Now, as it apparently dawned upon Ed when he talked about the fate of the hair, vacuous conversation or empty talk is not accidentally called bullshit. It is associated with excrement, which is – to let Harry Frankfurt have his say – “a representation of death which we ourselves produce,”¹² that is, something as unfit for human nutrition as empty talk is unfit, innutritious for human conversation.

What exactly makes talk appear empty and innutritious? Here we have to distinguish between talk that is not meant to mean anything and talk that is – as in the case of Ed – considered empty not by the speaker but by the recipient, resulting in its being “thrown away”. We may suspect that a state of culture in which conversation aimed at expressing oneself tends to be abortive is, at least partly, a consequence of the widespread intentional use of empty talk (for the various purposes outlined above), spreading the impression that talk that serves no practical purposes is meaningless and futile. If you reckon that your efforts at expressing yourself, at finding the right words in order to transform your vague feelings into a sort of self-understanding, are likely to be mistaken for some sort of vain bullshitting, you are likely to resign yourself to muteness – unless entertaining yourself and your company by bullshitting is, indeed, all that you want.

Would it be overstating the case if we followed this train of thought up to the assumption that, from the perspective of moral perfectionism, the intentional use of words for empty talk constitutes a fundamental danger for human society? If we follow Frankfurt's interpretation of bullshit, or the criticism of empty speech Ralph Waldo Emerson advanced in his well-known “Self-Reliance”,¹³ the initially quite harmless-seeming activity of bullshitting turns out to be at least as hazardous to human society as lying was considered to be by philosophers like Augustine, Thomas, the modern contractualists and Kant. Starting from the Augustinian assumption that lying means denying the natural purpose of language, namely the communication of our thoughts, Kant had claimed that it violates a kind of implicit contract between the users of language and thus heavily endangers the trust between the members of a community. Since all truly human relations are based on this trust, lying, according to Kant, is expressive of a merely feigned personality, not of a real (moral) person.¹⁴ If we follow this line of thought, the liar, by secretly interchanging the real with something unreal, is endangering our access to reality.

¹² Cf. Frankfurt 1988, p. 127.

¹³ With regard to Emerson cf. Cavell 2004, Ch. 1 and pp. 212-218.

¹⁴ “Wer lügt, verwendet die Sprache gegen die Intention von Sprachlichkeit: “[...] die Mitteilung seiner Gedanken an jemanden durch Worte, die doch das Gegenteil von dem (absichtlich) enthalten, was der Sprechende dabei denkt, ist ein der natürlichen Zweckmäßigkeit seines Vermögens der Mitteilung seiner Gedanken gerade entgegen gesetzter Zweck, mithin Verzichtung auf seine Persönlichkeit und eine bloß täuschende Erscheinung vom Menschen, nicht der Mensch selbst.” Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Zweites Hauptstück, 1. Von der Lüge, § 9, in: *Kants Werke*, Akademie Textausgabe VI, Berlin, New York 1968.

To be sure, there is much to be said both against Kant's strict moral condemnation of lying come what may and against his analysis of its disastrous consequences. On one hand, there may be strong and even moral reasons for lying that we do accept without losing trust. On the other hand, as Plato has pointed out, the liar is not less, but even more concerned with reality and truth, for persons (like Odysseus) who invent a lie must know the truth or, at least, have taken some efforts to know it, while people (like Achilles) who never (intentionally) lie are rather less careful in handling the truth.¹⁵ True, Plato did not have in mind what Augustine called the true liar, the liar who tells a lie for the sake of lying, "rejoicing in the falsehood itself".¹⁶ But, in contrast to the indisputable existence of people rejoicing in bullshit itself, one might doubt the existence (or, at least, the frequent occurrence) of this type of liar. Thus the danger of forfeiting our access to reality, according to Plato and Frankfurt, lies not in lying but rather in bullshitting:

"[Telling] lies does not tend to unfit a person for telling the truth in the same way that bullshitting tends to. Through excessive indulgence in the latter activity, which involves making assertions without paying attention to anything except what it suits one to say, a person's normal habit of attending to the ways things are may become attenuated or lost [...] By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are."¹⁷

Whereas Frankfurt in his well-known analysis of bullshit was concerned about a speech that is innutritious because it is not aimed at truth,¹⁸ *The Man Who Wasn't There* is about a world in which speech, even if it is, somehow, aimed at truth, comes to nothing.

What kind of world is this? The idea rather suggests itself that the omnipresence of bullshit and abortive talk in the movie is meant to characterize the world of "modern man", as Ed's defense counsel calls it. As Frankfurt has hinted, the extent of bullshit is somehow a function of the expectations of the social and political context. After all, bullshit is "unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about."¹⁹ Quite obviously, the discrepancy between talking and knowing is heightened in political systems or cultural contexts where people are expected to entertain opinions about matters of which they are (at least to some degree) ignorant. Thus, one can fairly safely assume that bullshit is rather promoted in the kind of modern democracy that is understood to mean that all people are equal with regard to their capacity to form opinions and that it is the moral duty of a responsible citizen to actually form opinions about everything of possible interest.

¹⁵ Cf. Platon, *Hippias II*.

¹⁶ Augustinus, *Contra Mendacium*, quoted according to Frankfurt 1988, p. 131.

¹⁷ Cf. Frankfurt 1988, p. 132.

¹⁸ Frankfurt describes *bullshit* and other forms of *empty talk* as "one of the most salient features of our culture". Cf. Frankfurt 1988, p. 117.

¹⁹ Frankfurt 1988, p. 132.

By this I do not mean to suggest that *The Man Who Wasn't There* is meant as a criticism of modern democracy as a political system. There might be quite other and maybe even more forceful reasons for the promotion of bullshit in other types of social systems. What I mean is that the movie quite beautifully applies Plato's perspective of moral perfectionism to the gap between the modern fiction of the autonomous and responsible person and modern life.

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