

Celebration of 'The Ordinary' in the American Philosophy of Cavell & Japanese Thought

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Introductory Remarks

This essay is intended as a brief introduction to the contemporary American philosophy of Professor Stanley Cavell of Harvard University. It was written on the basis of a few class lectures for my Japanese students when I was a Fulbright Professor at the University of Tokyo during the 2003-04 academic year. Here I will highlight Cavell's effort to recover the mid-nineteenth century tradition of American philosophy including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau from the standpoint of the ordinary language philosophy of John Austin and the later Wittgenstein. In this context I underscore how Cavell thematizes the notion of "the ordinary" in American transcendentalism. More specifically, Cavell undertakes a quest for the ordinary in American philosophy and its rediscovery of "the ordinary as sublime." He further develops his philosophy of the ordinary in terms of what he calls "Emersonian perfectionism," whereby perfection is not escape from or transcendence of the ordinary in an other-worldly beyond, nor is achievement of a final state of perfection in the future, but instead consists in experiencing the sublime in the ordinary. Cavell goes on to explore the wonder of the ordinary in Emersonian perfectionism through his books on philosophy of film, including the genres which he calls Hollywood comedies of remarriage (*Pursuits of Happiness*, 1981) and Hollywood melodramas of the unknown woman (*Contesting Tears*, 1989), as well as other art forms that he regards as precursors to classic Hollywood golden age movies, including Ibsen's plays, Shakespearean drama, opera, and popular culture.

Stanley Cavell is to be ranked among the most original and significant among contemporary American philosophers. Although the philosophical writings of Cavell are not yet well-known in Japan, Professor Saito Naoko of Kyoto University will soon publish her new Japanese translation of Cavell's study of Thoreau and Emerson titled *The Senses of Walden*, as well as her own book in English on the American philosophy of education of Emerson, Dewey and Cavell, titled *The Gleam of Light* (Fordham University Press / Forthcoming).

While Cavell's writings are now beginning to attract a growing field of interpretive literature, his thought has not yet been extended into the area of east-west comparative philosophy in general and Japanese modes of thought in particular. Hence, in the present essay, for the very first time, I will suggest a most significant point of contact between Cavell and Japanese thought regarding the notion of the ordinary, or as it were, the wonder of the ordinary—the celebration of the ordinary as sublime.

It should be clarified at the outset how the present essay is just a preliminary sketch of a more comprehensive, detailed, text-based study of various east-west parallels between Cavell's

American philosophy of the ordinary and certain aspects of Japanese modes of thought, especially focusing on Zen and its reformulation by Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), founder of the Kyoto school of modern Japanese philosophy. It will here be discussed how both the American philosophy of Stanley Cavell, as well as Zen and the modern Japanese philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, all alike culminate with a celebration of the ordinary in everyday life.

Quest for the Ordinary in Cavell's Philosophy

The unifying theme for Cavell's works is indicated by the title of one of his many books: *In Quest of the Ordinary* (1988). Cavell arrived at his insights into the ordinary from what is known as the tradition of "ordinary language philosophy" as represented by John Austin and the later Wittgenstein. In his works such as *Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell did much to stimulate interest in ordinary language philosophy in America. These works develop ordinary language philosophy as a response to the threat of skepticism, the doubting of self, others, and the world, a denial of the ordinary that results in nihilism, tragedy, and despair. For Cavell, ordinary language philosophy shows the response to skeptical doubt as avoidance or rejection of the ordinary is that of returning to the ordinary, including ordinary forms of language and ordinary forms of life, thereby to recover intimate relationships with self, others and the world. However, he went on to establish links between ordinary language philosophy and American transcendentalism. He further extended his philosophy of the ordinary through analysis of American film, as well as literature, theater, opera, Shakespearean drama, and popular culture, thereby resulting in his aesthetic vision of the ordinary as sublime.

Developing his theme of Emersonian perfectionism, Cavell describes Emerson's famous notion of "self-reliance" as discovery of one's own inner genius as original inspiration from the "gleam of light" in aversion to mass conformity of the herd. Cavell describes this discovery of one's inner genius as finding one's own intellectual voice. Autobiographically recounting the discovery of his own philosophical voice, he writes: "I began finding my intellectual voice in the work of the so-called philosophers of *ordinary language*, J. L. Austin at Oxford and the later Wittgenstein" (1994, APP 6). Cavell here cites Wittgenstein's memorable words from *Philosophical Investigations*: "What we do is lead words back from their metaphysical to their *everyday use*" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 116). Elsewhere, Cavell notes: "Wittgenstein is speaking of this, as I have come to see it, in noting that in philosophy . . . our words get away from . . . our everyday lives" (1988, 196). Connecting this to Austin's everyday language philosophy, Cavell proceeds: "How we 'lead words back' to their everyday use may be said to be done by following Austin's apparently innocuous directive to ask ourselves *what we say when* (that is, in varying contexts)" (1994, APP 7).

While Cavell discovered the meaning of the ordinary through the methodological procedures of ordinary language philosophy established by John Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, he went on to explore the discovery of the ordinary and everyday in the American transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Furthermore, he links the ordinary language philosophy of Austin and Wittgenstein, along with the American transcendentalism of

Emerson and Thoreau, with European existentialism.

One of Emerson's memorable essays was titled "Circles," wherein human perfection was vividly depicted through the image of *expanding circles*, where "around every circle another can be drawn." For Cavell, as for Emerson and Thoreau, transcendence is not achievement of a final perfection, nor is it escaping into an other-worldly beyond, but always means *to experience the sublime in the ordinary*. Cavell often points out how Emersonian perfectionism articulated in Emerson's "Circles" was itself deeply influential upon the existentialism of Nietzsche, whose overman is continually striving toward self-overcoming of nihilism through ecstatic affirmation of life. In the expanded edition of *The Senses of Walden*, which includes his meditation on Thoreau's *Walden* as well as several essays on Emerson, Cavell explains the relation he sees between ordinary language philosophy and the American transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau by reference to Emerson's much celebrated essay, "The American Scholar" (1837), known as the American philosophical declaration of independence.

It is well-known that Emerson, Thoreau, and others in the tradition of American Transcendentalism endeavored to incorporate into their worldview the tradition of Indian philosophy, including aspects of both Hinduism and Buddhism. While Cavell does not typically refer to the influence of Indian philosophy on American transcendentalism, in one suggestive passage he writes: "By 'embracing the common,' by 'sitting at the feet of the low,' this student [Emerson] of Eastern philosophy must mean that he takes the familiar and the low as his study, as his guide, his guru" (1981, 147). Cavell hereby clarifies how for Emerson, as for Thoreau, the guru or yogic spiritual guide is the appearance of the wonder in the ordinary, the common, the low, the plain, the familiar, the everyday, the pedestrian. In this context Emerson is now furthermore cited as saying:

I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic. . . I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today. . . (1981, 143)

Reflecting on Emerson's passage, Cavell goes on to say:

Something Emerson means by the common, the familiar, and the low [=the ordinary] is something I have meant, from the beginning to the end of the work I have so far accomplished, in my various defenses of proceeding in philosophy from *ordinary language*, from words of *everyday life*. In practice this has often meant, especially in the first decade of my writing, defending the procedures. . . of J. L. Austin of Oxford, and in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. . . They remain for me the guiding sources of, at a minimum, of what is still known as *ordinary language philosophy* (1981, 142-143; italics added).

Cavell's application to methods, concepts, themes and problems of ordinary language philosophy to the thought of Emerson and Thoreau resulted in a profound illumination of the American

philosophical tradition as a “quest for the ordinary,” resulting in a discovery of the wonder of the ordinary.

Cavell further relates the ordinary language philosophy of Austin and the later Wittgenstein, along with the American transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, to the existentialism of Kierkegaard, here making reference to “what Kierkegaard calls the perception of the sublime in the everyday” (1981, 150). Elsewhere, Cavell explains Kierkegaard’s celebration of the ordinary as sublime by the Knight of Faith: “And this is the Kierkegaard whose Knight of Faith alone achieves not exactly the everyday, but ‘the sublime in the pedestrian’ (*Fear and Trembling*, 52)” (Cavell, 1989, 52). According to Kierkegaard’s existentialist philosophy, whereas the Knight of Resignation must abandon the ordinary through detachment in order to attain the sublime, the Knight of Faith undergoes a leap of faith, thus to undergo a double movement, whereby through abandonment one lets go of the common, only to again return to the familiar, ordinary, and commonplace events of everyday life, but now transformed into the ordinary as sublime! Thus, in Cavell’s understanding of Kierkegaard’s existentialism, the Knight of Faith does not just return to the ordinary life in the sense of banal, mundane, existence—but instead discovers *the sublime in the ordinary* as the locus of human transformation and perfection. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927) holds that realization of authentic selfhood requires transcendence of inauthentic existence as everydayness, or ordinariness, the herd existence of mass conformity in commonplace life. Cavell writes: “Gerede is the word Heidegger uses in *Being and Time* to name Dasein’s everyday (hence, for Heidegger, our average, inauthentic) modes of Being and understanding” (1988, xi). However, as said by Epsen Hammer in his work *Stanley Cavell*,

But unlike Heidegger, Cavell refuses to link inauthenticity and everydayness. As opposed to the model developed in *Being and Time*, in which everydayness, or the ordinary, is essentially marked by inauthenticity, and hence according to which authenticity demands departure [from the ordinary], the Emersonian (or Wittgensteinian) mode calls for a return [to the ordinary]. (Hammer, 2002, 135).

Heidegger speaks of inauthentic existence as everydayness, ordinariness, commonness, whereupon the authentic existence, by opposition and reversal, becomes overcoming the everyday, the ordinary, the common. Yet by reversal, Cavell now calls for an Emersonian/Kierkegaardian return to the ordinary, not as the banal or mundane, but the transfigured ordinary as the wondrous and sublime.

In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell expresses this notion of the ordinary as sublime, or the relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary, as follows:

The wish to be extraordinary, exceptional, unique, thus reveals the wish to be ordinary, everyday. . . . So both the wish for the exceptional and the wish for the everyday are foci of romanticism. One can think of romanticism as the discovery that the everyday

is an exceptional achievement. Call it the achievement of the human. . . . Think of the spectacle of the likes of Rousseau, and Thoreau and Kierkegaard and Tolstoy and Wittgenstein going around hoping to be ordinary, preaching the everyday as the locale of the sublime! (1979, 463).

Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* analyzes a genre he calls "Hollywood comedies of remarriage." It identifies seven classic, golden age Hollywood films from the 1930s-1940s, based on a mode of conversation aimed toward education and transformation in everyday family life wherein marriage is regarded as the symbol of the ordinary, including: "The Lady Eve," "It Happened One Night," "Bringing Up Baby," "The Philadelphia Story," "His Girl Friday," "Adam's Rib," and "The Awful Truth." Pointing out Wittgenstein's great admiration for Kierkegaard, Cavell here illuminates Wittgensteinian's return to the ordinary, including ordinary language and ordinary forms of life, in terms of "what Kierkegaard calls the perception of the sublime in the everyday" (1981, 15). Cavell then asserts: "Here I should like to add that without the mode of perception inspired in Emerson (and Thoreau) by the everyday, the near, the low, the familiar, one is bound to be blind to some of the best poetry of film, to a sublimity in it" (1981, 15). In his book *Stanley Cavell*, Espen Hammer sums up Cavell's analysis his film genre called Hollywood remarriage comedies as follows: "Thus the affirmation of marriage through remarriage . . . figures as *an appreciation of the ordinary* as such, *the redemption of dailiness*. In Cavell's Nietzschean-Kierkegaardian vision of joy, the life of the ordinary-ordinary-life receives its ecstatic affirmation in the bliss of the shared joke. "The moment of laughter and song becoming one another is the voice in which I imagine the conversation of marriage aspired to in these comedies to be conducted" (Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 263). Moreover, Cavell develops all of these insight in terms of his theme of Emersonian perfectionism, whereby the Austin-Wittgenstein ordinary language philosophy, the Nietzschean-Kierkegaardian existentialism, and the Emerson-Thoreau American transcendentalism, altogether are synthesized into his aesthetic vision of the ordinary as sublime. Here space does not allow a detailed exposition of Cavell's analysis of film as an aesthetic discovery, transformation, and celebration of the ordinary. But his exploration of American cinema forms a significant part of Cavell's effort to move from avoidance or skeptical doubt of self, others and world in order to escape from or transcend the ordinary, which he further argues in that Shakespearean drama is shown to result in tragedy, toward the acknowledgement of self, others and world through affirmation of the ordinary—the ordinary as sublime, the sublime in the ordinary.

The Ordinary in Cavell and Japanese Thought

As indicated previously, the present essay is a preliminary sketch for a more comprehensive, detailed study of various east-west parallels between Cavell's American philosophy of the ordinary and certain aspects of Japanese modes of thought, including Zen and its reformulation in the modern Japanese philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945). Here I will just briefly

indicate the relevance of Japanese thought to Cavell's philosophy of the ordinary. While many Eastern religions aim to escape from or transcend the ordinary, Zen affirms the nonduality of enlightenment with the ordinary and the everyday. Indeed, as will be argued below, a distinctive feature of Japanese thought, including Zen and the modern Japanese philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, is how both celebrate the wonder of the ordinary as sublime. Moreover, it should be pointed out that while the present essay underscores parallels between Cavell, Zen and Nishida philosophy on celebration of the ordinary, the parallels between Cavell and Japanese Shin/Pure Land Buddhism is equally significant. In his development of Emersonian perfectionism as experiencing the ordinary in the sublime, Cavell quotes the writings of Kierkegaard. However, if one follows Kierkegaard's Lutheran theological notion of salvation by faith and grace alone, it becomes clear how in Japanese Buddhism it is especially the Shin/Pure Land tradition of Shinran, whereby salvation/enlightenment is a function of *shinjin* or "faith," that most approximates Kierkegaard's existential theology of faith, and moreover, what in both Kierkegaard and Shinran's Pure Land Buddhism is understood as a leap of faith. But in Nishida's last writings, he argues how in traditional Japanese culture, both Zen and Pure Land Buddhism culminate in a religious celebration of the ordinary, while also making reference to Kierkegaard's thought as a Western standpoint by means of which to articulate both the Zen and Shin/Pure Land traditions of Japanese Buddhist philosophy. Cavell's distinctively American philosophy of the ordinary, arrived at by integration of the British ordinary language philosophy of Austin and latter Wittgenstein, the Continental existentialism of Kierkegaard-Nietzsche, and the American transcendentalism of Emerson-Thoreau, all of these being synthesized into his American concept of Emersonian perfectionism, as experience of the sublime in the ordinary.

As stated by Van Meter Ames in his chapter on Emerson in his book *Zen and American Thought*: "Zen celebrates the wonder of the ordinary" (1962, 13). He adds that while it is often erroneously assumed that wisdom involves turning away from the ordinary to find something higher, Zen sees the wonder of the ordinary, the common, and the familiar. And indeed, this thematization of the wonder of the ordinary permeates the whole Sino-Japanese tradition of Zen/Chan Buddhism. In his famous book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Suzuki Shunryu Roshi, who established the first Zen monastic retreat center in America, thematizes the ordinary, everyday and commonplace in Sōtō Zen Buddhist thought and practice established by Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253). Suzuki Roshi asserts: "Zazen practice and everyday activity are one thing. We call *zazen* everyday life, and everyday life *zazen*" (1970: NY/Tokyo. Weatherhill, 118–119). Elsewhere he states: "Buddha . . . is not different from ordinary mind. And ordinary mind is not something apart from what is holy" (2002, 59).

In his book *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, Dale S. Wright underscores the key Zen/Chan teachings of Huang Po (J. Obaku, circa 850 A. D.), according to which: "Everyday mind is the way" (Chinese: *p'ing ch'ang hsin shih tao*; Japanese: *Heijō shin kore michi nari*), writing: "'Everyday mind is the way' is posited as a corrective to monastic otherworldliness" (2002, 162). The Zen affirmation of the ordinary and everyday is also seen in the Zen aesthetics of *wabi* underlying the traditional Japanese sense of beauty. As Alan Watts asserts in *The Way*

of Zen: “When the artist . . . catches a glimpse of something rather ordinary and unpretentious in its incredible ‘suchness’, the mood is called *wabi*” (1985, 181).

The modern philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) likewise thematizes the Zen celebration of the ordinary and everyday. Nishida’s early philosophy of “pure experience” (J. *junsui keiken*), or “immediate experience” (J. *chokusetsu keiken*), understood as the continuum of life prior to subject-object dualism, further comprehended as the flow of qualitative immediacy, was itself deeply influenced by the radical empiricism of William James in American philosophy. Nishida later reformulates his idea of reality as pure experience prior to bifurcation of subject and object or matter and mind in terms of his Zen concept of the dynamic, holistic Field (J. *basho*) of nothingness (*mu*) or emptiness (*kū*). In his final work, translated into English as *The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and a Religious Worldview (Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan*, 1945), Nishida Kitarō proclaims the ultimacy of the ordinary and everyday in the Sino-Japanese tradition of Zen. Chan Buddhism when he asserts: “There is only what Zen calls the commonplace and conventional—“*The way of enlightenment is the ordinary and the everyday*” (1987, 108). Again: “And it is the extremely “ordinary and everyday” standpoint that Zen celebrates . . . The Buddha-dharma . . . *is only the ordinary and everyday*” (1987, 108). Nishida argues that the neo-Platonic tradition underlying Western mysticism, itself aimed to escape from and transcend the ordinary in an otherworldly beyond, and therefore did not attain to “a religious celebration of the ordinary and everyday as we find in the Zen tradition” (1987, 109). Nishida then asserts: “Now in my logic [of emptiness/nothingness], absolute negation functions to affirm the religious character of the ordinary human experience, not to negate it” (1987, 112). Again and again, Nishida makes reference to what he calls: “the Zen celebration of ordinary human experience” (1987, 111). For Nishida, the pure experience of nothingness or emptiness is the flux of qualitative immediacy, the direct experience of pure qualities of lived events just as they are in the absolute present in emptiness/suchness. Yet what most scholars of Nishida’s philosophy have failed to notice is that his thought culminates in the Zen/Chan notion that “Ordinary mind is the way.” Hence, according to the modern Japanese philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, as for Zen, the flow of pure experience in the locus of nothingness culminates in the religious celebration of the ordinary and everyday.

Concluding Statement

If in Eastern philosophy the concept of the ordinary has been illuminated most of all by the Sino-Japanese tradition of Zen/Chan Buddhism and its reformulation in the modern Japanese philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, in Western philosophy in general and American philosophy in particular, it is Stanley Cavell who has done most to thematize and problematize the concept of the ordinary, the common, the familiar, the everyday. Zen finds enlightenment through meditation on ordinary events just as they are in their emptiness/suchness. Cavell’s brilliant original synthesis of analytic ordinary language philosophy, existentialism and American transcendentalism as unified by his theme of Emersonian perfectionism aims to overcome the nihilistic threat of philosophical skepticism, and its expression in Shakespearean tragic drama, along with other

art forms depicting tragedy arising through skeptical denial of the ordinary, by wondrous return to the ordinary as the locus of transformation. In the end, the thought systems of both Cavell and Zen, as well as the modern Japanese philosophy of Nishida, altogether culminate in a breakthrough insight into the celebration of the everyday, the wonder of the commonplace, and the ordinary as sublime.

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