



**Universität  
Zürich** <sup>UZH</sup>

Institute of Philosophy  
Doctoral Program "Philosophy – Language, Mind and Practice"

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Master Class

**Emersonian Moral Perfectionism**

**Stephen Mulhall**

New College, Oxford University

**10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> July 2015**

## Synopsis

Perfectionism in Moral philosophy is often understood as aiming to maximise the realization of certain privileged and cultivated styles of life (which are viewed as being of intrinsically greater worth than other, more common or vulgar styles), and so as regarding certain people (those capable of leading such valuable lives) as being of greater worth than others. What Stanley Cavell calls Emersonian Moral Perfectionism is very different: he sees in the work of Emerson and Thoreau a distinctive American expression of a register of moral discourse and thought that has inflected Western culture since Plato, and which is not only anti-elitist, but forms a vital part of any genuinely liberal democratic understanding of the relation between the individual and society. This version of moral perfectionism is concerned neither with the claims of justice nor the calculation of welfare nor the cultivation of character, but with the transfiguration of the self and its society: it pictures the self as on a journey that begins when it finds itself disoriented or lost, no longer able to make sense of itself and its world, and its recovery from that lostness requires a refusal of the present state of society in the name of some further, more cultivated state of both self and society. Cavell argues that this species of moral perfectionism has been misunderstood, and so has become increasingly recessive, in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy (except amongst some of that tradition's more radical critics such as Wittgenstein); but it has continued to find systematic expression over the last century or so in the traditions of what is still called 'Continental Philosophy' (particularly in the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger), and in the field of aesthetics (in literature, but also in Hollywood film).

In this series of four seminars, I want to explore Cavell's understanding of the nature of this Emersonian inflection of perfectionist thinking; his critique of those who reject such perfectionism as an affront to moral equality and democratic political aspirations; his reasons for regarding Nietzsche and Heidegger as perfectionist thinkers; and his perception of mainstream American cinema as providing a home for perfectionist understandings of moral and political life. This will involve a critical evaluation of the distinctive conceptions of selfhood and social relations that perfectionism embodies, as well as its conviction that works of art and works of philosophy can and should be seen as having perfectionist dimensions, and so require us to re-conceive our presuppositions about the relations between morality, art and philosophy in the economy of our culture and forms of life.

## **Programme**

### **Friday, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2015**

9:30 – 12:30 The Nature of Emersonian Moral Perfectionism

14:30 – 18:30 Mill and Heidegger as Perfectionist Thinkers

### **Saturday, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2015**

9:30 – 12:30 Perfectionism, Philosophy and Film

14:30 – 18:30 Comedies and Melodramas

**Registration:** [phd@philos.uzh.ch](mailto:phd@philos.uzh.ch)

**Details:** <http://www.philosophie.uzh.ch/doktorat/meisterkurse.html>

**Venue:** Philosophisches Seminar, Zürichbergstrasse 43, 8044 Zürich

**Room:** ZUP-U-8

**No fees apply, but please note that participants are expected to have done the reading of the texts. PhD students at the UZH are required to book the module in order to get credit points.**

## Schedule and Readings

### Seminar 1: The Nature of Emersonian Moral Perfectionism

We will examine Cavell's attempts to define this perfectionist perspective by invoking work of Emerson and Nietzsche, and contesting Rawls' famous and influential indictment of Nietzschean perfectionism as elitist and contrary to justice.

R. Emerson: The American Scholar, in *Essays and Lectures*, The Library of America, 1983.

-- 'Self-Reliance', in *Essays and Lectures*, The Library of America, 1983.

F. Nietzsche: Schopenhauer as Educator, in R. Hollingdale (trans.): *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, 1983.

J Rawls: *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, 1971, section 50.

S. Cavell: *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Chicago, 1990, Introduction, lectures 1 and 3.

J. Conant: Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*, in R. Schacht (ed.): *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*. Cambridge, 2001.

### Seminar 2: Mill and Heidegger as Perfectionist Thinkers

Mill's work on liberty and Heidegger's existential analytic of Dasein can both be understood as expressions of moral perfectionism, on Cavell's understanding of that tradition. This seminar will critically evaluate the legitimacy of this understanding.

J.S. Mill: *On Liberty* ch 3.

-- *Utilitarianism*, ch 4.

M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*, sections 1-4, 25-7, 46-53.

S. Cavell: *Cities of Words*, Cambridge, 2004, ch 5.

S. Mulhall, *Routledge Guidebook to Heidegger and Being and Time*, Introduction, ch. 2 and 5.

### Seminar 3: Perfectionism, Philosophy and Film

This seminar will examine Cavell's basic approach to the relation between philosophy and film, and his notion of a film genre, as the first step in understanding his argument that two genres of Hollywood film embody a perfectionist understanding of morality.

S. Cavell: *The World Viewed*, Cambridge, 1979, ch. 1-4.

S. Cavell: *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cambridge, 1981, Introduction, ch. 1 and 4.

*The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges: 1941)

*Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor: 1940)

### Seminar 4: Comedies and Melodramas

This seminar will complete our examination of what Cavell calls 'Comedies of Remarriage' and 'Melodramas of the Unknown Woman'.

S. Cavell: *Contesting Tears*, Chicago, 1996, Introduction, ch 3 and 2.

*Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper: 1942).

*Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls: 1948).