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Emersonian Moral Perfectionism: An Alternative Ethics – But in What Sense?

Abstract. Stanley Cavell's *Emersonian moral perfectionism* is not a complete theory of moral philosophy alongside utilitarianism or deontology; it seeks to get a grip of a dimension in *any* moral thinking, less of a hierarchy of what to value most in life and more a sketch on how we come to value anything in the first place. Emersonian perfectionism tries to understand what it means to be a moral subject, an authentic self, and to do this it cannot stay solely within the conventional sub-disciplinary boundaries of philosophy. First and foremost, Cavell intends his outlook as a way of discovering the philosophical uniqueness of Emersonian thought; he asks us to take very seriously what Emerson has to say on the self and its coming to itself. But such themes are never confined within the narrow framework of a particular author, essayist or a poet, and Cavell traces related topics in works of art as diverse as Ibsen's *Doll House* and the poetry of Whitman, philosophers as seemingly distant as Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

While Cavell is oftentimes suggestive rather than elaborate on the relevance of Wittgenstein and Heidegger for his version of moral perfectionism, a critical reader ought to spell out the senses in which the two thinkers *are* essential to the perfectionist project. In brief, neither one of them had much to say on ethics by way of explicit commentary, yet both of them have given rise to a host of reasonable studies in ethics, *following* them. Thus philosophers like Cora Diamond and Iris Murdoch have made their name drafting a new kind of ethics, sometimes bluntly dubbed Wittgensteinian moral philosophy, and authors such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jean Luc-Nancy have done the same in the Heideggerian footsteps, drawing attention to his "originary ethics".

The key issue regarding the aforementioned exemplars in moral philosophy, and arguably Emersonian ethics, is that they speak to ethical issues without explicitly addressing ethics; they touch on something crucial to our ethical conduct without laying out ethical norms. They are not so much interested in the normativity of ethics in the first place. They seem to grasp that ethics has to do with something more fundamental, perhaps something like an original encounter with the being of the world, a genuine attentiveness to the particularity of our experience, rendering ethics possible in the first place. Such an outlook on morality may not be unambiguously called ethics, at least not as something separate from epistemology and ontology, yet its affinities with contemporary moral philosophy are wide-ranging, in particular, with the work of Iris Murdoch.

What Stanley Cavell has famously dubbed *Emersonian moral perfectionism* – or simply *Emersonian perfectionism* – is not a complete theory of moral philosophy alongside utilitarianism or deontology. Emersonian perfectionism, rather, seeks to get a grip of a dimension in *any* moral thinking, less a hierarchy of what to value most in life, more a sketch on how we come to value anything in the first place – probing the everyday quality of my life and the state of my soul, the very rudiments of what it means to be a moral subject. As a term, Emersonian perfectionism is misleading, inasmuch as it may conjure up false connotations, first, of perfectionism in the everyday sense of the word, and second, of *moral per-*

fectionism in the standard meaning of the term¹. Among other things, to be sure, Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism *is* a re-interpretation of the standard tradition of moral perfectionism, but the differences are so remarkable as to make it somewhat misleading to stress this terminological connection. A fresh vision on the hidden potentiality of human life, seeking its ultimate goal not in a perfection of society to be understood as a *telos*, but in the perpetual goallessness of this-worldly life itself, Emersonian perfectionism strives for perfection only in the simple sense of *endless* perfectibility of each and every particular moment of our existence.

In addition to the difference of teleology, the thematic emphases in Emersonian perfectionism are divergent from the traditional ethical theories; instead of front-page moral dilemmas often discussed in conjunction with traditional theories, what is at stake are questions such as interpersonal recognition, and the related difficulty of moral conversion – seeing myself in another person, ready to take on the challenge of change, relying on the exemplary friend to help me overcome my current self. First and foremost, Cavell intends his outlook as a way into discovering the philosophical uniqueness of Emersonian thought; he asks us to take very seriously what Emerson has to say on the self and its coming to itself. Emersonian perfectionism endeavors to make sense of what it means to be a self, and to do this it cannot stay solely within the conventional sub-disciplinary boundaries of philosophy. Indeed, the view resists any sharp dichotomies in philosophy, a splitting of the field into ethics and ontology, for the question concerning the fundamental elements of our self belongs in some ways to both – or perhaps ultimately to neither. Given the intertwinement of such thematics, it becomes apparent how Cavell's reading of perfectionism is not confined to the narrow framework of a particular author, essayist or a poet, and Cavell is more than keen on discovering related topics in works of art as diverse as Ibsen's *Doll House* and the poetry of Whitman, philosophers as seemingly distant as Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

In what follows, my objective is to provide an overview of Emersonian moral perfectionism, primarily with the help of Cavell, and secondarily with the help of Emerson and other classical and contemporary philosophers pertaining to the matter. I will begin with introductory remarks as to how to position perfectionism with respect to other philosophical thematics. Thereafter I will outline the senses in which Emersonian perfectionism is not a competing ethical theory, how it differs from the standard versions of moral perfectionism, and why it resists divisions of the field of philosophy into sub-branches. How Emersonian perfectionism relates to its chief philosophical source, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), will be my concern increasingly towards the end of my article. To be sure, perfectionism is not the only interpretation of Emerson by Cavell, but it is in many respects more important than his other views, finding its original formulation in his Carus lectures from 1988, and published under the title *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990). The book and its various strands of perfectionist thought have a fairly complicated, even a convoluted structure, and one must thus be cautious with any attempts at treating the contents of the book systematically and in a structured way – something I will to some extent attempt in this article². Throughout my discussion, particu-

¹ Throughout my discussion, the term 'perfectionism', unless otherwise mentioned, refers to *Emersonian moral perfectionism* as opposed to perfectionism in the everyday sense (or the standard meaning of *moral perfectionism*, which will be discussed in the second section below). The expression 'Emersonian perfectionism' is used as another short-cut for Cavell's Emersonian moral perfectionism.

² In addition to the three lectures dealing with perfectionism from various points of view, the book contains a thirty-page introduction and a thirty-page (!) preface, and curiously enough, many of the most important insights are expressed in these introductory chapters.

lar accents will fall on the perfectionist notion of truthfulness to oneself, the related necessity to change, and how this may not be done without the help of another human being. Finally, I will be adding some critical reflections on Cavell's stripe of Emersonian moral perfectionism.

Clearing the Path: The Place of Ethics

Since the very idea of a perfectionist ethics may be somewhat difficult to digest – the way in which it should be kept separate from ethics conventionally conceived – it is appropriate to begin the discussion of Emersonian perfectionism with introductory notes. To be precise about the terms, Cavell nowhere explicitly states that his version of perfectionism would even constitute an *ethics*, strictly speaking, at least not of the traditional stripe, and while the outlook has high ethical relevance, one should try to explain how perfectionism finds its place in relation to the other realms of philosophy. Let me begin with a couple of remarks on the relationship between *perfectionism* and Cavell's whimsical interpretation of *skepticism* – both of these among his key philosophical terms. To start with, skepticism in the Cavellian framework amounts to the human tendency to reject the inherent finitude of the human condition, in a word, as the human denial of the human, or in another formulation, an argument of the self with itself (Cavell 1990: 64–100). In Cavell's own writings, the projects of making sense of skepticism and sketching moral perfectionism remain unfortunately separate from one another, though there are occasional attempts to bridge the gap. Permit me here to briefly outline, then, my own interpretation of their intertwinement – mentioned here to highlight the coherence of Cavell's project, at times hidden from himself³.

In my interpretation, then, Cavellian skepticism and Emersonian moral perfectionism are ultimately two complementary aspects of the same set of issues, one wearing the face of tragedy, the other the face of opportunity. Adding to the above characterization of skepticism as the human denial of the human, another central notion for Cavell, the *ordinary*⁴, provides the everyday context-bound criteria for putting up with skepticism – though they cannot provide a definitive solution against it, as Cavell takes Wittgenstein's later philosophy to show. Moral perfectionism, in turn, consists in a redemption or a recovery from this inherent split within the self, a real possibility of transcending it with the help of a human friend, through an affirmation of the ordinary. To content ourselves with a general manner of speaking here, skepticism appears thus to be a negative way of framing the inherent duality of human existence, while perfectionism explicates a positive side to the tragedy, a feasible means of withstanding our human frailty.

To further facilitate the entry into the thematics of perfectionism, important comparative insights might be garnered from the two great classics of the last century close to Cavell's heart: Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Why the two? Whereas Wittgenstein's centrality to the Cavellian project stems from his very early interest in the Austrian philosopher; Heidegger's appearance in this particular context may at first appear slightly arbitrary, and Cavell (1979: 131) himself calls the association somewhat of a coincidence. But the apologetic

³ What I will be suggesting in this paragraph, then, goes beyond what Cavell himself explicitly says. In an interview of his philosophy, however, I had a chance to test the claims I will be making, instigating Cavell to comment: *I think that's very fair, I think that's an awfully good way to think about it.* The interview (2008) is largely unpublished; see the bibliography for additional information.

⁴ The concept of the *ordinary*, as used by Cavell, designates generally things belonging to ordinary life: ordinary language, ordinary activities, the "commonness" of life. In this light, Stephen Mulhall's book on Cavell, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (1994), is appropriately named.

remark may cloud the sense in which thinkers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger *are* essential to the perfectionist project. In short, without denying any of their decisive differences, they do stand in a somewhat similar situation regarding their respective stances toward philosophical ethics. What I have in mind is that neither one of them had much to say on ethics by way of explicit commentary, yet both of them have given rise to a host of reasonable studies in ethics, *following* them. Thus philosophers like Cora Diamond or Iris Murdoch have made their name drafting a new kind of ethics, sometimes bluntly dubbed Wittgensteinian moral philosophy, and authors like Emmanuel Levinas and Jean Luc-Nancy have done the same in the Heideggerian footsteps, drawing attention to his “originary ethics”⁵.

I am using this admittedly superficial observation on the history of contemporary philosophy attempting to make sense of the way in which Cavell frames his perfectionist ethics. I am not implying that Heideggerian original ethics and Wittgensteinian moral philosophy would somehow be one and the same project; only that there are reasonable strands of genuine ethics left out in numerous contemporary conversations on the theme, and that perhaps both projects try to snap onto the deficiency. The key issue regarding both, and arguably Emersonian ethics, is that they speak to ethical issues without explicitly addressing ethics; they touch on something crucial to our ethical conduct without laying out ethical norms. They are not so much interested in the normativity of ethics in the first place, for they seem to grasp that ethics has to do with something more fundamental, perhaps something like an original encounter with the being of the world, a genuine attentiveness to the particularity of our experience, rendering ethics possible in the first place.

Such an outlook on morality may not be unambiguously called ethics, at least not as something separate from epistemology and ontology⁶. Cavell notes the presence of “something like moral (or religious) urgency” throughout Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, and Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and *What is Called Thinking?*, yet he finds it crucial that the ethical in these works is not “accorded the standing of a separate field of philosophical study” (Cavell 1989: 10-11). In the Carus lectures, one finds a somewhat stronger expression: “a tone of continual moral urgency or religious or artistic pathos” in Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Emerson, and Cavell again underscores the inseparability of the theme from intersecting areas of philosophical concerns (Cavell 1990: 61).

While the notion that the different areas of philosophy are ultimately entwined goes to the heart of Cavell’s understanding of perfectionism, he is not very careful to spell out what such an entwinement exactly means. Regarding epistemology and aesthetics, with his versatile references to skepticism and the arts, a connection is strongly suggested, but his ties to ontology – in this narrow sense Cavell may have been a victim of the Anglo-American legacy of Wittgenstein⁷ – remain somewhat vague. A similar vagueness plagues his allusions to the “moral or religious urgency” in Wittgenstein and Heidegger, and particularly the religious aspect is left to very little elucidation. Regarding the latter, Cavell’s remarks are mostly confined to noting the surface similarity between the Emersonian striving for the authentic life and the Heideggerian distinction between authentic (*eigentlich*) and inauthen-

⁵ For accessible general works, see particularly Murdoch 1970; Levinas 1989; Diamond 1991; Nancy 1996. In what follows, however, my remarks will be mostly confined to Cavell, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, thus hoping to avoid excessive swelling of my subject.

⁶ This raises the question concerning the relationship between Emersonian perfectionism and the problem of normativity: if perfectionism refuses to call itself an ethics, how might it have normative bearing in the first place? The short answer is that we are interested in morality rather than moralism (see Bates 2003). I will come back to this; let me now only mention that Cavell highlights often and in various ways the inseparability of different branches of philosophy; see, in particular Cavell 1990: xxix, 2, 5, 7, 46, 61; 1989: 10–11, 40; 1995: 28.

⁷ I will come back to this in the final section below.

tic (*uneigentlich*) existence drawn in *Being and Time* (Cavell 1990: 2; Heidegger 1927: 126-130)⁸.

Whereas a comparison between Emerson and Heidegger dwelling exclusively on this famous pair of concepts remains ultimately somewhat superficial, it is useful for stressing the sense in which the two thinkers are approaching ethical questions through forays into different compartments and ways of being in the world – rather than trying to fashion prescriptive moral theories in the traditional sense⁹. But the Heideggerian entwinement of ethics and ontology allows us to go further than Cavell here. In so far as *Being and Time* seeks to get to the heart of fundamental ontology understood as the encounter of *Dasein* with primordial being, it is neither “ethics” nor “ontology” narrowly conceived, for it precedes divisions of the field of philosophy into such sub-disciplines. His later texts commenting on *Being and Time*, for instance the *Letter on Humanism*, can be very explicit on sub-disciplinary divisions in philosophy resulting in a loss of original thinking (Heidegger 1946: 7-8). If the question of being (*Sein*) is ultimately connected with our inhabiting a world (*Dasein*), it becomes clear that ethical-existential matters are omnipresent in ontology, or to use a more radical formulation, *are* ontological concerns (Heidegger 1927). But Cavell goes no further than to suggest that the distinction between authentic and inauthentic being opens up for its reader a possibility for genuinely authentic being in the world.

Speaking of Wittgenstein’s perfectionism, Cavell is a little more explicit, but here too, the final interpretation is left to the reader. Cavell refers to a remark recounted by Wittgenstein’s friend, doctor Drury, according to which the problems treated in *Philosophical Investigations* are “being seen from a religious point of view” (Cavell 1989: 40). This somewhat vague comment may be supplemented by some fairly recent studies verging on a perfectionist reading of the later Wittgenstein¹⁰. For Cavell, Wittgenstein’s later thought provides an exemplary case of the argument of the self with itself: the soliloquizing philosophical narrator constantly questioning and seeking to make better sense of his own philosophical suggestions (Cavell 1990: 64-100). To supplement this, we may suggest that the Wittgensteinian refusal to present definitive theses in his later philosophy may be understood as a quasi-ethical striving for keeping the mind constantly clear and fresh for a perspicuous examination of the surrounding world¹¹.

With his allusions to Wittgensteinian perfectionism Cavell seems to be getting at something similar, but it is not entirely clear what he means with the “religious” aspect here. What is “religious” about the view is perhaps the seriousness and a certain unconditionality with which Wittgenstein approaches the problems, an uncompromising insistence on keeping our seeing clear and attentive. Cavell himself has read *Philosophical Investigations* as a case of confessional literature, where the author is continuously struggling with problems bewitching him – in a manner somewhat similar to St. Augustine in the *Confessions* or Kierkegaard in his religious writings (Cavell 1958: 70-72; 1964: 217). The juxtaposition is

⁸ Stephen Mulhall (1996a: 14) is right, I think, in making the general observation that Cavell’s Emersonian perfectionism is centrally indebted to Heidegger.

⁹ Heidegger repeatedly underscores that he does not wish to make value judgments as to which kind of life, an authentic or an inauthentic one, would be better or more worthwhile (Heidegger 1927: 113–130); and in fact, the authentic life is an “*existentiell* modification” of the inauthentic life, and not vice versa (Heidegger 1927: 130). This can be linked to his general emphasis on phenomenology’s dealing not with the “what” but the “how” of experience (Heidegger 1927: 27).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Mulhall 1994; Neiman 1999; Laugier 2002; Raïd 2002.

¹¹ Such a reading comes close to that developed by Oskari Kuusela, who argues that the resistance of the later Wittgenstein to presenting philosophical theses has essentially to do with his struggle to keep philosophy free from dogmatism (Kuusela 2008).

not as arbitrary as it may at first sound, if we factor in the incessant striving for self-clarification and complete sincerity omnipresent in Wittgenstein's book – and his profound admiration for authors such as St. Augustine and Kierkegaard.

As in the case of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, a perfectionist ethics does not constitute a separate branch of thought in the case of Emerson either (Cavell 1990: xxix; 1995: 28). Like Heidegger, Emerson views the problem of ethics not as a question concerning our ability to follow preordained norms, but as an existential issue going to the very heart of how we should attend to our existence in the world; and like Wittgenstein, he is very uncompromising in what he will say or abstain from saying regarding the proper conduct and the level of attention directed at the world around us. For Emerson, the decisive question in ethics is not how to justify my ethical actions, but quite simply: *How shall I live?* (CW 6: f 1860, 1)¹². In Cavell's formulation, Emerson differs from other philosophers in asking "the philosophical mood so purely, so incessantly, giving one little other intellectual amusement or eloquence or information, little other argument or narrative... save the importance of philosophy, of thinking itself" (Cavell 1980: 152). I like this formulation were it not for the somewhat excessive emphasis on the importance of *philosophy* understood as thinking: philosophy for Emerson, to the contrary, is always entwined with the concrete reality of life, and stressing the importance of thinking may unnecessarily deemphasize this aspect¹³.

In Emersonian philosophy, "the importance of thinking" means incessant striving for honesty and sincerity, such that life would become real here and now. "To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom" (CW 3: exp 1844, 35). Each moment of human life is an ethical one, because each moment we can see or fail to see. To borrow an expression from the later Wittgenstein (1953: §1), also evoked by Cavell, the explanations in Emerson's philosophy "come to an end", ideally at each moment (Cavell 1989: 116). When a philosopher places emphasis on ordinary experiences, the ultimate implication is that *all* experiences will become philosophically and morally significant. "To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine" (CW 2: hist 1841, 8). This sentence from Emerson's "History" provided the motto for the first edition of Nietzsche's *Gay Science* – though he was careful to efface the word 'saint' (Nietzsche 1882: 343; Kaufmann 1974: 7–8) – and we may take the aphorism as emblematic for much of what is essential to Emerson's and Nietzsche's ethico-ontological thought.

The question of ethics and ethical conduct, then, finds a somewhat unconventional orientation in Emersonian perfectionism. In a sense, Cavell's project abandons the traditional notion of ethics, at least conventionally understood, and in doing this it deliberately blends the boundaries between ethics and other fields of philosophy. In such a reading, the domain of ethics crucially overlaps not only the fields of aesthetics and epistemology, but also Cavell's views on language and thinking, our incessant need to clarify our words, which is in itself an ethical act since it has to do with our personal stake at the words we use and speak. Thus philosophical thinking as such appears in some important ways ineliminably ethical, and in his book *Cities of Words* Cavell goes so far as to call perfectionism "the moral calling of philosophy" (Cavell 2004: 2). This implies that we have a quasi-ethical

¹² My procedure for citing Emerson is to name the volume of the *Collected* (or *Complete*) *Works*, followed by an abbreviation of the essay title cited, and the page number(s).

¹³ While I sympathize with a perfectionist interpretation of Emerson, I am by no means among those (such as Cavell) thinking that we should downplay the proto-pragmatistic strains in Emerson. My PhD dissertation *Self as World – The New Emerson* (due for publication as a book in the near future) contains an elaborate discussion of both Emersonian perfectionism and Emersonian pragmatism; for another persuasive synthesis, consult Saito 2004.

stake at any philosophical words we use. Cavell's later book is explicit in linking his views on perfectionism with his philosophy of the ordinary, suggesting that Emersonian perfectionism ultimately renders possible an altered relationship to the world as manifested by the ordinary phenomena of our lives (Cavell 2004). Cavell (1990: 46) stresses how such philosophical concerns are somewhat removed not only from ethics understood as moral theories but also reasoning understood as argumentation. What he calls Emersonian moral perfectionism is thus his response to the above quoted Emersonian notion of "wisdom, or living the greatest number of good hours, as finding the journey's end in every step of the road (a description at once of a good way of life and of thinking – philosophy as journey)" (Cavell 1989: 10-11, 114).

The State of my Soul

In order to gain a closer perspective into Emersonian moral perfectionism, the next task confronting us is to make sense of the way in which perfectionism is not a competing moral theory in ethics. In various introductory books on moral philosophy, we are accustomed to finding a host of different theories, such as utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, and libertarian ethics, and their advantages and disadvantages weighed in and discussed. The common feature shared by many of these theories is that they take some things, for example, the consequences of our actions, as the most relevant factor deciding the morality of those actions, while placing less weight on some other things, emphasized in turn by other theories. But before we can properly explain why Emersonian perfectionism does not neatly align with such theories, we must brush one possible misunderstanding aside: that perfectionism *might* mistakenly be taken for a theory in ethics alongside other theories. Indeed, one of the reasons why Cavell wants to hang onto the term 'perfectionism' is that he wants to reinterpret the tradition of *moral perfectionism*, which in the standard sense would refer to an ethical theory, and such a standard interpretation of perfectionism forms the general background to which he is responding with his work on perfectionism.

Among various other matters, Cavell's lectures on perfectionism constitute a counter-argument against John Rawls's discussion of perfectionism in his contemporary classic *Theory of Justice*, where the author in one late chapter takes up varieties of perfectionism, arguing against their compatibility with democracy (Rawls 1971: 325-332; Cavell 1990: 3-4). The chapter distinguishes between a moderate and a strong version of perfectionism, and since a rejection of the former suffices for the rejection of the latter, it will be enough for my purposes as well: "the sole principle of a teleological theory directing society to arrange institutions and to define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, science and culture" (Rawls 1971: 325)¹⁴. According to this view, perfectionism is a theory alongside other theories in ethics, singling out the maximization of human excellence as the decisive factor in making moral decisions. It is precisely such an understanding of perfectionism that the Cavellian-Emersonian version resists, on at least three fronts.

To mention the clearest point of difference first, Cavell vehemently opposes the interpretation of perfectionism as something inherently elitist; on the contrary, the opening question of his lectures (to which he will respond negatively) is directed at Rawls: "Is Moral Perfectionism inherently elitist?" (Cavell 1990: 1). In contrast to the Rawlsian critique of

¹⁴ In his analysis Rawls abandons moderate perfectionism and hence perfectionism in general as being incompatible with democracy (Rawls 1971: 325-330). For critical commentary, consult Cavell 1990: 1-32, 48; Hurka 1993; Mulhall 1994: 268-269; Goodman 1997; Conant 2001.

perfectionism, Cavell strives to show that *Emersonian* perfectionism is compatible with democracy, and in bringing throughout his lectures Emersonian perfectionism closer to the Nietzschean version in his *Untimely Meditations* – Rawls’s paradigm example of elitist perfectionism – he goes against the hotly debated issue of Nietzsche allegedly defending the elitist idea of human individuals living but for the production of great geniuses.¹⁵ The Emersonian perfectionist pays attention to the state of soul of an individual, and this perspective makes up an essential component of democracy. For there to be genuine democracy, society must be composed of human beings, with their own distinctive voices, own selves, and thus Emersonian perfectionism, so far as it functions as an internal critique of democracy, enables rather than disables democracy¹⁶. Furthermore, as an outlook on life Emersonian perfectionism is open to each and everyone of us: all people may lead an Emersonian-perfectionist life.

More importantly, Emersonian perfectionism stands apart from the standard meaning of moral perfectionism in not being a *teleological* theory (Cavell 1990: 48; 2004: 222). This is to say that perfection is not a final state or a goal waiting to be realized somewhere in the future, not a fixed *telos* orienting all our attempts to come closer to it: a crucial component of the perfectionist life is its goallessness (Cavell 2004: 3, 13; Saito 2001: 395). Thus we may not say that Emersonian perfectionism is concerned with human excellence, or such-like values singled out from others; what matters is the particularity of the moral situations we find ourselves in, and this will decide what to value in each case. Emersonian perfectionism appears again sharply distinct from perfectionism in the everyday sense of the word: whereas a perfectionist, say, in singing may realistically hope to attain perfect pitch through rigorous practice, such a notion of absolute perfection makes no sense in perfectionist ethics¹⁷.

If there is no teleology whatsoever involved, then every particular moment is an end in itself; goallessness, as it were, turns into a goal in itself; “*each* state of the self is, so to speak, final”, or using elsewhere a different formulation in conjunction with the word “perfect”, “each state constitutes a world” (Cavell 1990: 3, 12). At each particular moment the self experiences not only a particular perspective into the world, but the world as it were in its entirety, so far as the world appears to the self. In a way, this is a logical consequence of the ethical notion of the endless perfectibility of each particular moment. Perfectibility confronts us as an endless task, the same one over and over again: that each moment be perfect. Thus the Emersonian perfectionist has only one goal, to manage to live on amidst the goallessness of life itself; when each moment of life is already complete in itself, there are no reasons for aspiring after goals transcendent to life itself¹⁸.

¹⁵ See Nietzsche 1874a: 384–385; Cavell 1990: 48–53; Mulhall 1994: 268–269. In the case of Nietzsche, we may indeed raise the question as to what extent he is – forgetting the stereotypes – really an elitist thinker. For example Conant (2001) and Goodman (1997) persuasively argue that Nietzsche’s perfectionism is not nearly as elitist as has often been suggested.

¹⁶ For various commentaries on the relationship between Emersonian perfectionism and democracy, see Cavell 1990: 3; Conant 1997: 184; Saito 2001: 396–397; Mulhall 1994: 268–270; Goodman 1997: 174–177. For a fruitful approach on related themes not directly related to perfectionism, consult Kateb 1995.

¹⁷ Although Cavell draws himself apart from the standard definition of perfectionism, his perfectionism maintains some important ties to non-Emersonian perfectionism. According to Hurka, perfectionism in the standard sense of the term lays emphasis not only our duties towards others but also towards ourselves, and perfectionism is the foundation of all ethics (Hurka 1993: 5, 190; 1998).

¹⁸ The denial of Emersonian moral perfectionism’s being a *teleological* theory leaves out, so a critic might argue, the possibility that the “perfection” envisaged in perfectionism amounts not to a lack of *telos* whatsoever, but only a *telos* that would be attainable. I note in passing that certain religiously inclined thinkers may regard the very striving for an *unattainable telos* as the ultimate meaning of human existence. If this makes sense, then Cavellian

Thirdly, to push the distinction between the two versions of perfectionism one step further, we may elucidate the sense in which Emersonian perfectionism is not really an ethical theory at all. Aside the obvious point that Cavell's version of perfectionism is not intended to be set alongside competing theories in moral philosophy, let me now explain what its not being a theory might mean. One possible answer would be that there is no closed list of characteristics, let alone premises, arguments or conclusions, that would make up the outlook of Emersonian perfectionism; indeed, as Cavell himself repeatedly insists, his stripe of perfectionism is open to revision (Cavell 1990: 4-5; 2004: 14). Another line of answer might set out from the view that Emersonian perfectionism is not a fictional model of how we might theoretically construe our being a self in the world; rather, it amounts to a description of the fundamental aspects of our existence that cannot be done away with.

But different arguments may be presented against the latter view at the outset; we might retort that any (no matter how allegedly foundational) description of the fundamental aspects of our existence will be normatively charged and value-laden, for any description will have to make choices as to which terms to prefer over other terms, which things to highlight over other things. Furthermore, Emersonian perfectionism itself toys with the notion of utopia, another fictional world towards which our being in the real world aspires after, thus indirectly amounting to something more than a mere description. In a word, no purely realistic description of our being a self in the world is possible; any description is also a utopia, an expression of an ideal.

I am mentioning the two possible ways of resisting being called a theory (the open-endedness and the descriptive character of Emersonian perfectionism) because I think Cavell oscillates somewhere between the two options. At any rate, he seems to consider his version of moral perfectionism of such decisive importance that any moral theory must take it into account. He considers the focus of perfectionism on the everyday quality of human life to be more primary than the various factors esteemed in competing moral theories. Like many a reasonable critic of contemporary moral philosophy, he opposes the tendency of philosophers to spend disproportionately much time in discussing what he calls "front-page moral dilemmas" (Cavell 2004: 11), such as euthanasia or abortion, forgetting one of the most fundamental questions in ethics, concerning the quality of our everyday lives. For Cavell, the latter question deserves a place in any moral theory, and he notes the pertinence of the matter in the long history of philosophy (Cavell 1990: 62; 2004: 11, 24).

Emersonian perfectionism, then, is "something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul" (Cavell 1990: 2). Such a call for critical self-scrutiny perhaps partly explains why Cavell sees perfectionism not as an ethical theory but as a precondition for ethics to begin with¹⁹. The idea, we may suppose, is that philosophy as such contains within itself an ethical challenge: it calls on us to examine ourselves, and to change the course of our lives if needed. A certain responsiveness transcending specific allegiances to morally charged ways of prioritizing certain things over others is needed before an authentic ethical life becomes possible in the first place.

And here I reach the occasion for my first serious criticism against Cavell: if the perfectionist project concerns before all my life, my coming to myself, how could it really count as a full-fledged ethics, which first and foremost should make much of our responsibilities

perfectionism may be seen as somewhat akin to religious perfectionism, which Cavell himself never explicitly denies.

¹⁹ See Cavell 1990: xxxi, 2, 62; 1994: 142. Good commentaries are Mulhall 1994: 279–282; 1996b: 353; Saito 2004.

for one another?²⁰ This is one of the problematic issues at the heart of Emersonian perfectionism. Before proceeding to give a more detailed answer with the help of Cavell's reading of Emerson, let me suggest some general pathways as to how one might get closer to finding an answer. In the first place, the weight of our responsibility for ourselves is not ultimately contingent on our ability or inability to genuinely attend to the suffering of others, since genuine empathy presupposes a certain minimum of self-love — in line with the classical view of Aristotle's *Ethics* of the friend as "another myself"²¹ — while the reverse (that loving ourselves would presuppose loving others) may not hold. Cavell appears to think, indeed, that our obligations towards ourselves are in some important ways more fundamental than those towards others; thus *truthfulness towards oneself* unveils itself as perhaps the most essential single feature of perfectionism (Cavell 1990: 1).

Such a view may be criticized on the grounds that it misses the dialectical nature of self-love, how self-recognition is not possible without recognition from others, seeming to grasp only one side of the matter. Thus somewhere along the lines of the Hegelian understanding of the fundamental reciprocity of human recognition, we might insist that our being self-conscious subjects is not possible in the first place without a mirroring relationship with another self-consciousness.²² Of course, such a notion runs in a circle, though hopefully not in a vicious one: our being able to give recognition to others presupposes our being moral subjects, which in turn presupposes recognition from others... Here we are facing what might be termed the paradox of our being with others, and pressed to take a stance one way or another, I would incline toward a Hegelian rather than a Cavellian view on the matter. Permit me next to have a look at the issue in the light of Emerson's essays.

Self against World

In my sketch so far, the most essential characteristics of perfectionism have turned out to be the individual responsibility for one's self, and the related necessity to change our lives if needed. At times Cavell will take the truthfulness towards oneself to consist in responsiveness to the humanity in oneself; thus he is keen on quoting Emerson's simple statement "I will stand here for humanity" (CW 2: sr 1841, 35) as exemplifying both the realization of one's humanity within and standing for such a feat before others (Cavell 1990: 1, 9). It is remarkable, then, that Cavell's version of perfectionism captures at once the high classical ideal of being and becoming human, as well as the versatile and less flattering obstacles that such a project inevitably comes up against in the modern world of confusion and constraint. It must not be forgotten, indeed, that besides being a positive outlook on life, Cavellian perfectionism diagnoses some of the most persistent threats before our journey for self-realization: the looming adulthood cynicism, our internal resistance to change, the inescapable fear of being ashamed of our own condition and frailty, and the leveling

²⁰ Cavell faces the question in 1990: 2.

²¹ Aristotle uses the phrase (or to be precise, the phrase "another himself") a couple of times in the Book IX of *Nicomachean Ethics*. See Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1166a, 1170b.

²² In my view — though I cannot take up the subject in any detail here — Emerson's affinity with Hegel (and arguably Fichte and Schelling) could be crucial for a better understanding of his stripe of perfectionism. Indirect evidence for this is provided by the observation that some of the French followers of Hegel, most famously Alexandre Kojève, deal with topics a Cavellian philosopher will easily recognize as (also) Emersonian-perfectionist. I mention as examples the recognition of oneself in an Other, and the related desire to transform one's particularity into universality, what ultimately amounts to the meaning of life. (See Kojève, in particular, 1939: 11-34.) For Hegel's theory of recognition, see Hegel 1807; for some observations on Emerson's Hegelian strands, consult Stievermann 2007: 315-319.

tendency of human society and culture. “Why is this perpetual pain preferred to the pain of turning?” (Cavell 1990: xxxi) – this is one of Cavell’s most moving rhetorical questions touching upon the ethically important problem of moral sloppiness. But the pain delivers a promise. “It is today that you are to... waken and to consecrate yourself to culture,... to domesticate it gradually, which means bring it home, as part, now, of your everyday life” (Cavell 1990: 55).

Thus we find at the core of perfectionism a two-fold relationship to the world around us: At best, the intersubjective reality of human relationships is not only the ultimate reserve of beauty in our lives but also our primary impetus for self-overcoming; at worst, it is precisely what keeps us from changing, or at least makes it more difficult for us to see the real possibility of conversion. Cavell expresses this by suggesting that our quarrel with the world need not be settled: “It is a condition in which you can at once want the world and want it to change” (Cavell 2004: 18). In Emerson’s essays, such ambivalence towards the surrounding world comes across with particular force in “The American Scholar” – one of Cavell’s central points of reference in his discussion of perfectionism – where the word “culture” ceases to be the emblem for our inability to ever become ourselves, transforming itself into the very engine of our personal revolution. Emerson calls on us at once to try and appropriate as much as possible in the world, yet use the resources provided by the world and our own private lives to fashion a revolution, not a mere remaking of the existent order. “This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man” (CW 1: ams 1837, 65). The word *upbuilding*, as Cavell (1989: 8-9) perceptively notes, virtually rhymes the German epitome for self-culture, *Bildung*, which thus becomes nearly synonymous with Cavell’s perfectionist project.

But as the citations from Cavell indicate, his notion of *Bildung* is more radical than many an Enlightenment aesthetic ideal would allow for: oftentimes the very project of self-culture begins with our very admitting of having gone astray, and we use our being lost as the impetus for real self-reliance. Indeed, the impulse for genuine culture is often stronger than the imperatives of society, and if society threatens to suffocate human culture, we *must* turn against society. Perfectionism envisages “the soul as on a journey (upward or onward) that begins by finding oneself lost to the world, and requires a refusal of society, perhaps above all of democratic, leveling society, in the name of something often called culture” (Cavell 1990: 1).

While Cavell will find such a thematics of getting lost as a precondition for genuine change in works as versatile as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (Cavell 1990: 5), its attentive articulation and extensive thematization is perhaps one of the most original features of *his* own whimsical version of perfectionism. As regards Emerson, I am not fully convinced that Cavell’s reference to the beginning of “Experience”, “Where do we find ourselves?” (CW 3: exp 1844, 27), would itself constitute a substantial argument for him having had a similar idea, though other Emersonian texts omitted by Cavell may perhaps provide more support for the view²³. Regarding the theme, I am more impressed by his allusions, say, to the Hollywood genre of remarriage, and in particular *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) – the female protagonist Tracy Lord’s journey into finding herself and the genuine love for her husband through an impressive display of first losing hold of herself, then coming to understand her own frailty, itself a theme that Mrs.

²³ As perhaps the best candidates for Emersonian texts stressing the importance of rapture and losing one’s self, I might mention “Circles” (CW 2: circ 1841, 177-190) and “Inspiration” (CW 8: insp 1875, 267-297). Cavell’s references to the former are scanty, to the latter nonexistent.

Lord will learn to appreciate only after losing her way in the course of the film²⁴. The general implication is incisive: we should trust ourselves not only when we have a strong hold of who we feel to be, but also and *perhaps particularly* when our selves seem to be abandoning us, plunging us into the darkness of well-nigh self-betrayal.

As a reading of Emerson, Cavell's references to his primary source are somewhat scanty and often selective, but the references he makes are usually perceptive enough to allow for idiosyncratic omissions amidst his versatile associations elsewhere. The central text in Emersonian perfectionism is the essay "History", the opening piece of *Essays: First Series*, sketching the rudiments of his philosophy of history that exerted a direct influence on Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation*, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life" (Nietzsche 1874b). Emersonian maxims such as "What [the mind] does not see, what it does not live, it will not know" (CW 2: hist 1841, 6) are taken for granted by Nietzsche's meditation, where "knowledge presupposes life" (Nietzsche 1874b: 331). In "History", Emerson essentially deals with the question as to how we should relate to the words of others in our cultural tradition, how we should read works of history such that they would bear maximum meaning for our lives. Cavell wraps his perfectionist reading of Emerson around the following passages (I quote at somewhat greater length than he does, to make the context of the text plain):

All that Shakspeare [sic] says of the king, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner feels to be true of himself. We sympathize in the great moments of history, in the great discoveries, the great resistances, the great prosperities of men; – because there law was enacted, the sea was searched, the land was found, or the blow was struck *for us*, as we ourselves in that place would have done or applauded.

We have the same interest in condition and character. We honor the rich, because they have externally the freedom, power, and grace which we feel to be proper to man, proper to us. So all that is said of the wise man by Stoic, or oriental or modern essayist, describes to each reader his own idea, describes his unattained but attainable self. (cw 2 hist 1841, 5.)

The phrase *unattained but attainable self* provides Cavell with a key to Emersonian perfectionism. According to the interpretation, Emerson refers to himself by the phrase *the modern essayist*, thus claiming to be "a path to one's unattained self" (Cavell 1990: 8-9). Note that we are here concerned not with Emerson's self but with that of the reader; thus what we find in the text through Cavell is effectively an example of Socratic birth-giving. History and philosophy are not written for the mere leisure of collecting facts about our past; rather, they provide representative examples of what *we* might do in a similar situation; thus the great events of history take place, in the Emersonian hyperbole, *for us*.

Here we may sketch a Cavellian-Emersonian solution to the philosophical problem of the self versus other, and their respective weights in ethical situations: there need not be an insoluble tension between the two, for giving voice to oneself, say, in a written text – being truthful to oneself rather than others – may help others, the readers of the text, discover themselves in turn. Perhaps one difference between Socratic midwifery and Emersonian exemplarity would be that Emerson has no qualms about speaking of himself, while Socrates was more insistent on drawing out only that which is implicit in his addressees. But the implication is similar; even Emerson's speaking of himself will at its best only draw out what is to be found in his reader.

²⁴ See *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940).

Thus Emersonian perfectionism lays essential emphasis on *friendship*, the importance of another human being, an exemplar, who helps me find myself²⁵. In this interpretation, Emerson himself provides an example of another human being for the reader, a representative self, and elsewhere Cavell will aptly note that our perfectionist relationship to a text is emblematic of our relationships to one another (Cavell 1990: xxix). Someone looking for himself might indeed discover, say, in a philosophical classic another human being who represents to him his own unattained self, in a sense “is” more him than he himself (Cavell 1990: 26). Of course, such a phenomenon is most famously encapsulated in Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”, in whose opening paragraph in “every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts, and they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (CW 2: sr 1841, 27). In another perfectionist passage from “The Poet” brought up by Cavell, “the great poet makes us feel our own wealth, and then we think less of his compositions, and his best communication to our mind is to teach us to despise all he has done” (CW 3: pt 1844, 4; Cavell 1990: 26).

Two important conclusions ensue from Cavell’s observations. The first is the quintessential Emersonian ideal of *representativeness*, a position multifarious enough to carry connotations both private and political. Indeed, the notion of individuals being representative for one another is one important sense in which Cavell sees Emersonian perfectionism aligning with *democracy*, and it is apparent that the word “representative” is used deliberately not so much to dwell uncritically on the political familiarity of the notion, as to deconstruct the very term, trying to get to the heart of what democracy might mean in real human interaction. Thus a person becomes representative for and of others not by virtue of the mere fact that she has been chosen to speak for others through a democratic decision-making process, but only on the precondition that *she* discovers her own voice in and ever after the process. Both Emerson and Cavell seem to be experimenting with the ambiguity of the word ‘represent’, and indeed delving into some later passages by Emerson on the matter (something Cavell would not do) makes it plain how representing humanity for one another means also re-presenting for other people the real events taking place in the world, translating them into lively metaphors exemplifying our ideals²⁶. Ethico-political authority or exemplarity is thus gained only on the grounds of full acquaintance with the world; we might say that ethics and ontology appear intertwined. Cavell underscores repeatedly how Emersonian perfectionism is about finding one’s voice, and only after finding such a language speaking at once for myself and for the world can we become representative.

Dealing with Emersonian-Cavellian representativeness in the political sense, second, we must keep in mind how the phenomenon is by no means confined to a limited class of individuals, but rather evinces something that all human beings in a genuinely democratic society are constantly engaged in. Cavell seems to think, indeed, that we are all educations for one another; in each one of you there is something further and foreign for me to yet attain and become familiar with, as if we were all invitations for each other to something greater than our current selves (Cavell 1990: 9). It is axiomatic in Cavell’s version of perfectionism that people cannot renew and change themselves without the help of an Other: it is another human being, a friend or a beloved, who gives me the wings to flutter over the yawning

²⁵ See Cavell 1995: 26, 1990: xxxii, 59; 2004: 15-16, 27; Saito 2001: 395.

²⁶ This can be seen, for instance, in the following text from the later essay “Education”: “In some sort the end of life is that the man should take up the universe into himself, or out of that quarry leave nothing *unrepresented*. Yonder mountain must migrate into his mind.” (CW 10: ed 1884, 131; emphasis added.)

gulf between my current and future self²⁷. In many cases change begins with an encounter and a conversation: as Cavell wittily remarks, conversion often presupposes conversation²⁸.

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, for example, counted by Cavell among the exemplary perfectionist works, Nora and Helmer have never "had a serious conversation", have "never sat down in earnest together to get at the bottom of anything" before their turn-taking encounter near the end of the piece. Once they finally confront one another and speak, Nora becomes aware of her "[d]uties to myself." (Ibsen 1879: 105, 108.) In his Emersonian perfectionism, Cavell is impressively perceptive in drawing attention to theme, yet he could have been more attentive in appealing to the various passages where Emerson underscores the importance of not only friendship but also love. "Thus love reduces the unjust inequalities between different people, as the sun melts the iceberg in the sea. The heart and soul of all men being one, this bitterness of *His* and *Mine* ceases. His is mine. I am my brother, and my brother is me." (CW 2: comp 1841, 72.) Many of these texts are not to be found in Emerson's essays "Friendship" and "Love", and many of them remarkably blend in a Christian spirit the boundaries between me and you – something that Cavell, perhaps more indirectly, strives to do as well. Let me now turn to my concluding section with an eye on elucidating perfectionism with the help of related discussions by other authors.

Positioning Perfectionism: Critical Reflections

I have been discussing the thematics of Emersonian perfectionism first with the help of a Cavellian prelude comparing Emerson with Wittgenstein and Heidegger, then with a commentary on the way in which Cavell frames his perfectionist ethics, with particular emphasis on self and Other, and on the bind between the self and the world. Having explained the chief aspects of what I think is fruitful in Cavell's interpretation, let me now move onto critical reflections. Before doing this, let me however stress that I consider Cavell's Emersonian moral perfectionism not only one of the best philosophical interpretations of Emerson *by any author*, but a distinctively original ethical outlook in its own right.

Let me begin, then, by mentioning my three main lines of criticism concerning the way in which Emersonian perfectionism relates to *Emerson's* original texts. First, Cavell's quoting of his chief source is selective, and does not always amount to a balanced reading of the original texts. In conversation, Cavell has no trouble acknowledging that he is not interested in a scholarly reading of Emerson; while the confession is admirable in its honesty, perhaps even conferring him a certain degree of freedom in what he has to say on the essayist, it must be taken as an invitation to further scholarly work that it is²⁹. Second, Cavell lays too little weight on *nature* as a source of Emersonian perfectionist conversions. If a version of perfectionism is to set forth from Emerson's texts – as Cavell's obviously does – then one ought to attend more fully than Cavell to the ways in which the human self-overcoming is often decisively sparked by the constant and organic tendency of *nature* to renew itself. To

²⁷ Thus Stephen Mulhall (1994: 338) appropriately characterizes Emersonian perfectionism as a notion of a "conception of the self as inherently divided between its attained and attainable states and in need of an Exemplar" – a friend or a favorite author – "to help it manage the shift from the former to the latter."

²⁸ I have to admit to being unable to find the reference for this admirable pun (though I still recall it comes from Cavell). Cavell's lectures on perfectionism (1990) make the point in broader brush strokes.

²⁹ In an interview with Cavell by the current author, he formulated the matter as follows: *In some awful way, I have to confess, I don't care if I have to distinguish between what I can in a scholarly way prove Emerson meant and what I feel I can get out of it if I mean it. I'm philosophizing reading Emerson, and I think he wants me to, and when I find work that leaves the thing sort of dead for me on the page, again I know I cringe from this.* This part of the interview is unpublished (cf. Cavell 2008).

put the point bluntly, for Emerson the human perfectionism is often subordinate to nature's "perfectionism" rather than vice versa.

Third, despite passing references, Cavell ultimately shies away from the religious element in Emersonian thought, whose importance, though difficult to articulate clearly, is undeniable and most essential. Cavell's hesitation to follow the glimpses of divinity in Emerson's writing, indeed, is perhaps the most serious shortcoming of his perfectionist reading, partly for the very reason that he variously hints at it, yet falls short from spelling out what the allusions exactly mean³⁰. The mystery of the religious element suggests more fundamental worries concerning the nature of perfectionism: if the outlook deliberately blends the boundaries of literature and philosophy, ethics and ontology, we may reasonably raise the question as to how one should ultimately position perfectionism. Is it an ethico-ontological theory on the fundamentals of ethical conduct in the world, or perhaps a synthetic interpretation of versatile themes not only in philosophical but also literary texts, or both of these in equal terms? Here the question concerning the relationship between Emersonian perfectionism and Emerson's original essays becomes again pressing, since there are times when Emersonian perfectionism should perhaps be considered *Cavell's* rather than Emerson's outlook³¹.

To mention two further problems in positioning perfectionism, we might ask how Emersonian perfectionism stands with respect to contemporary moral philosophy. First, how is Cavell's perfectionism different from, say, Iris Murdoch's version of perfectionism in her book *The Sovereignty of Good*, and particularly its first chapter, "The Idea of Perfection"? Murdoch is a reasonable exemplar for comparison not only because Cavell himself mentions her book as one of the related discussions in his introductory notes to lectures on perfectionism, but also because the more general bearings of her book stand in an intriguing relation to the perfectionist endeavors of Cavell³². As regards his own positioning, Cavell admits his proximity to Murdoch, but refuses particularly to count Murdoch's well-known example of an inner conversion of a person for a case of moral perfectionism, for that for Cavell would have to do with a fundamental change of the self rather than a temporary overcoming of snobbery³³. But a critical reader might wonder how we may distinguish between a fundamental and a temporary change in the context of Emersonian-Cavellian perfectionism, if we are giving up the very notion of a solid self, as Cavell himself insists.

A more substantial difference between the two philosophers may be found in their respective stances towards the history of perfectionist philosophy: while neither has much trouble admitting their far-reaching debts to the tradition, Cavell is perhaps trying to *rewrite*

³⁰ My reading of Cavell's non-religiosity stands in an intriguing tension with Stephen Mulhall's interpretation that the question of religion is, for Cavell, ultimately "the most fundamental and so the most revealing of his preoccupations" (Mulhall 1994, 285). While Mulhall is, of course, well aware of Cavell's own proclivity to acquiescence with respect to religion, he stresses the more than arbitrary parallels between the Cavellian philosophical project and Christianity. This makes it even more ironic, indeed, that Cavell has so little to say on religion in his forays into Emerson.

³¹ Yet a further subsidiary question concerns the therapeutic aspect of Emersonian perfectionism, evidenced by Cavell's paramount references to Freud in his dealings with perfectionism (see the lecture "Freud" in Cavell's second book on perfectionism 2004: 282-300; see also Cavell 1987). Cavell seems to be worried by Freud's refusal to see his project of psychoanalytic therapy as intimately related to philosophy – perhaps a worry Cavell himself would identify with, for he might well feel related concerns – or, in the framework of Cavell's own project, by *his* philosophy possibly lacking the therapeutic weight it ought to carry.

³² Indeed, Murdoch's book is thematically perhaps closer to Cavell's work than any other text known to me; it is also the work that Cavell mentions first, while drawing attention to texts related to his own project, in his preface to the lectures on perfectionism (Cavell 1990). The other authors he mentions are Annette Baier, G. E. M. Anscombe, Cora Diamond, Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and Peter Winch.

³³ See Cavell 1990: xviii-xxvix. For the original version of the story, consult Murdoch 1970.

the tradition, while Murdoch is often very forthcoming as to how her project is but an interpretation of classical philosophy, in particular Platonism. To speak in more philosophical terms, it seems to me that the particular brand of ethics exemplified by Murdoch is more willing to admit its ties to ontology, while Cavell's attitude to ontology – not to mention *metaphysics*, which in the Anglo-American world often sounds like the very scapegoat of philosophy – seems to be somewhat ambivalent, to say the least. Both philosophers are in some sense Wittgensteinians, but Cavell seems to inherit more of the quasi-Wittgensteinian repulsion to metaphysics, while Murdoch's views on ontology are, again, influenced by her Platonism. But in the Cavellian framework, such a resistance easily lands in a contradiction, since the very project of trying to ground ethics in something more fundamental than conventional moral philosophy easily turns into an ethico-ontological project. In this regard, it is no coincidence that Cavell's perfectionist writings abound with references to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, though oftentimes somewhat apologetically, as if Cavell were aware of the connection but had trouble admitting the full extent of it.

Finally, we may meditate on the relationship of Cavell's project to the other classical texts pertaining to perfectionism throughout the history of philosophy. Here one must be careful to keep Emersonian and standard versions of moral perfectionism apart: while it is obvious that moral perfectionism has a long tradition, the ties of *Emersonian* perfectionism to the history of philosophy are more complicated. The standard perfectionist idea about truthfulness to oneself and of taking up the challenge of authentic existence can naturally be found in very diverse works, from Plato's *Republic* to Heidegger's *Being and Time* and G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, as Cavell emphatically points out (1990: 1). While introducing the reader to Emersonian perfectionism, mapping out its intellectual background, Cavell presents a list of works containing related ideas; the list is open to revision, and among many of the works listed only a small portion, say, one chapter or just a few passages, pertain to perfectionism (Cavell 1990: 5–6). He prepares his reader for the list by imagining that there is “an outlook... sketched out... in some imaginary interplay among [certain] texts” (Cavell 1990: 4). After this Cavell lists 66 works; I will mention here a truncated selection of those bearing most directly on my discussion of perfectionism, without losing sight of the list's versatility:

Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, The Gospel according to St. Matthew, Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mill's *On Liberty*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Emerson's “The American Scholar”, “Self-Reliance”, and “Experience”, Nietzsche's third *Untimely Meditation* “Schopenhauer as Educator”, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, Dewey's *Experience and Nature*, Heidegger's *Being and Time*, “On the Origin of the Work of Art” and *What is Called Thinking?*, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and finally the movies *The Philadelphia Story* and *Now, Voyager*.³⁴

The works listed here make up approximately one half of the texts listed by Cavell, yet the list is versatile enough to arouse some perplexity. In addition to philosophers, there are works by psychologists, prosaists, poets, as well as two movies. On what grounds does Cavell list, say, Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* or William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*? Arguably, both books deal with the “state of the soul”. Freud's book aims at delving into the depths of human psyche by interpreting dreams; in James's

³⁴ For the original list in its entirety, see Cavell 1990: 5.

book there is a chapter called “Conversion”, which pictures a turning of “a sick soul” towards religious experience (James 1902: 157–177, 178–209). Cavell himself mentions as an example 28 perfectionist features from Plato’s *Republic* (Cavell 1990: 6-7; 2004: 445-447).

Cavell justifies his listing through a desire to bring together works that have some bearing on how we lead our lives, saying in essence that he wants “to call to mind a fraction of the play of voices left out (‘forgotten?’) in characteristic philosophical discussions about how we might live, voices that will enter other conversations more urgent ones to my mind, about how we do live” (Cavell 1990: 5-6). This leads me back to the initial motivation behind Emersonian perfectionism: we seek to find in philosophy a way of addressing ethical matters so as to make their urgency and pertinence fully visible to non-philosophers and non-specialists as well as to philosophers. What speaks to us most profoundly ethically, may not be ethics in the customary sense of the word. Cavell’s eclectic and perfectionist mapping of works takes up the Emersonian challenge to appropriate and bring to life as many works in our cultural tradition as possible, to harness culture into a resource for life. In striving to introduce weighty moral questions into philosophical discussions, Cavell takes part, in an Emersonian spirit, in the classical quest for the good life with the help of philosophy.

Coda: Self as Other

Forming an authentic relation to the surrounding world, to our cultural heritage, means appropriating it: becoming what one is, a human being whose thoughts have been thought by others. It is intriguing to note how such a thematic figures in versatile authors, while perhaps not being one of the key concerns of classical philosophers. Take Goethe’s *Faust*: “If you would own the things your forebears left you, / you first must earn and merit their possession”³⁵. T. S. Eliot writes: “Tradition ... cannot be inherited ... if you want it you must obtain it by great labour” (Eliot 1919: 4). In Cavell’s words, “I suppose one inherits in philosophy only what one must recognize as one’s own” (Cavell 1980: 143). These authors are addressing in a constructive vein what Harold Bloom (1975) terms “anxiety of influence”. But such a phrase misses the sense in which influence could also be a blessing, a revelation, an in-flux of novel insights from a hitherto unknown source. It is one of the unique merits of Emersonian moral perfectionism that it brings to the fore the dilemma between the self and the other, without suggesting that caring for my soul would in any way contradict my caring for the Other.

³⁵ “Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast / Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.” (Goethe 1808 / W.A. I 14., 39.) For central Emerson commentators dealing with the matters discussed in this paragraph, see Cavell 1990: 1-32; Conant 1997; Goodman 1997; Van Cromphout 1999; Stievermann 2007.

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