

Morality and Recognition:  
Cavellian Themes in Elaine May's *A New Leaf*

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“[C]onversation, while it means talk, means at the same time a way of life together.”<sup>1</sup>  
—Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words*

“Marriage? You mean to a woman? Oh, I can't, Harold. I couldn't. I mean, she'd be there, asking me where I've been, talking to me . . . talking.”  
—Henry Graham, *A New Leaf*

1. Introduction

In his *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Cities of Words*, Stanley Cavell famously engages with a number of romantic comedies from the 1930s and 1940s, which he says belongs to a genre called the comedy of remarriage. With its focus on an unlikely couple, its screwball sensibility, and its concern with the transformative power of friendship and marriage, it's natural to think of Elaine May's 1971 unheralded masterpiece *A New Leaf* as being in conversation with films like *It Happened One Night*, *A Philadelphia Story*, and *The Lady Eve*, whether or not it technically qualifies as a member of the genre.<sup>2</sup> My purpose in this chapter is to consider the contribution that the film makes to the philosophical discussion Cavell sees playing out in these earlier romantic films.

While few would deny the ingenuity and influence of Cavell's work on these films, there nevertheless exists significant scholarly disagreement over which elements are most important or most essential to his readings. To avoid becoming bogged down in these disputes, I shall simply stipulate that my interpretation of *A New Leaf* will be inspired by Cavell in three important respects. First, it's Cavell's view that comedies of remarriage explore and advocate for a particular moral outlook that he terms “perfectionism.” While the utilitarian outlook presents a method for calculating which actions are good and Kantianism supplies a universal principle of right action,

Cavell says that perfectionism, “proposes confrontation and conversation as the means of determining whether we can live together, accept one another into the aspirations of our lives.”<sup>3</sup> The idea, I think, is that rather than focusing upon how to solve discrete ethical problems in ways that respect principles of rationality set forth by a theory, these films take as primary ethical questions like, “How shall I live my life?”, “What possibilities are open to me going forward as I attempt live in community with others?” and, “How might my choosing to live one way rather than another transform my very being?” Their outlook, Cavell seems to me to be saying, is in the vicinity of Bernard Williams’s, when he complains that modern moral philosophy focuses on questions about the rightness or wrongness of momentary acts, to the exclusion of larger questions about how to live a good life over time.<sup>4</sup>

Second, Cavell believes that each of these comedies uses marriage as a metaphor for the kind of relationship, friendship, or fusing together of lives that makes for a new and better way of being. For instance, he says that *A Philadelphia Story* understands marriage as a vision of America’s “dedication to a more perfect union, toward the perfected human community, its right to the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>5</sup> Or, as he explains it elsewhere, the marriage relationship is a “study of the conditions under which [the] fight for recognition . . . or demand for acknowledgement . . . is a struggle for mutual freedom.”<sup>6</sup> The idea being that the pair in the film face the prospect of coming together in a form of community that promises a superior way of living. Importantly for Cavell, this necessitates a metamorphosis on the part of the characters—a change in their traits, dispositions, and needs. And the nature of this transformation is among the primary philosophical interests of these films, he thinks.

Third, Cavell commits himself to the idea that the films themselves do philosophy. That is, instead of understanding them simply as fodder for philosophical discussion, or as raw material upon which we might go to work applying philosophical theories developed independently of them,

the films are allowed to set their own agendas and to attempt to answer the questions that they themselves raise. Rather than having to answer to philosophy, then, the films themselves are understood as works of philosophy with the capacity to tell us how they are to be read.<sup>7</sup> Films themselves—like books and journal articles—can be philosophy. Philosophy can be screened.<sup>8</sup>

My reading of *A New Leaf* will be Cavellian primarily in these three respects. I shall argue that the film is interested in perfectionism of the sort to which Cavell calls our attention, and that it has something to say about what a perfectionist approach to ethics—as opposed to modern moral approach such as Kantianism and utilitarianism—might look like. I shall also argue that the film explores an important transformation of desire and need on the part of its male lead in particular, accomplished through the joining of himself with another person for the purpose of mutual activity and a shared way of life. Finally, I hope to emphasize ways in which the film advances its own philosophical position, going beyond or departing from the films to which Cavell gives his attention, while nevertheless remaining in conversation with them. Its philosophical position, I'll argue, is that there exists a relationship of a special sort between the perfectionist approach discussed by Cavell and the more traditionally moral views with which he contrasts it. *A New Leaf*, as I'll understand it, attempts to show us that the issues that most concern the perfectionist are actually foundational to, or are at the root of, morality. This all will become more clear as I proceed, hopefully.

## 2. *A New Leaf*

The film's opening introduces us to Henry Graham (Walter Matthau), a patrician born into a wealthy family, who's managed to run through his entire trust fund—spending it on cars, art, fine wine, and horseback riding, among other things. Broke and unable to maintain the lifestyle to which he has become accustomed, he considers suicide to be his only option. Henry's butler—worried primarily that he'll soon be out of a job—suggests to Henry that he solve his problems instead by

finding a wealthy woman to marry, as marriage “[i]s the only way to acquire property without labor.” Henry adopts the butler’s idea, but somewhat casually adds his own spin: he’ll ultimately murder whatever woman he finds to marry him. So after taking out a large loan from his uncle, which needs to be repaid in short order, Henry sets out to find a wealthy woman to marry.

After a few abortive attempts to couple with women of means, and with the deadline to repay his uncle bearing down, Henry finally lays his eyes on Henrietta Lowell (Elaine May)—a painfully awkward and clumsy botanist, who’s inherited a fortune from her deceased father. Henrietta is, in many ways, the antithesis of Henry. Whereas Henry is tidy, well-dressed, and has a taste for the finer things, Henrietta is messy, unrefined, and has terrible taste—her drink of choice is “Mogen David’s extra-heavy Malaga wine with soda and lime juice.” And whereas Henry wants nothing more than to do nothing at all, Henrietta is genuinely driven by her work as a botanist, specifically her hope to discover a new species of fern. The differences between them are a source of genuine disgust for Henry. “Never have I seen one woman in whom every social grace was so lacking,” he says after an evening with her. “Did I say she was primitive? I retract that. She’s feral. I’ve never spent a more physically destructive evening in my life. I am nauseated . . . I will taste those damn Malaga coolers forever.” Yet, she is moneyed and oblivious. And so “Perfect!” as far as Henry is concerned.

From the beginning, Henry stands up for and looks out for Henrietta—irritating though he finds her. When she’s scolded by the haughty hostess of a fancy dinner party for spilling her tea on the carpet, Henry chivalrously empties his red wine onto the floor and declares: “Take your damn carpet to the cleaners and send the bill to me!” He cleans up the crumbs and morsels of food that she leaves on her face and clothes. And before long Henry gets down on one knee to propose marriage—accidentally crushing a glass while he does so, but nevertheless managing to declare, “I would kneel on anything for you Henrietta.” Of course, it’s all a ruse. Henry’s actions are intended

to give an impression rather than to evince actual concern for Henrietta as a person, and his words are meant to manipulate rather than to address her. Nevertheless, the ruse succeeds. She falls for him and accepts his proposal.

Upon learning the news of the impending marriage, Henrietta's lawyer is beside himself, as he's been pilfering from her trust fund and recognizes that this might be the end of the gravy train. Along similar lines, after the wedding Henry moves into Henrietta's home only to discover a house staff that is robbing her with abandon. He angrily dismisses them, along with the lawyer. Now Henry begins planning the murder in earnest, reading extensively about toxicology, trying to secure the proper poisons, and so on. In the meantime, Henrietta discovers a new type of fern and discloses to Henry that she has named it for him, and he is unexpectedly moved by the sentiment.

As things progress, Henry finds himself to be an able guardian for the scattered and absentminded Henrietta—a role that requires more practical life skill and care than we'd previously imagined him capable of. The couple eventually agrees to go on a research expedition together in the wild, and Henry—having had significant difficulty securing the poisons he needs to finish off the bride who he's become increasingly protective of—finally sees this as his chance to do away with Henrietta. (Perhaps she'll be attacked by wolves, or can be fed to a bear!) While traveling down a river in a canoe, they flip in the harsh rapids. Henry makes it to shore safely, but Henrietta doesn't and is left holding on to a branch. Henry takes a few steps away from the water, leaving her there to drown. But upon seeing a specimen of the fern that Henrietta has named for him, and turning to point it out to her only to remember that she isn't there, he realizes he cannot go through with the plan. He returns to save her—somewhat surprised and even annoyed with himself. At this juncture, the two agree that Henry will take up a job teaching history at the school where Henrietta works, and that they will go to work together every day and sit in the study together at night grading papers.

### 3. Amorality and a Failure of Recognition: Two Practical Failures

As mentioned in the introduction, Cavell believes the comedies of remarriage orient us toward a particular conception of ethical inquiry. Moral dilemmas and moral “issues” are largely absent from these films—to put it as Cavell does, the concerns at the forefront of films like *It Happened One Night* or *The Awful Truth* are, “typically not front-page news, not, for example, issues like abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, whistle-blowing, plagiarism, informing, bribery, greed . . .”<sup>9</sup> And so the moral theories that most clearly address themselves to such issues—Kantianism and utilitarianism, says Cavell—are forced to take a backseat. In their place, we’re presented with cases that are perhaps more humdrum, in which a pair is “deciding on what kinds of lives they wish to live and whether they wish to live them together, to consent to each other, to say yes to their lives and to their life together.”<sup>10</sup> And so the films inspire us to reflect on the process of living out a life with others, and on the way in which this gets negotiated, rather than on the permissibility of discrete choices.

So here we might notice right away a respect in which *A New Leaf* departs from Cavell’s principal films. For here something like “front-page news,” to use Cavell’s phrase, is front and center. This is the story of a man who marries a woman for personal gain with the intention of murdering her, thus immersing us not simply in questions about what is the best life to lead, but in issues surrounding blatant failures to conform to morality’s requirements. And I see no reason to think that this immorality is incidental or beside the point. Indeed, much of the film’s black humor derives from the fact that Henry so quickly and thoughtlessly moves to flout what we’d all consider to be the most stringent and obvious of moral demands—notice how seamlessly he moves from the troubling idea that he will marry a woman to get his hands on her money to the awful conclusion that he’ll do away with her so he doesn’t have to talk to her. *A New Leaf*, we’ve said, is a film made with these older romantic films in mind, and so the unexpected inclusion of this “front page” moral

element should inspire curiosity about what the film is up to. This is a point to which I shall return toward the end of the chapter.

Beyond his heinous moral failings, Henry exhibits the more humdrum practical failure of failing to *recognize* or *acknowledge* others. It's the kind of practical failure that concerns us in *The Lady Eve*, when Jean seduces Charles in hopes of eventually beating him at cards, or early in *It Happened One Night*, when we wonder whether Peter is coming to Ellie's aid only so that he can publish a story of her having fled her father (Page Six news, rather than front page, we might say). Roughly, the issue is that Henry lives in a world in which others exist as obstacles around which he must plan or scheme, rather than a world occupied by persons with whom he might enter into relationships based upon concern and respect—his way of living is one in which others *fail to register*. For instance, Henry's longtime financial advisor seems not even to exist for him as a being to whom Henry might relate person-to-person—upon learning that he's paid \$550 of Henry's bills out of his own pocket, Henry immediately responds, "May I say that if you expected even the smallest amount of gratitude, you have wasted \$550." And when his butler announces that he'll have to resign if Henry has no money to pay him, it never occurs to Henry to ask him how he'll fare without the job. Consider also the quotation that served as the second epigraph for this chapter—the one in which Henry explains that he doesn't want to marry because people who are married have to talk to one another. It's a telling admission, because as Cavell emphasizes in the first epigraph, talking and conversation is a way we humans share our lives together. Talking involves not simply trying to manipulate or influence someone. Rather, it involves *recognizing* and *addressing* them. And this is something that's not only mystifying to Henry, but something he finds positively grotesque.

The central example of Henry's inability to recognize others, though, is of course Henrietta. At least, that is our point of departure in the film. For as he lays eyes on her for the first time, and announces that she's "Perfect!", we're meant to laugh at the utter crudity of the sentiment. Rather

than seeing someone from across the room and being struck by her charm, her beauty, her wit, her grace—or just by *her*—what inspires his assessment of her as perfect is her availability and vulnerability to be used as a resource. Indeed, as we progress through the film, much of the humor is grounded in Henry’s egregious unwillingness at various points to see Henrietta’s needs, interests, and goals as actually counting for something on account of *her* counting for something. Awkward though she is, Henrietta is characterized as a relentlessly sweet person with a caring disposition and admirable goals, whose humanity is consistently on display. And her moments of humanity are often met by Henry with his muttering something under his breath about her impending demise—the dark joke consisting in his inability to recognize the humanity that is so glaringly obvious to us.

Here I wish to focus a bit on the conception of recognition itself, for I think part of *A New Leaf*’s philosophical accomplishment is its clarification of the notion. There is, it’s fair to say, a good amount of discussion of recognition over the course of philosophy’s history, from Rousseau to Fichte to Hegel to Cavell.<sup>11</sup> The most comprehensive attempt to make sense of it in contemporary times, however, is found in the work of Stephen Darwall. Darwall originally identified a type of respect that he termed “recognition respect,” which he understood to be grounded in the dignity or authority of persons.<sup>12</sup> Since then, his work has constituted a sustained attempt to understand the practical standpoint that makes recognition respect possible—what Darwall calls the “second-person standpoint.”<sup>13</sup> As he characterizes it, his work is an attempt to think about “what exactly is involved in reciprocal recognition, and to think about its pervasiveness in human experience.”<sup>14</sup> But as it turns out, there is great difficulty in attempting even to specify the subject matter here. For someone can, of course, notice the existence of someone else, plan around their ends, use their interests to incentivize them—all in ways that don’t involve recognition of the sort Darwall has in mind. So what are we talking about when we talk of recognition? While one might suspect that what’s called for here is simply a clearheaded piece of philosophical analysis, Darwall’s view is that there is no



proper definition or analysis in the offing. This is, he thinks, because there exists no way of reducing second-personal notions related to recognition and respect to ideas that are not second-personal. What we have is “a circle of irreducibly second-personal concepts,” all inter-defined. So what we find is Darwall attempting to bring his audience into the topic through metaphor and illustration. He tells us, for instance, that we’re talking from the second-person standpoint when we *stand* somewhere and demand acknowledgment of rights, and he writes about the difficulty of gaining recognition when you can’t *look someone in the eyes*.<sup>15</sup> But the written word, one suspects, is limited in its ability to carry out this task of getting us inside the circle of concepts. Perhaps, then, film is a place to which we might turn. For the medium has unique resources with which to depict modes of inter-personal relating—it has the advantage of being able to *show us* what it is for one person to register another in the right sort of way, or to allow us to watch people talking to one another in the sort of way that constitutes genuine second-personal address.

And indeed, I believe that elaborate depiction of second-personal address—of recognition, of acknowledgment, and so on—is at the very heart of *A New Leaf*. Matthau’s performance as Henry in particular constitutes an acute and insightful take on what it looks like for someone to navigate the world without second-personally registering the presence of others. We can observe, for instance, the way in which Henry’s attempts to talk with Henrietta really don’t engage her at the level of her interests and passions at all, or invite her into a genuine sharing of ideas, but instead are mere counterfeit instances of such attempts, intended to manipulate her into falsely believing he has interests and curiosities that he does not. What is it to be a “a counterfeit attempt?” This is something the film shows to us, I think.

Henry: I have been re-reading Gregor Mendel’s fascinating experiments with garden peas. And it has struck me again how much we owe our understanding of plant genetics with all its myriad implications to that brilliant pioneer.

Henrietta: Yes, but we mustn’t forget Morgan and Muller. Morgan, Muller and

Mendel.

Henry: Who?

Henrietta: Gregor Mendel, the man that you just mentioned. Morgan, Muller and Mendel, I think are a perfect example of scientific synthesis. Errr . . . Doesn't it seem that to you?

Henry: No, it doesn't.

Whatever we might mean when we talk of addressing someone else, or conversing with someone else, in a way that recognizes and acknowledges them as worthy of respect or dignity or as possessing a kind of second-personal standing—well, it seems to be the thing that's noticeably absent in this exchange. Henrietta is treated, more or less, as a being to be manipulated—here, into thinking that Henry knows and cares about genetics—and as a being whose words can simply be dismissed. Or, to give another example, in the scene where the couple goes to dinner for the first time, we can watch Henry's face as he helps Henrietta up, brushes up the crumbs she's left on herself, and catches her as she stumbles. There, we don't see loving attention, genuine concern for her wellbeing, or affectionate focus on what she needs. Instead we see a man who knows which motions he needs to go through in order to woo this woman. And importantly, his expression doesn't even seem to register her as a person to be held responsible for her gauche behavior and gracelessness, but instead suggests that he regards her as a sort of irritating force of nature—as we mentioned earlier, his ultimate assessment of her is that she is “feral.”

Such moments are, however, usefully contrasted with those later on in the film where Henry's orientation toward Henrietta seems to shift ever so subtly. Consider the scene in which Henrietta arrives in the bedroom on the first night of their honeymoon adorned in what we're told is a “Graecian-style nightgown” that she's put on incorrectly (Henry: “Your head is through the arm-hole”). Henry and Henrietta then work together to correct the error. Now, to this point in the film Henry has shown no interest in sex at all, though we get some sense that he's resigned himself to the

possibility that physical intimacy might be required. And while we never see these two consummate the relationship, I think it's fair to say that we're to understand Henry's attempt to correct her nightgown as a kind of stand-in. At first we suspect, perhaps because we've been conditioned to, that he's simply disgusted by her awkwardness. But as he helps her adjust the nightgown in a clumsy bit of fumbling around—which, again, I think we're supposed to equate with the sexual act—we suddenly see glimmers of attentiveness and care. What could have been a mere irritating chore seems, at least for a moment, surprisingly tender. The ingredient we see in this scene, missing from the earlier dinner scene, is second-personal acknowledgment of the person in his company. Rather than attend to his scheme, he attends to *her*.

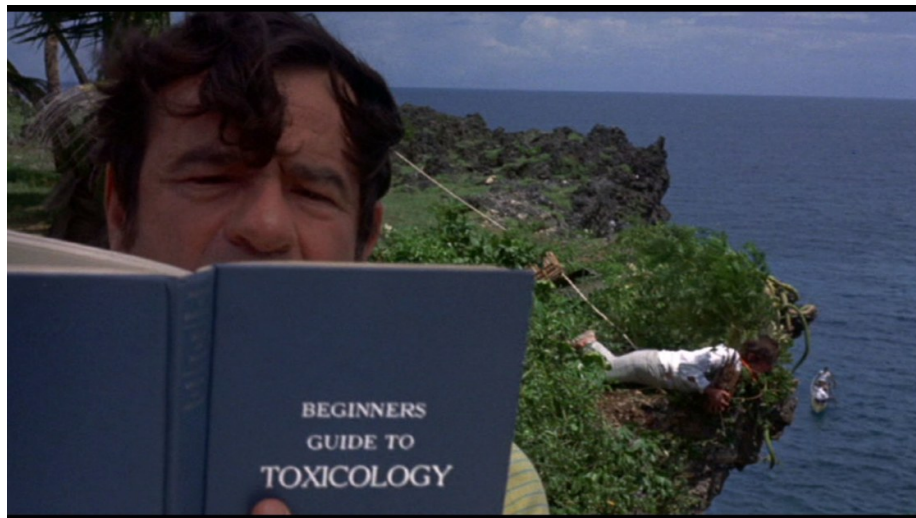
The unique genius of Matthau's performance, I think, is found in moments where he slowly begins to attend to Henrietta in a way that looks more genuinely second-personal, but without realizing that he's doing so. Of course, it's a romantic comedy trope that at least one member of a pair gradually undergoes a transformation in their relation to the other. This, however, is usually attended with some implicit awareness on the part of the transformee of what's going on. (Think of Clarke Gable hovering over Claudette Colbert under the moonlight in *It Happened One Night*—can there be any doubt that he's aware her meaning for him has changed, even if he's not entirely glad about it?) In Henry's case, he seems relatively oblivious to the fact that he's thrown things into a second-personal gear at all. So we're presented with comic moments like the one where he expresses concern for Henrietta in a mundane but sweet way (“Oh, no. I forgot to check [Henrietta] before she went to school this morning. She'll be walking around all day with price tags dangling from her sleeves”) while he packs for a camping trip in which he plans to feed her to a bear if the opportunity arises. Henry's two orientations toward Henrietta—a kind of self-personal concern alongside a willingness to see her as a dispensable resource to be mined or as an instrument to be used—obviously don't sit well together, which is part of the joke. But by depicting both orientations as

residing in Henry simultaneously, the film goes a long way toward spelling out or depicting the difference between genuine recognition of another and seeing someone else as a mere instrument. That is, we get a sense of what it is to be operating within the circle of second-personal concepts by watching a character enter and exit the circle repeatedly without noticing.

In addition to depicting this contrast in terms of an intra-personal tension within Henry himself, the film represents it *inter*-personally. When Henry and Henrietta announce their plans to wed, her lawyer—who has been overseeing her fortune—is beside himself. For he has been helping himself freely to her wealth, and now realizes someone else will be in the position to pilfer the money. So he disapproves of the marriage. Now, clearly we're meant to see this as a parody of the father-daughter relationship that plays such a prominent role in the early comedies of remarriage. In those films, the father is on alert, ensuring that his daughter is marrying a worthy partner, and the man's task is to prove himself. Here, the lawyer—who even steps into the role of giving Henrietta away in the ceremony—is really just protecting her qua financial asset. But when Henry eventually discovers that the lawyer is, along with various members of her household staff, bilking Henrietta out of her fortune, his tone and body language betray a sense of genuine resentment and anger on her behalf that goes beyond a simple concern for preserving the wealth he intends to steal. He confronts the staff not just to fire them, but to register his recognition of their misdeeds and to confront them. We sense that, whatever else Henry has up his sleeve, he's concerned *for her* about the way that she's being taken advantage of. In other words, he's begun to recognize her interests and her dignity as something that registers for him second-personally.

To conclude the section, I'd like to raise the possibility that the film even invites the viewer, at times, to adopt Henry's outlook and thus to see Henrietta both from the point of view of someone who is protective of her *and* from the point of view of someone who views her as a mere instrument. Of course, we the audience are disposed from the get-go to empathize with Henrietta

and to resent on her behalf the way she is treated. But there are moments in which the film's comedy might be thought to encourage us to "try on" Henry's point of view, so to speak. Consider the film's most famous gag, where Henry studies a toxicology textbook in the hopes of learning how to poison his new bride while she dangles on the edge of a cliff behind him trying to collect a fern. It is, perhaps, a moment where the viewer might catch herself thinking, "Come on, just turn around! Give her a nudge! Your problems will be solved!" That is, it's a moment where the audience member might come to attend to the special features of the second-person standpoint by noticing herself slipping out of it.



#### 4. Transformation from Individual to Collective

Let us turn our attention now to what the film has to say about Henry's transformation, from wanton egoist to a person capable of genuinely inter-personal recognition. Now, Cavell insists that a major preoccupation of the comedy of remarriage is transformation of a special kind. The transformation is not the sort in which a person comes into possession of an up-until-now elusive piece of ethical knowledge or a moral theory that she'd previously not had. Rather, the point of Cavell's saying that these films are wedded to a variety of perfectionism is that he thinks they involve

a transformation on the part of the characters with regard to their very being. The comedies of remarriage consider questions about, “what constitutes a union, what makes [two individuals] into one, what binds.”<sup>16</sup> At one point, Cavell calls the change undergone by a character a kind of “metamorphosis.”<sup>17</sup> And this metamorphosis is one in which happiness is achieved not through “the perennial and fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but [through] the examination and transformation of those needs.”<sup>18</sup>

So let’s consider the film’s handling of these ideas. When we meet him early on, Henry is interested only in what he owns—what he *has*—and in his status as a wealthy patrician. Indeed, his identity seems to be wrapped up in this status, as he thinks that what makes him himself is what he *is* rather than what he *does*. It’s acknowledged that this way of being sits uneasily in the modern America where the film is set. “You have managed in your own lifetime, Mr. Graham to keep alive traditions that were dead before you were born,” his butler remarks. If there’s any doubt that this is what the film is saying, consider the way in which Henry’s Ferrari can be understood as a metaphor for Henry himself. The Ferrari is introduced to us in the film’s opening scene. It’s established immediately that he admires the car because of what it is—for the status it has qua Ferrari; for its being a fine thing—despite the fact that it breaks down three times a week and therefore fails to perform its function. Never is there any indication, early on, that Henry himself wishes *to do anything*, or that his sense of worth is tied to any sort of well-functioning. His way of existing in the world simply involves having a certain stature, just like his car.

Now, when the moment of crisis arrives, and Henry is about to lose everything, the only way he can see to go forward—the only plausible alternative to suicide—is to find an easy way to go on existing as he has, maintaining his status. The way forward, as he sees it, is to get more resources. But we know, given the genre we’re working in, that the way out for Henry will involve transforming his need—transforming *himself*. The transformation occurs, more or less, as a result of

his acting *as if* he's married. By acting as if he's attending to Henrietta, by acting as if he cares for her, by pretending he is her friend, by feigning interest in her words, by saying the things that someone in love would say, Henry undergoes a metamorphosis. He play-acts his way into a genuine union with another person. Now, this idea that play-acting has a role in generating a union is nothing new. Think, for instance, of the famous scene in *It Happened One Night* where Peter and Ellie pretend to be a married couple in an attempt to throw some detectives off their trail. This, obviously, is a moment of bonding for the pair—one in which they take a step in the direction of a union by pretending they're already in one. But whereas the traditional way that these stories go is that the members of the pair slowly and perhaps a little bit grudgingly come to admit to themselves and then to the other that the union is something they desire, Henry's case is a bit more complicated. As a result of the kind of split-personality that he's begun to exhibit, Henry seems at times both to be filling the role of loving husband *and* to be wholeheartedly set on killing Henrietta. Even in the tender moments, what he "really" wants is ambiguous, in other words.

The picture, here, is one that ultimately differs substantially from the one seen in the other comedies of remarriage. Cavell, after all, emphasizes the ways in which the perfectionist strain in these films leads ultimately to a certain amount of congruence that's gained in the internal ordering of the person's motivations and emotions, creating a sort of internal harmony. *A New Leaf*, on the other hand, emphasizes a stark internal divide in its protagonist and ultimately highlights the way in which Henry's recognition of Henrietta *compels* him into community with her. This is most evident in the final scene, where Henrietta is thrashing around in the river screaming for help and Henry begins running away to leave her to drown. But, spotting the fern—the one she's discovered and the one she's named for him—Henry is stopped mid-stride and is more or less dragged grudgingly by his thoughts about Henrietta back to the water where he saves her. Their exchange, once she's reached safety, confirms his ambivalence about things.

Henrietta: Henry. Henry. Henry? I'll always be able to depend on you, won't I?  
All the rest of my life?

Henry: I'm afraid so.

It's almost as if Henry's recognition or acknowledgement of Henrietta compels him in the way that a categorical moral law might. What we get, then, is a less rosy view about what it is to acknowledge another person than we get in some of the other films. There's a darkness that comes with recognizing the other, we might say.

In what sense, then, is Henry transformed so that his way of living—or his way of *being*—will be different? In what sense has his need been transformed? The most profound way, I think, is that he is now capable of a form of activity or a way of life that wasn't previously available to him. What we learn is that Henry is now capable of engaging with people not simply to use them, but in concert with them. Consider the end of the film, where we see Henry canoeing with Henrietta—both going down the river, coordinating their rowing in a paradigmatic group activity. Or consider the closing moment where Henry agrees to begin teaching at Henrietta's school, and to go to work with her each day, and to grade papers at night alongside her. Engaging in genuine activity with another, in which the other is recognized as counting for something, is now a real possibility for Henry—something which seemed unthinkable at the film's outset. Of course, we see the transformation basically only in his behavior toward Henrietta. But we have to imagine that a whole new way of being is now available to him. He's now a being capable of community with one another—capable of acting *with* others. To stretch a little bit, perhaps, we can see this transformation as a moment that is Rousseauvian in spirit, in which a recognition of the other enables a person for the first time to join with others to act as a collective body.





Indeed, it seems as if this metamorphosis precipitates a change in Henry's fundamental needs as well. For by the end of the film, he seems compelled—by his own psychology—to enter in to forms of activity with Henrietta. He needs to look after her, he feels pulled to canoe with her, he sees that he must settle into a life with her. Whatever needs are at play here, they were certainly absent at the film's beginning.

It's worth pointing out that the film presents us also with a very different sort of community that contrasts with the sort of small community Henry enters into with Henrietta. When we encounter the house staff living in Henrietta's home, there is a sense in which they are a mini-society, living together with a common purpose. The purpose, however, is simply individual benefit—there's no general will here. Each wants to take her piece of the pie, and the relative lack of scarcity means that there's little for them to dispute over. It's not a life in which people form community over mutual recognition and live a life of activity together. It's a community based on a *modus vivendi*, born of convenience, based upon what Rousseau calls "the will of all." And if we're to think of the perfectionist project as one focused on the question of which ways of living are choiceworthy, we're given a model here of something that seems deficient. In Henry, however, we're

given a demonstration of the sort of transformation that would be necessary in order for life under the general will to be possible.

Now, I've focused on Henry's transformation, and have said little about Henrietta. In a way, this isn't particularly surprising, as the Henry's journey is the narrative's most obvious focus—though we might complain that the film shortchanges Henrietta a bit. Still, it's worth concluding this section by considering where Henrietta begins in the film and how it differs from where she ends up. Throughout, Henrietta is depicted as sweet and sincere, smart and caring, and kind to a fault. She is absentminded in a way that makes her oblivious to the ways in which she's being used—by her lawyer, by the house staff, and by Henry. So we might expect her trajectory over the course of the film to be one in which she improves by becoming a little more savvy. But that's not where the film goes. The major change in Henrietta, I take it, is that by the end, things external to her have changed in a way likely to alter her way of being. What I'm suggesting is that once Henrietta is recognized by Henry, she becomes a potential partner—a participant in collective activity. Once the house staff is thrown out, she is no longer being used. The objective conditions of her life have changed in such a way that her being itself changes. No longer is she merely an object there simply to be planned around or used. She is, in fact, a person, and part of a larger collective body, acting together with her partner. This seems to occasion a change in the way she sees herself. Upon discovering the new species of fern, she says, "Henry, I don't think I could have ever discovered it without you. You gave me confidence. You remember? You said that if being with you was going to give me confidence, I was going to be a very confident botanist. Well, you were right." Henrietta didn't need to undergo a change that would allow her to recognize others second-personally. But part of what she needed, apparently, was to be second-personally regarded by another. In fact, if one suspects—as I think it is reasonable to—that Henrietta was vaguely aware that she was being taken advantage of by her lawyer and by the house staff, then perhaps we can imagine that her newfound

self-confidence will enable her to *demand* second-personal respect from others that she'd previously not received.

## 5. Morality and Recognition

I began this chapter by noting that Cavell presents perfectionism as an orientation toward ethical inquiry that serves as a kind of alternative to standard moral theories like utilitarianism and Kantianism. Perfectionism's focus, he says, is the more everyday concern about how to live and how to go forward in the world in concert with others, rather than the heady issues of right and wrong. It bears emphasizing that Cavell does not take a commitment to perfectionism to require a rejection of morality—he says that it's technically consistent with Kant and Mill, for instance.<sup>19</sup> It's possible, after all, to think that morality's laws get a real normative grip on us while also thinking that the most pressing of practical questions surround how to live together with others over time. Yet, it's pretty clear that Cavell thinks there's real a difference in emphasis here, with perfectionism drawing attention to some practical issues over others, perhaps with the thought that these issues *ought* to be prioritized. Thus, perfectionism is in some sense a rival to the other views, even if technically consistent with them. And the comedies of remarriage, Cavell says, are primarily concerned with the issues at the heart of perfectionism. I agree with Cavell about where the primary concerns of the films he considers lie. But toward the beginning of the chapter, I also pointed out a way in which *A New Leaf* appears to depart from those earlier films. Namely, the film raises the issue of traditional morality—the issue of front page news—by placing a heinous plan of action at its center. What I want to suggest is that the film does so in a way that draws a connection between the two sorts of questions that seem to divide perfectionism and traditional moral theories—the question of right and wrong versus broader questions of how to live—and that this is a way in which the film makes a unique contribution to the philosophical discussion considered by Cavell.

According to Cavell, the comedies of remarriage are perfectionist in their orientation in part due to their focus on a particular moment in the life of an ethical agent—one in which a person confronts another, attempting to make herself intelligible, and provides a “justification of [her] moral standing.”<sup>20</sup> It’s a moment in which there is an attempt on the part of a person to gain recognition from another. But this moment “does not exist in utilitarianism,” Cavell tells us, for within utilitarianism, “the individual does not exist.”<sup>21</sup> Here I think he means that what exists, as far as the theory goes, is sensation, and that all moments of moral reflection surround production of pleasure rather than focus on persons and their standing. “Nor does [this moment] exist in Kant,” Cavell continues, where one is confronted not by persons but by “the moral law alone.”<sup>22</sup> By which he means, I think, that the Kantian believes we’re accountable to moral rules rather than to persons. What I want to suggest is that this way of understanding the relationship between perfectionist concerns about acknowledgment and traditional utilitarian and Kantian concerns about morality is misguided, and that *A New Leaf* goes much of the way to showing what’s misguided about it. As I read it, the film does not portray issues of recognition and acknowledgement as ones that are absent from traditional moral theory. Rather, it suggests that living together in recognition of others is the beginning of, or the basis of, the ability to see morality’s dictates as binding. To put this another way, to see someone else as making second-personal claims on one’s feelings and actions constitutes the beginnings of morality, and to be unable to recognize the other is to be incapable of moral deliberation and action at all. Of course, such recognition is not *all there is* to morality, nor to moral theory. Kantianism and utilitarianism represent, I think, two different ways of developing this initial impulse to recognize the other.

To see how the film deals with this issue, consider what I referred to in section 3 as Henry’s two practical failures. There I distinguished conceptually between his immorality and his failure to recognize Henrietta. However, as it plays out in the film, it isn’t that Henry makes two distinct

mistakes when he plots Henrietta's death: a failure to recognize her and a failure to recognize the moral law. Rather, the truth is that the moral question never really arises for him because the sort of second-personal concerns that give rise to the moral impulse are simply absent in him. Try, at the beginning of the film, to talk Henry out of carrying out the deed by pointing to moral and rational strictures, and he'll be unmoved. No amount of reasoning is going to reorient the man for whom others count for nothing. But one imagines that once he's undergone his transformation, references to the moral law might actually begin to register. We don't know, of course, as the film concludes without showing how exactly Henry's life is going to go moving forward, but once he's capable of seeing others as potential friends and community-mates, it seems likely that moral concerns for others will begin to creep in. The moral question arises precisely when one begins to ask herself difficult questions about how to act in a world full of people who count, who are worthy of recognition, and who are potential collaborators and community-mates.

This is to suggest that the film pushes back in an important way against a central thought of Cavell's. Cavell seems to believe that the morally upright person, who respects the moral law and respects the constraints of rationality, does so *in lieu of* or *as an alternative to* acting on what she owes to others. She acts for the sake of maximizing pleasure or for the sake of the law, but not for the sake of other people. But this is mistaken, I think. What Kant, for instance, thinks is required of us by the moral law is the recognition of others as ends in themselves. The reason why Henry can so breezily embrace a plan that flies in the face of the moral law is that he doesn't recognize others as ends in themselves. And when he does formulate the plan, what's wrong with it is not that it violates the moral law *as opposed to* that it fails to recognize Henrietta as a person. Rather, it violates the moral law *in virtue of* its failure to recognize others. Our love for others, and the community that we build with them, seems in many ways to be an extension of the fundamental impulse to recognize another. Kant's kingdom of ends, in other words, will be a realm of universal recognition. Likewise, if we

think about what the utilitarian will require of us—at least on the most plausible rendering—it is that the pleasure of individual persons registers or counts for something. Henry’s plot against Henrietta is wrong because it undermines *her* happiness. So it’s not that utility matters *instead of* persons. Rather, the idea is that recognizing persons requires recognizing their happiness as mattering. And so the impulse to maximize comes once we recognize all people as mattering and we want to figure out how to proceed.

This is how Darwall, for instance, understands matters. He’s interested in second-personal relationships not as a supplement to morality, but as its ground. *A New Leaf*, I think, is on to this point as well. For Henry’s failure of morality and his failure of recognition are really one and the same. And it’s quite plausible to think that when the film ends, the transformation that he’s undergone has remedied his amorality in addition to making him ready for deeper human friendship and community. So *A New Leaf*, rather than advocating for perfectionism as an alternative to modern morality, reveals perfectionism’s central concerns as modern morality’s basis.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on the Register of a Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 173.

<sup>2</sup> Precise criteria for membership in the genre are never spelled out by Cavell. One might assume that because *A New Leaf* doesn’t involve a remarriage, the film would be ruled out. However, Cavell sometimes seems willing to include films—such as *His Girl Friday*—in the genre even when no remarriage occurs.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 159.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> This commitment, which is more or less the basis for the burgeoning discipline of film-philosophy, is defended in some detail in Stephen Mulhall's *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2002) and in Thomas Wartenberg's *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> *Cities of Words*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>11</sup> For Cavell's discussion of these matters prior to his work on film, see his "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 238–266.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (October, 1977): 36-49.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, 18, and *ibid.*, ix.

<sup>16</sup> Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>19</sup> Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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