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Teaching in a Crisis and in the Ordinary: Knowledge and Acknowledgement in Teacher Education

TAKAYANAGI Mitsutoshi Faculty of Education, Shinshu University

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1. Introduction: Does Teacher Preparation Prepare Students to Teach?

It has long been said that teacher education, mostly teacher preparation training in higher education, does not work effectively in preparing students ready to tackle various problems in a real classroom. Sato, based on two representative survey results, cautions that the majority of in-service teachers, including novice teachers, believe that their university education has a lower impact on their teaching competence than their colleague teachers or students (Sato, 1992, 164-165).¹ Sato and Asanuma concluded that traditional knowledge-based education in universities falls short of helping students to 'tackle real-life problems' because they hardly had chance to develop 'problem-solving inquiry techniques' or to integrate 'different areas of knowledge within a real social context' (Sato and Asanuma, 2000, 120).

It is implied that despite various attempts at education in Japan for more than thirty years, the teacher preparation system remains irrelevant to the difficulties that teachers actually face in their classrooms. Fujita states:

Since the 1980s a tide of education reform movements has emerged in many countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan and reframed the policy discourse on evaluating and organizing public education. This new framework has placed more emphasis on freedom rather than equality, and quasi-public (or superficial) accountability rather than responsibility for our children and community. More confidence has been bested in market efficiency rather than intrinsic educational value, and direct managerial control rather than the professional expertise of autonomous teachers (Fujita, 2007, 52).

He also says:

The ideologies behind reformism are wrought with irony and illogical. The current reform initiatives and proposals seek to address crises that do not exist and rather will

give rise to unforeseen educational crises (ibid.).

To understand the phrase ‘crises that do not exist’ as referred to above, it needs to be recalled that teachers are often targeted as scapegoats in educational arguments: In Fujita’s words, ‘Japanese schools and teachers . . . have been under relentless attack from various stakeholders since the 1980s’ (50). To those critics, teachers are helpless during crises in education, such as school-disorder problems. Furthermore, teachers’ professional standing itself is under attack. This would explain why education reform tends to praise market efficiency and underestimate intrinsic educational value practised by teachers, addressing centralised managerial and administrative control whilst debilitating teachers’ autonomy. As a result, ‘unforeseen educational crises’ emerge: according to Fujita, the teaching profession these days has become ‘extremely busy and physically demanding’ and ‘tends to exploit one’s own life extensively’ (52). ‘[M]any teachers have become confused trying to make sense of their roles and lost confidence in being teachers, intellectuals and role models for children’ (50). They feel ‘tired chronically’ and ‘unhappy, isolated, hopeless’, ‘desiring to leave the profession’ (52).

What is implied here is that in discussing education, a crisis is often misidentified and, consequently, a venture to reform education might result in aggravating the condition of the people who actually count in educational practices. Therefore, Fujita cautions that ‘Stakeholders must ask themselves if there is a need for reform after close examination of the realities of education’ (53). Revisiting our initial concern, then, what kind of reform is necessary and plausible for a teacher preparation programme in terms of its significance to a crisis that students will face in a classroom in the future? To explore into this question, this paper will, firstly, have a look at a teacher’s memoir and revisit the characteristics of the crisis that the teacher actually confronted. Secondly, based on the understanding of the teacher’s crisis, it will explore why many efforts in teacher education reform fail to make sense with respect to helping teacher’s experience and ordinary conduct. Finally, it will discuss how teacher education could possibly respond to the crisis, with the awareness of traits and peculiarities that the profession holds.

2. Teacher’s Crisis in Classroom: from the Memoir *Teacher Man*

Angela’s Ashes, a memoir primarily focused on the author’s childhood in Ireland, was published in 1996 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography and Autobiography in 1997. At that time, namely, when Frank McCourt became the author of his first book, he was sixty-six years old. For the preceding thirty years, he had been teaching in New York City high schools, mostly English and sometimes creative writing. In his third book, *Teacher Man*, in which he writes about his days as a teacher, he asks himself about his late start as a writer

and asks, 'So, what took you so long?' He stated:

'I was teaching, that's what took me so long. . . When you teach five high school classes a day, five days a week, you're not inclined to go home to clear your head and fashion deathless prose. After a day of five classes your head is filled with the clamor of the classroom (McCourt, 2005, 3).

There is no easy answer as to whether he had the potential to become a writer and the clamour prevented him from actually writing, or if his undertaking of teaching five classes a day, five days a week, for thirty years, made him a real writer. The fact remains, though that he went through it and wrote about his experience as a teacher. For example, after depicting the troublesome class in a vocational high school on the first day of his teaching career, McCourt inserted his self-confessional statement:

Mea culpa

. . . They thought I was teaching.

I thought I was teaching.

I was learning.

. . . I was more than a teacher. And less. In the high school classroom you are a drill sergeant, a rabbi, a shoulder to cry on, a disciplinarian, a singer, a low-level scholar, a clerk, a referee, a clown, a counselor, a dress-code enforcer, a conductor, an apologist, a philosopher, a collaborator, a tap dancer, a politician, a therapist, a fool, a traffic cop, a priest, a mother-father-brother-sister-uncle-aunt, a bookkeeper, a critic, a psychologist, the last straw (19).

Readers might be overwhelmed by labour and complexity of teaching that McCourt, if sarcastically, revealed. If being a teacher burdens one with such multiple and excessive strains, some may wonder, how could he possibly stay in the profession for that long? McCourt also asked himself, 'At the end I wondered how I lasted that long'(11). And it does not seem to be appropriate to seek one simple reason for his remaining in the thirty-year long career. Close to the ending of *Teacher Man*, however, the narrator, who is just about to retire, gave some advice to a young substitute teacher. In a lively way, it tells how he had tackled with difficulty of starting the job and sticking to it.

You're on your own in the classroom, one man or woman facing five classes everyday, five classes of teenagers. One unit of energy against one hundred and seventy-five units of energy, one hundred and seventy-five ticking bombs, and you have to find ways of

saving your own life. . . You can be knocked out or gored and that's the end of your teaching career. But if you hang on you learn the tricks. It's hard but you have to make yourself comfortable in the classroom. You have to be selfish. The airlines tell you if oxygen fails you are to put your mask first, even if your instinct is to save the child. . . You are with kids and, as long as you want to be a teacher, there's no escape. Don't expect help from the people who've escaped from the classroom, the higher-ups. They're busy going to lunch and thinking higher thoughts. It's you and the kids. . . Find what you love and do it (255).

It is interesting to see that he emphasized the teacher's learning rather than teaching, and that she could learn by finding and doing what she loves, not consulting experts or authorities outside of her arena. The irrelevance of teacher training and to the challenges that teachers face in the classroom, in McCourt's case, became evident at the beginning of the first class on the first day of his teaching. A boy student named Petey mentioned that he had a sausage sandwich, and another boy teased him by saying that his mother made such a lunch because she hated him. Petey threw his sandwich in the brown-paper bag at his critic. The class cheered, 'Fight, fight'. Then, as McCourt writes:

I came from behind my desk and made the first sound of teaching career: Hey. Four years of higher education at New York University and all I could think of was Hey. . . They ignored me. . . I moved toward Petey and made my first teacher statement, Stop throwing sandwiches. . . The class laughed. . . There's nothing sillier in the world than a teacher telling you don't do it after you already did it. . . Professors of education at New York University never lectured on how to handle flying-sandwich situations. They talked about theories and philosophies of education, about moral and ethical imperatives, about the necessity of dealing with the whole child, the gestalt, if you don't mind, the child's felt needs, but never about critical moments in the classroom (15-16).

The 'critical moments in the classroom' mentioned above can be interpreted as a crisis of a teacher. His challenge of saying a word or a sentence implies one side of the crisis; his distrust of education experts, such as those who are at the institutions of 'higher' education is the other. The twofold nature of the crisis is examined as follows. Firstly, it relates to the act of the teachers' words: every word they say matters to their students and, moreover, to their professional standing. If they give up talking to students, in other words, and resign conversation, it means 'the end of your teaching career' (255). Also, these words and sentences are constantly tested, teased, or challenged by stakeholders. The crucial characteristic of this side of the crisis, therefore, manifests itself in the fact that it always

accompanies the ordinary practice of teaching. In short, the crisis is critical because it is an everyday occurrence. This sharply contrasts the use of the term in a financial context. The severity of the crisis is measured in terms of how extraordinary it looks. Economists and politicians warn how serious a crisis is by insisting that this is the worst one in one hundred years. On the contrary, in the case of a teacher's crisis, the closer it becomes to an everyday occurrence, the severer it is.

The other side of a teacher's crisis is, secondly, linked to the feature of the dominant approach to the everyday crisis itself. As McCourt mentions, people tend to look for help from someone outside of the classroom. This implies that the normalcy of the crisis is to be handled by extraordinary, sometimes even exotic views and exercises, presented by those who are called experts. The ordinariness of teaching practice is apt to be left untouched and neglected by such approaches, even though these are originally coined for helping it. Accordingly, teachers in the classroom seem to be considered as if they have no say about their (difficulty of) teaching and (possibility of) learning.²

Listening to McCourt's description of his classroom experience, it is fair to say that the twofold nature of a teacher's crisis is strongly connected to what the teacher says, namely, the notion of voice—either finding or accepting it. As McCourt captures in his writing, a teacher's voicing of a word or a sentence is always challenged and, potentially, if not instantly, associated with one's career as a whole. On that account, she needs to learn to speak. Nevertheless, it is not her voice that resonates in various learning occasions but in such situations, the vocabulary and logic outside of the teaching profession almost take over her voice.³ What is worse, even teachers themselves seem to have virtually forgotten that their voices matter to their education. That could be the reason why McCourt, a veteran teacher, felt compelled to mention it to the younger teacher, with relatively strong wording, 'You're on your own. . .', ' . . . if you hang on you learn the tricks', 'You have to be selfish', 'Don't expect help from the people. . . ' (255). This by no means suggests that teaching is something exclusive and ought to be separated out from anyone and any institution outside of the classroom. Rather, it indicates that no one but the teacher is the best sources of education that the teacher, herself, is crying out for.

3. Knowledge and Humanity: Learning According to Stanley Cavell

In the preceding section, it was elucidated that the crisis teachers face is double-layered. First, the nature of the crisis is embedded with the ordinariness of the teacher's practice. Second, teachers feel, with a nihilistic view, that their voices—their ordinary voices, based on the everyday practices in schools—are helpless in reconstructing their self-education concerning the former sense of crisis. The cause of the latter part of the crisis is that current discussions about teacher education reform mostly take place amongst experts and

administrators, so it loses its point in terms of responding to the critical features of the crisis. Against this background, a question emerges: what kind, or aspect, of teacher education should be emphasised to respond to the crisis of the teaching profession, whilst paying full attention to the peculiarity of it?

The uniqueness and significance of this message to the novice teacher, as stated above, does reflect the dominant trend of teacher education today. At least in Japan, education reform since the 1980s has been directed mostly towards better teaching performance, not being (or the well-being of) a teacher: teacher education has been predominantly understood as training for teachers to achieve up-to-date knowledge and efficient social skills. What is learned about teaching, accordingly, tends to be discussed by someone outside of the classroom, and, thus, is presented to teachers as if it is a predetermined menu, with little choices.

One might ask: how could an approach be possible in which the ordinariness and nihilism of the crisis are appreciated and adequately dealt with? With regard to this, Paul Standish hints at a viewpoint in which the above approach becomes possible, questioning a premise of commonly discussed education reform.

Standish takes the late-2000s financial crisis as an example. He points out that a way in which most experts respond to the crisis looks ironic; institutions that are financially stretched are affected by the crisis. The crisis, it is fair to suppose, is substantially caused by the failure of the 'audit culture', in which the notion of 'accountability' or 'transparency' is considered as sacrosanct (Standish, 2009, 7). Nevertheless, experts and pundits are enthusiastic about solving financial problems by means of imposing 'greater accountability' (ibid). He relates this irony to the idea of the 'Midas touch', based on the myth about an avaricious king, who comes to own the power to turn everything he touches into gold. The king eventually realizes that, blocked by his own power, he cannot eat, drink, or even hug the people he loves. The myth is significant in elucidating the implication of the ironic lies. According to Standish, like Midas, we are sometimes slightly and sometimes severely dissatisfied with the 'the ordinary currency of our common practices' (6). That is to say that people tend to become skeptical about the ordinary—coinage, for instance—and long for something better: Midas seeks the extreme *coinage* of gold, especially in a time of a crisis. In such circumstances, the fact is mostly forgotten that 'standards can be maintained only on the basis of continuities of human interaction and trust' (ibid.).

This kind of imposition of 'greater accountability' in a so-called 'audit culture', according to Standish, applies to education: 'our ordinary confidence in teaching and learning is devalued in favour of some more technical language, which is thought to be closer to the reality of things' (7). As a consequence, 'the teacher becomes more like a flexible, replaceable technical operative' (7) and 'knowledge is rendered exchangeable and

commodified' (6).

Standish's notion of our longing for 'better-than-ordinary knowledge' (ibid.) is grounded in Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* (ibid.), whose primary concern is skepticism. Instead of trying to repudiate it, Cavell discusses how we live with skeptical questions; namely, the manifestation of an aspect of human knowledge is allured to deny the human and, thus, ordinary knowledge.⁴ To him, verification theorists, caught up by skeptical impulse, convert the inquiry of human knowledge into a problem of proof:

Ordinarily we might say, having looked again, or specifically, to see whether the cat is in the next room, that we have *verified* the statement that the cat is there; we checked; we know it for a fact. But the verification theorist "discovers" (not, however, with the force of Cartesian *astonishment*) that we haven't *conclusively* verified that statement. . . "Do you mean," they are invited to inquire, "that *nothing* would show—if you like, nothing would make you say—that there was not really a cat in the room after all?" If you retort that indeed nothing would make you say so, how will you convince us that this does not merely show something about your own rigidity rather than something about the solidity of your knowledge? (Cavell, 1979, 232-233)

Here, Cavell, sarcastically describes the tactics and effects of verification theorists and explicates the nature of the temptation, that is to say, an undeniable doubt whether we really know what we think we know. Cavell highlights the writing of Wittgenstein with respect to laying out 'how to investigate the cost of our continuous temptation to knowledge' (241).⁵ One of the examples that Cavell shows us of Wittgenstein's implication about human desire to assure one's knowledge in terms of certainty, 'temptation to knowledge', is as follows:

In the *Investigations* the cost [of our continuous temptation to knowledge] is arrived at in terms (e.g., of not knowing what we are saying, of emptiness in our assertions, of the illusion of meaning something, of claims to impossible privacies) suggestive of madness. . . (242)

Wittgenstein's 'suggestive of madness' is implied, for instance, in a scene of instruction, in which a teacher teaches a child how to count, and who does not count in the way the teacher expects him. After much effort, which seems to be in vein, to show him how to count, the teacher comes to the point where he is about to give his concluding statement to the child:

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do' (Wittgenstein, 72e).

Cavell says that Wittgenstein's way of writing, of this scene and other similar descriptions found in his books, such as *Philosophical Investigations* and *Brown Book*, suggests that he is caricaturing our tendency to 'separate out lunatics' (Cavell, 1979, 112). Wittgenstein helps to highlight a sense of separation or segregation. If we run out of verification, in spite of our best efforts, for assuring our understanding of the world or our minds, then it automatically means that (at least) on one side of the conversation is a lunatic, i.e., a person who does not (or cannot) share (a way of acquiring or retaining) human knowledge. This is, if extreme, logically plausible consequence of 'temptation to knowledge'.

It is now evident that, in the 'audit culture', what ought to be avoided is human—the ordinary aspect of knowledge, i.e., personal engagement with what we say we know when we say so. Where 'transparency' is imposed on the uniqueness of each person and the difference of each situation, the knowledge needs to be tested and guaranteed in terms of what is called objective evidence, namely, certainty. In such circumstances, knowledge is reduced into something purely impersonal and completely detached from ordinary human speech, i.e., one person says to the other: 'I know X', 'I can teach you because I know Y', or 'Thanks to your instruction, I came to know Z'. Our voicing as human, knowing creatures, becomes completely disconnected from, and indifferent to, knowledge. This substantialized view of knowledge is akin to the demands of the 'audit culture'. The more impersonal teaching and learning become, the smoother the exchanges of knowledge can take place. Quality of commodified knowledge is measured by verified proof, such as certificates and diplomas, or records of sales and profits, instead of the moral significance that it may bring about, personal involvement it entailed, or the complexities of teaching and learning it might carry.

The 'temptation to knowledge', which endorses the 'audit culture' in education, comprises its drive for overcoming the uncertainty or evanescence of the ordinary. This explains why Standish conceives the Midas touch to be the deadening effect of the 'better-than-ordinary knowledge' (Standish, 6). Cavell explicates the characteristic of such an urge as the 'experience of "seeing ourselves as outside the world as a whole", looking in at it, as we now look at some objects from a position among others' (Cavell, 1979, 236). He also says that the cost of seeing human knowledge as something inhuman is 'the loss, or forgoing, of identity or of selfhood' (242). This is exactly what the 'audit culture' charges us.

4. Acknowledgement and Learning of a Teacher

Cavell, excavating his own way of approaching to the skeptical, clarifies his position with a discussion as to whether we can really know another person's mind, e.g., another's pain. He suggests that our expression of knowing pain is not an assertion of certainty, but rather a

response.

I said that the reason ‘I know I am in pain’ is not an expression of certainty is that it is an expression of pain—it is an exhibiting of the object about which someone (else) may be certain. I might say here that the reason ‘I know you are in pain’ is not an expression of certainty is that it is a response to this exhibiting; it is an expression of *sympathy*. (‘I know what you’re going through’; ‘I’ve done all I can’; ‘The serum is being flown in by special plane.’) (Cavell, 1976, 263)

In this sense, the utterance of ‘I know’ does not indicate a statement of having a collection of evidence to prove the interlocutor’s feeling. Cavell continues:

But why is sympathy expressed in this way? Because your suffering makes a claim upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what ‘(your or his) being in pain’ means. (ibid.)

One *must* acknowledge that the other is suffering when she says that she knows the person is in pain. Conversely, one cannot say that she knows that the other is in pain without expressing sympathy. Some might wonder, however, if he could say that he knows that the other is in pain without feeling any sympathy. Cavell says:

I do not mean that we always in fact *have* sympathy, nor we always ought to have it. The claim of suffering may go unanswered. We may feel lots of things—sympathy, *Schadenfreude*, nothing. . . The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. . . A ‘failure to know’ might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. . . (263-264)

When we know something, according to Cavell, we are asked to respond to it. One might successfully express his feeling. Another might fail. Nevertheless, even such failure helps one to present oneself as someone who is incapable of it, e.g., being incapable by self-centeredness, psychological suppression, or physical restraint.

Returning to our central concern, what does the lack of connectedness between teacher preparation and teaching practice exhibit? It possibly shows the stakeholder’s failure to

acknowledge the sufferings of teachers. In the case of discourse in the audit culture, which interprets teachers' ordinary practice and their education in a solely commercial sense, i.e., a matter of efficiency in trading knowledge as a commodity. It means that they are making a double mistake. Firstly, they understand the notion of knowledge independently from human acknowledgment. Secondly, they fail to acknowledge the voices (either expressed or silenced) of teachers in an ordinary crisis, and present themselves as those who make teachers' voices unheard.

This is not a simple assertion that people should let teachers raise their voices. Rather, it highlights Cavell's view of knowledge implied by, and embedded in, the notion of acknowledgement, which leads to recounting our response, and, hence, responsibility; how they pervade but are left unappreciated. It also helps to re-examine teachers' responses in classroom. McCourt's first spoken word in his education practice, 'Hey', is obviously not a big word; it might not be appropriate opening statement as a teacher distributing commodified knowledge. Still, he acknowledges that Petey and his critic are in trouble. Although he said, 'Stop throwing sandwiches', they fell on the floor. Even so, he threw his words as a teacher responding to students. The teacher education that is needed is not something to produce replaceable teachers. A commodified view of knowledge commodifies teachers. There is no such thing as the appropriate first word for all teachers to say during flying-sandwich situation nor is there a single and most effective statement for a teacher to open up a process of teaching and learning. These things can never be pre-determined by anyone, including the person who is in charge of the teacher preparation curriculum. The role of teacher education is to help teachers learn to respond, or to voice, in one's way. Illustrating this viewpoint, Cavell discusses such view in elucidating his notion of Moral Perfectionism—'a dimension of any moral thinking' (Cavell, 1990, 62):⁶

Moral Perfectionism's contribution to thinking about the moral necessity of making oneself intelligible (one's actions, one's sufferings; one's position) is, I think it can be said, its emphasis before all on becoming intelligible to oneself. . . Perfectionism's emphasis on culture or cultivation is, to my mind, to be understood in connection with this search for intelligibility, or say this search for direction in what seems a scene of moral chaos, the scene of a dark place in which one has lost one's way. . . With respect to the issue whether virtue is knowledge, whether virtue can be taught, whether to know the way is to take the way, perfectionism's obsession with education expresses its focus on finding one's way rather than on getting oneself or another take the way (Cavell, 1990, xxxi-xxxii).

The disconnect between teacher education and teachers' ordinary practices matters not in

terms of equipping trainee teachers with a packaged knowledge and techniques to smoothly get along in the classroom, but rather to help teachers to find their own ways of responding to (and taking responsibilities for) the classroom. Beneath a teacher's everyday conduct, there is a sense of crisis from the very first word in the classroom to the last, no matter how peaceful or chaotic moment her class is in. The task of teacher education is, therefore, connected to a search for a contribution to the condition teachers are in, not only on the horizons of what teachers need to know, but also on that of what we mean by saying that we know something about the world or others.

A final question: at the end of the day, was the higher education that McCourt had successful or not? It depends. It remains open to how each of us responds to his words and statements.

Notes

¹ Sato writes, 'In a 1982 study conducted by the Japanese Society for the Study of Education (1985) 422 beginning teachers were asked to name two persons who, in their judgment, had been most helpful to them in learning how to teach. In other words, who had been the most effective advisors? The overwhelming majority (61 percent) of beginning teachers named elder teachers as their best sources of advice on teaching. Next in importance were head teachers of the same grade and colleagues of the same age, named by approximately one-third of respondents. In descending order of importance but at significantly lower levels were department heads, college friends, principals, university professors, and supervisors. . . In another study conducted in 1981 in Mie Prefecture (Kamiyama et al., 1983), 3,983 teachers were asked to name the most effective factor in developing their teaching competence. The four most frequently mentioned sources of help were: advice from colleagues, school in-house workshops, learning from students, and excellent books and case reports. . . Other factors were selected much less frequently: voluntary study groups, advice from principal, school board teacher training center, and advice from parents' (Sato, 164-165).

² This resonates with Sato's caution that teachers' professional autonomy in Japan has tended to be gradually aborted and partly neglected since the mid-1950s (Sato, 159; 161).

³ Although this may sound familiar as an expression in a political debate, the implication here is that it shall not be directly assimilated to such a cliché as 'everyone has to speak up and raise voice to liberate oneself from the suppression by power'. The nihilism with which teachers withdraw their voices is not something to be alleviated by eliminating a targeted suppresser. The crisis of teachers' voices, rather, calls them to pay attention to the dimension of what makes us conceive of, or compromise, something as political. This will be

reexamined and touched upon again at the end of this paper.

⁴ Cavell says, 'Nothing is more human than the wish to deny one's humanity, or to assert it at the expense of others' (Cavell, 1979, 109).

⁵ Cavell states, 'The explicit temptation of Eden is to knowledge, which above all means: to a denial that, as we stand, we know. There was hence from the beginning no Eden, no place in which names are immune to skepticism. . . The feature of the situation I emphasize is that its sense of exposure upon the birth of knowledge pertains not only to one's vulnerability to knowledge, to being known, to the trauma of separation, but feel to the vulnerability of knowledge itself, to the realization that Eden is not the world, but that one had been living as within a circle or behind a line; because when God "drove out the man" the man was not surprised that there was an elsewhere' (Cavell, 1988, 49).

⁶ Cavell also says that an aspect or a moment of morality 'in which a crisis forces an examination of one's life that calls for a transfiguration or reorientation of it' is 'the province of what I[Cavell] emphasize as moral perfectionism' (Cavell, 2004, 11).

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