2. This Side of Silence: *Middlemarch* and Moral Perfectionism in a Different Voice

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> No wonder philosophy lives in fear of the ordinary word.
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> CAVELL, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*

Moral perfectionism, for Stanley Cavell, is the lifelong struggle to side with the better (the "unattained but attainable") version of oneself, where this better self is a) pursued through speaking for the consent of others with whom you are, or want to be, in community and b) never fully realizable in much the same way that justice is never fully realizable. In this paper, I suggest that George Eliot's *Middlemarch* exemplifies Cavellian moral perfectionism in its investigation of this struggle as experienced by its major characters and also in three additionally instructive ways. First, it helps us address the central importance of voice for moral perfectionism and exemplifies a philosophical voice ingeniously close to the human voice. Second, it illuminates the productive tension within moral perfectionism between searching for one's voice (Emerson calls this "whim") and attending closely to the minutiae of ordinary life (feminists call this "care"). And, third, it endorses a version of Cavellian moral perfectionism that reinforces the primary importance of caring. I hope that the overall effect of this argument will be to reinforce ascendent readings of Cavell's work as pertinent to, and reflective of, feminist care ethics.

Cavellian moral perfectionism is always attuned to the "woman's" voice, which he also calls the human voice and which, for him, represents the voice that cannot consent to a world that is unjustly configured. In *Contesting Tears*, Cavell writes that

the melodrama of the unknown woman, the genre that considers the inexpressibility of the woman's voice in a patriarchal world, is *derived* from the remarriage comedy, the genre in which men and women are able to talk freely with one another (which he treats at length in *Pursuits of Happiness*).[1] Cavell often sees himself, at least in his capacity as a philosopher, as speaking for the consent of "women".[2] In the best case scenario, there is a mutual acknowledgment and a shared happiness (though these are hard-won and fragile, "tainted by the villainy" of male supremacy)[3]; in the worst case scenario, the woman makes a compromise with justice, as in Charlotte Vale's settling for the stars in *Now Voyager*, or walks away from the political community completely, despairing of its ability ever to include her, as in Nora's closing of the door behind her in *A Doll's House*. But Nora herself is following the moral perfectionist impulse—she rejects the intolerable condition of being unknown (voiceless) in pursuit of an eventual community in which her abhorrence of patriarchal marriage will be common sense (we can imagine with her a community in which her voice is also the public voice). Moral perfectionist thinking is thus oriented toward the margins of the political community—it asks who is being left out, whose voice is not being heard.

Cavell usually gets at this exclusion through examples of moral perfectionist texts that engage with, and respond to, the human voice (remarriage comedies but also philosophical texts animated by a confessional and egalitarian moral perfectionism) or examples of denials and repressions of the human voice (melodramas of the unknown woman but also any philosophy that has not thought sufficiently about the arrogation necessary to speak in a philosophical voice). *Middlemarch*, though, seems itself to speak, even to do philosophy, in the human voice. Eliot elevates literature to philosophical investigation by illustrating as finely as possible the texture of ordinary human life. Her work is revelatory of what Cavell calls the "humanness of the sublime."[4] In other words, Eliot's philosophical fiction does what Cavell most thinks philosophy ought to do—show us who we are. It does this both through bringing to

1. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago University Press, 1992), 5 and *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981).
2. He frames his overview of moral perfectionism through this question: "Where is the voice of the woman in this view of things: nowhere or everywhere?", *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2.
3. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 85.
4. Here is the context in which Cavell uses that phrase: "In an old culture a list of obvious books might seem pretentious or ridiculous—like a gentleman's calling himself a gentleman. In a new culture it

life those things that should bother a moral perfectionist philosopher (conformity, injustice, arrogance) and more capaciously through a generous and humble acknowledgment of the near-maddening complexity that must underwrite any moral perfectionist approach to philosophy.

Middlemarch thus further illuminates Cavellian moral perfectionism by calling into question the relationship between the sort of action required to side with one's better self (writing, reading, thinking) and the kind of goodness required to understand what really might make one better (attention to, and care for, the world). Cavellian moral perfectionism contains within it this tension—thinking philosophically (critically, aversively, against conformity) requires constant care, which we can define as receptiveness to, and acknowledgment of, everyday life in all its vulnerability.[5] Freedom from necessity is not an appropriate goal for a moral perfectionist philosophy. Indeed, attunement to the world and to others in it is the condition for siding with my better self. And yet, at the same time, it is very difficult to write and speak meaningfully while living a life deeply defined by attention to, and care for, others. In *Cities of Words*, Cavell cites two passages that reflect Emerson's transcendence of this moral tension: in the first, Emerson "shuns his father and mother and wife and brother" to follow "Whim", and, in the second, upon being confronted with the abstract questions of social justice asks, infamously, "Are they *my* poor?".[6] It is necessary on occasion to get carried away along these lines. I have to turn away from the particular circumstances in which I find myself and toward what Cavell calls culture so that I may commune with the minds of others who have felt chagrined by what most "men" say. I have to say something for myself and as myself, and this takes time, focus, solitude, and a rejection of moralistic and conformist ways of thinking about our obligations (as a parent of two children under five, I am at present painfully aware of the essential importance of focus and solitude).

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should be a reminder not so much of the sublimity of the human—Whitman's perception is not so much of the *works* of humankind—as of the humanness of the sublime." *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 6.

5. The now-canonical definition of care offered by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher usefully captures the importance of attention to the ordinary: "Caring [is]…a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." See Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Routledge, 1994), 103.

6. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 30–31. See also for a discussion of these same passages in Emerson, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 134–138.

Caring, in other words, is what makes moral perfectionism so demanding and elusive—it often draws us *away* from culture rather than toward it. And yet, receptiveness to other people both grounds moral perfectionism in the ordinary and protects us from making the philosophical mistakes Cavell identifies over the course of his life's work: understanding genius as greatness rather than as receptivity, abstracting away from ordinary life rather than investigating it, repressing the human voice rather than responding to it, and considering philosophy to be a matter of epistemological progress rather than a site of conversation, education, and therapy. The radical ethico-political potential of Cavell's work, as Cavellian feminists have shown, is that it can overturn old hierarchies of moral life, such that we are able to see that the moral life of the person of culture (the philosopher) is grounded in the lived experience of a caring human being.[7] *Middlemarch*, with its attention to the intricacy of life, presents us with a vision of revolutionary ordinariness (to paraphrase Toril Moi), in which the human voice, rather than the philosophical voice, sits firmly at the heart of morality (to paraphrase Sandra Laugier).[8]

Middlemarch, then, is a perfectionist text that insists on the moral primacy of care, which is not to say it resolves the tension we have just encountered but that it weighs in on the side of caring. Cavell remarks in *Little Did I Know* that caring reveals a "register" (the musical metaphor he almost always uses when trying to locate moral perfectionism) of a "life of study and writing growing out of philosophy", since he has "known deeply gifted friends…some about to be, or who deserve to be, famous, others still struggling to write as well as they think and as they imagine" and "from the beginning of my professional life having lived with children whose inescapable, if not always convenient, expectations of me were an essential protection of me against less loving expectations that might have destroyed my hopes."[9] In the register of moral perfectionism, Cavell can acknowledge the realities of ordinary life often ob-

7. As Sandra Laugier puts it, "The ethics of care draws our attention to the ordinary, defined as what we are unable to see but is right before our eyes. It is an ethics that gives voice and attention to humans who are undervalued precisely because they perform unnoticed, invisible tasks, and take care of the basic needs of others." Sandra Laugier, "Cavell on Feminism and the Ethics of Care", *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies*, 6 (2018): 64.
8. Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary* (Chicago University Press, 2017). Sandra Laugier "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary," *New Literary History*, 46 (2015): 217–240. The human voice is not denied and repressed only by cisgender male people but also by anyone who is at ease when wielding the voice of philosophical (and other kinds of) authority. See also Alice Crary, "The methodological is political: What's the matter with 'analytic feminism'?", *Radical Philosophy*, 202 (2018): 47–60.
9. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford University Press, 2010), 4.

scured by philosophy and confess his indebtedness to them. He can acknowledge the genius of friends, colleagues, and students though they fall short of "greatness" and also the importance of attending to his children even when it gets in the way of his whim.

Philosophy in an Alternative Key

At the start of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Cavell poses the question of whether moral perfectionism is inherently elitist in the sense that it involves valuing cultured or learned ways of being in the world.[10] Showing that Emersonian moral perfectionism is, on the contrary, democratic (and necessary for democracy) is the central task of the lectures contained in that book. The success of this exercise depends on the tricky double move of distancing Emersonian perfectionism from "modern moral philosophy" while at the same time insisting that Emerson is a philosopher (the founder of the American voice in philosophy, no less). There is a kind of flipping of the accusation here—an elitist philosophy is not self-reflexive and searching like moral perfectionism but is instead assured of its own authority and represses the ordinary human voice. [11] In holding that Emerson is practicing philosophy by resisting conformity, Cavell demonstrates that aversive thinking—thinking for oneself—is for *everyone*. There is, moreover, at the heart of Cavell's reading of Emerson, an acknowledgment of aversive thinking as a mutual and interdependent endeavour, in which I see my thoughts reflected back to me in and through other people. When I side with my better self, I claim community with others siding with their better selves, and I speak for the consent of those others. So, moral perfectionism is not a distinct strand of moral philosophy, but is, rather, a name for the (always unfinished) moral self in each of us. Saying that Emerson, in his concern for this register of the moral life, is a philosopher is to remind philosophy that this question of what constitutes the particular moral life of each human being is one it cannot (continue to) ignore.[12]

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10. See also Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 13.
11. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 4.
12. The question of the elitism inherent in unconventional philosophical approaches is a live one in contemporary feminist philosophy. Amia Srinivasan, in a review of ordinary language philosopher Nancy Bauer's *How to Do Things with Pornography* (Harvard University Press, 2015), writes, "The

Like Emerson, George Eliot, as Moira Gatens has painstakingly demonstrated, was a philosopher, not merely because of her engagement with philosophy as it is traditionally understood (her essays for *The Westminster Review* and her translations of Spinoza and Feuerbach, for instance), but because her novels are themselves exercises of philosophy, what Gatens, in consonance with Cavell's musical metaphors for moral perfectionist philosophy, calls "philosophy in an alternative key".[13] Eliot's novels are a way of practicing a more profound philosophical thinking, one that is able to take into account "life in its highest complexity" in a way mainstream philosophy, because of its tendency to abstract away from that complexity, cannot.[14] Like Emerson, Eliot investigates the conditions for the moral development of the human self without presenting the reader with an abstract theory of morality.[15] Also like Emerson, Eliot reorients the reader toward nature and experience—the exemplars of the moral life are, for both, to be found not in commentary on life but in life itself. Eliot, moreover, shares Emerson's view that moral selfhood is worked out in and through relationships with others.[16] Finally, Eliot thinks aversively and believes that a kind of aversive thinking drives the moral life, but she presents a moral self that is in conflict as much with its own "inborn egoism" as it is with conformism.[17]

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view of the philosopher as an artist or critic who attempts to elevate her own particular ways of seeing to the level of the universal—this is not a democratic vision of philosophy." *European Journal of Philosophy*, 26 (2018): 1416. And yet it is difficult to shake the intuition that I can best be of service to the broken world by "standing for" and "bearing" this world as myself (see *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 9 and *Little Did I Know*, 538–540). Srinivasan appears to understand this impulse well and follows it herself (see *The Right to Sex* [Bloomsbury, 2021])—she just doesn't think it constitutes philosophy.

13. Moira Gatens, "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot", *Philosophy and Literature*, 33:1 (2009): 74. See also Moira Gatens, "Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Eliot on Imagination and Belief", *European Journal of Philosophy* 20:1 (2012): 74–90 and "Imagination, Religion and Morality: What Did George Eliot Learn from Spinoza and Feuerbach?" in *Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women's Philosophical Thought*, eds. Eileen O'Neill and Marcy P. Lascano (Springer, 2019).

14. Gatens, "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot," 74.

15. Emerson and George Eliot, whose given name was Mary Ann (or Marian) Evans, met only once, when Emerson was on his lecture tour of England in 1870. Eliot's first biographer, Mathilde Blind, includes this intriguing account of that meeting: "Ralph Waldo Emerson, on a lecturing tour in this country, while on a brief visit, made Marian's acquaintance, and was observed by Mrs. Bray engaged in eager talk with her. Suddenly she saw him start. Something said by this quiet, gentle-mannered girl had evidently given him a shock of surprise. Afterwards, in conversation with her friends, he spoke of her 'great calm soul.' This is no doubt an instance of the intense sympathetic adaptiveness of Miss Evans. If great, she was not by any means calm at this period, but inwardly deeply perturbed, yet her nature, with subtlest response, reflected the transcendental calm of the philosopher when brought within his atmosphere." Mathilde Blind, *George Eliot* (W.H. Allen and Co, 1883), 55–56.

16. Gatens, "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot," 80–82.

17. Ibid, 81.

Middlemarch is thus a striking absence from the canon of texts Cavell names to flesh out his argument about the demotic nature of Cavellian-Emersonian moral perfectionism. Cavell read and admired George Eliot and does designate her an exemplar of moral perfectionism on at least two other occasions.[18] He also uses an example from *The Mill on the Floss* to explore moral judgment in *The Claim of Reason* and explains that her work, along with Jane Austen's, is a forerunner of the remarriage comedies, some of which *are* included in his canon.[19] Spinoza's *Ethics* is there too—famously translated by Eliot and providing a philosophical blueprint for much of her work. Cavell even goes so far as to suggest, in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, that Austen and Eliot offer a profound understanding of the connection between the ordinary and the moral perfectionist impulse (between care and whim, as I introduced it above).[20] These two novelists belong in the perfectionist conversation because of "their devotion to the life of the everyday, while at the same time they share, in the texture and turn of every scene, their knowledge of, their craving for…the further self, glimpsed from the perspective of…perfectionist moments."[21] And yet, *Middlemarch* eludes Cavell's canonisation.

Alongside his list of perfectionist texts, he offers a schematic of features that serve to make a text perfectionist, which he extracts from Plato's *Republic*. A very quick summary that likely generalises more than Cavell would want: moral perfectionist texts concern conversations between a principal pair; in which one of the pair learns from the other, more authoritative, one; and in learning feels the pull toward becoming a better version of their/her/his self; and is taken out of the daily life they knew before; and is converted toward a new life through education; and begins an ascent toward a better self; and sees that this better self is already within them and belongs to them (is not a matter of being especially talented or gifted or extraordinary); and sees also that this better self is inextricably bound up in the community that could acknowledge it; and this realisation orients them toward a better community, worthy to be claimed by *everyone*—the city of words; and rebukes society for settling

18. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 13 & 211 and *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 122.
19. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 277 and *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 211.
20. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Belknap Harvard, 2005), 111–131.
21. Ibid. 122.

for anything less than this better community; and finding (founding and constantly re-founding) that community requires doing some philosophy that is "precisely antithetical to academic philosophy"; and in searching for such a philosophy tries out many different forms in order to find those best suited to "making things happen to the soul."[22]

Others of Eliot's novels portray this moral journey (Cavell also singles out *Daniel Deronda*)[23], but it is *Middlemarch* that is most attuned to it. It tells the story of a principal pair, Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw, who, through sustained conversation with one another learn to side with their unattained but attainable selves. Both characters are profoundly chagrined by the world around them, and each possesses a strong sense of justice. *Middlemarch* also, like those other works of poetry and literature Cavell wants to call philosophy, draws us away from professional philosophy and toward an understanding of philosophy as the investigation of ordinary life. Because of its complexity and detail, it is as notoriously difficult to summarise *Middlemarch* as it is to summarise Cavell's work. We might say that the novel follows not one but *four* principal pairs (though several other pairs and singular characters are deeply investigated as well): Mary Garth and Fred Vincy, Tertius Lydgate and Rosamond Vincy, Dorothea and Edward Casaubon, and, finally, Dorothea and Will. These relationships are all going on at the same time and in the same place between people who know and depend upon one another (indeed, two of the relationships are Dorothea's and a third—Rosamond and Lydgate's—is saved by her intervention). The moral path of each character overlaps with that of every other. And in each relationship, we can see a version or inversion of Cavell's formula.

The relationship between Mary Garth and Fred Vincy, we might argue, follows the moral perfectionist script as Cavell has articulated it with relation to the comedy of remarriage, though here it is the woman who gives the man a place to become himself ("creates" him, gives him a voice).[24] Mary Garth is a respectable but relatively poor young woman, beneath Fred socially though they grew up together and were childhood sweethearts. Fred Vincy is the son of a wealthy merchant who attends university in order to join the church, though his heart is never in it. Fred is listless and

22. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 6–8.
23. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 122.
24. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 16.

often profligate. He loses almost all of Mary's parents' money in an ill-advised horse trade, and though Mary's own savings go toward making up the loss, she forgives him, and they return to one another. Mary is morally authoritative, a teacher for Fred who manifests for him (through her own humour and goodness and that of her family) a community worth claiming. Fred is reformed—turned away from both his university-gained views of the world and his tendencies toward risk-taking—and forges with Mary a "solid mutual happiness". [25] The picture of them Eliot leaves us with we might think of as an ideal marriage—a pursuit of happiness.

On the other hand, Rosamond and Lydgate endure an anti-perfectionist relationship—a tragedy. Tertius Lydgate arrives in Middlemarch a stranger. He is an ambitious young doctor who comes from a wealthy family but is determined to make it on his own. Rosamond Vincy (Fred's sister) is spoiled and beautiful, the most accomplished graduate of the local finishing school. They are drawn to one another, but neither is able ever to acknowledge the other. This mutual disdain holds them in conformity with social norms and expectations—since they are not receptive to one another, they can only fall back on their social identities as man and woman. Lydgate uses his masculine authority to try to force Rosamond to live within their means so that he can pursue his career, and Rosamond uses her feminine charms to wheedle and manipulate Lydgate into living in the best house and owning the best things. Conformity with these social roles keeps them from becoming better versions of themselves because neither is able to call the other out according to the moral perfectionist formula (to say something like, "I know you—this is not really you speaking; this cannot be what you really mean."). Lydgate pursues a path that will make him the most money, rather than following his intuition that there is much to be done to reform medicine for the better. He "always regarded himself as a failure" and dies a relatively young man.[26] Rosamond never outgrows her childish petulance or her self-centeredness. She remains "mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgment, disposed to admonish her husband, and able to frustrate him by stratagem."[27] Again, Eliot gives us a flipped version of Cavell's view of gender—the final authority lies with Rosamond. She is the one who maintains a hierarchical social order and spurns Lydgate's

25. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Penguin Classics, 1994), 832.
26. Ibid., 835.
27. Ibid.

attempts to speak candidly about their problems and their relationship. It is Lydgate who, like the unknown woman, feels voiceless and on the verge of madness, not Rosamond.

Eliot's investigation of these two interwoven relationships is already an exercise in moral perfectionism—she uses these threads of the narrative to demonstrate the complexity of moral life, the difficulty in resisting conformity, the role others play in making us who we are, and the tendency for abstract systems of thought (university learning, the church, medical science, social propriety) to make it harder to mean what one says rather than easier. Eliot's treatment of Dorothea, however, is more closely aligned with Cavellian moral perfectionism in the sense that Dorothea deliberately sets herself on a moral perfectionist path—like St Teresa of Avila, she craves an epic life. At the same time, though, Eliot's study of Dorothea reminds us that it's easy to start out down the *wrong* moral perfectionist path (even when you're after the right one)—we might read her marriage to Casaubon as a moral perfectionist false start. Eliot further complicates the question of moral perfectionism by introducing an anti-egoism into the ethical formula—she leads us to the mystic's question of the extent to which should try to *overcome* the self, even as we work toward becoming who we are. And, finally, Eliot pushes us to contemplate Dorothea's embodiment of the tension of living simultaneously the life of the philosopher and the life of the carer—Dorothea's resistance to conformity, her courageous pursuit of love, and her long moral journey, lead her ultimately to an ordinary life as a wife and a mother.

Dorothea Brooke, who is so finely drawn by Eliot I am reluctant to attempt to summarise her character, chooses Edward Casaubon, a middle-aged clergyman and scholar, as her husband, though her sister, uncle, and friends think this a bizarre (even perverse) decision because he is so much older than she is and because he is so serious. But she is looking for a serious life—maybe we can say she is looking for philosophy. Casaubon (who is more than just a cipher—Eliot has much sympathy for him and shows us his inner life as well as Dorothea's), represents for Dorothea that difficult-to-define thing we are after when we start down the moral perfectionist path. And when she marries him, she sees herself as following the steps set out above by Cavell—she is ready to learn from Casaubon, to be pulled toward her finer, higher self and toward a culture which sustains such finer, higher selves. On their honeymoon in

Rome, Dorothea comes to see that this path is a dead end; she "felt with a stifling depression that the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by ante-rooms and winding passages seeming to lead nowhither."[28] Dorothea here embodies both the unknown woman and the frustrated philosopher. She has no voice in her marriage to Casaubon, which we might see as standing for all philosophy and culture. All too often, this is where we get stuck, even with the best intentions. We follow a whim, we glimpse an unattained self, but we end up in an arid discipline, full of rules we do not have the confidence to break. Dorothea stays in that marriage and dutifully cares for her husband until his death by heart failure (which comes blessedly earlier than it might have), even though she is miserable and even though she is all the while drawn to Casaubon's nephew, Will Ladislaw.

Will is an Emersonian character in the sense that he possesses an "active soul" —he travels, is interested in everything from politics to painting to journalism, and is in pursuit of a life that would make him feel useful.[29] He and Dorothea are attracted to one another for a long time before Casaubon's death, and Casaubon is so jealous of them that he writes into his will that all his property will go to Dorothea upon his death unless she marries Ladislaw. One conversation in particular, occasioned by Will remarking that Dorothea's life with Casaubon is a "dreadful imprisonment", gets to the heart of their relationship:

> "No, don't think that," said Dorothea. "I have no longings."
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> He did not speak, but she replied to some change in his expression. "I mean, for myself. Except that I should like not to have so much more than my share without doing anything for others. But I have a belief of my own, and it comforts me."
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> "What is that?" said Will, rather jealous of the belief.
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> "That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power

28. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 195.
29. In "The American Scholar", Emerson writes, "The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed and as yet unborn." *Nature and Selected Essays* (Penguin, 2003), 88.

> against evil – widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower."
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> "That is a beautiful mysticism—it is a—"
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> "Please not to call it by any name," said Dorothea, putting out her hands entreatingly. "You will say it is Persian, or something else geographical. It is my life. I have found it out, and cannot part with it. I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl. I used to pray so much—now I hardly ever pray. I try not to have desires merely for myself, because they may not be good for others, and I have too much already…"
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> "God bless you for telling me!" said Will, ardently, and rather wondering at himself. They were looking at each other like two fond children who were talking confidentially of birds.
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> "What is your religion?" said Dorothea. "I mean—not what you know about religion, but the belief that helps you most?"
>
> "To love what is good and beautiful when I see it," said Will. "But I am a rebel: I don't feel bound, as you do, to submit to what I don't like."
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> "But if you like what is good, that comes to the same thing," said Dorothea, smiling.[30]

We can imagine a similar exchange taking place in either a remarriage comedy or a melodrama of the unknown woman. On the one hand, Will and Dorothea delight in one another's company—they acknowledge one another fully. They are so receptive and responsive to one another as to react to changes in tone and expression not just to what is said. They are also engaged here in an intimate discussion of the very stuff of moral perfectionism—they are speaking soul to soul. But, on the other hand, this conversation takes place during a chance meeting at Dorothea's uncle's house, while Dorothea is still married to Casaubon and discouraged by him from seeing Will. She is trapped in a compromise with justice, within which all she has is this conviction that she is somehow bound up with goodness.

Cavell tends to offer either an account of the woman's/human voice's expression through mutual acknowledgment or an account of the tragedy of its being silenced.

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30. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 391–392.

Does Dorothea present a third possibility? She is expressing a sense of self-denial that is problematic from both a perfectionist point of view (she seems to have lost sight of her better, future self) and from a feminist point of view (self-sacrifice is, of course, a long-standing and oppressive expectation the world has for women).[31] But she is also brushing up against the limits of what we can speak of at all—expressing "a beautiful mysticism." We might see in Dorothea's commitment to "what is perfectly good" Eliot's endorsement of a step about which Cavell seems ambivalent: de-centring the self.[32] Dorothea insists that she is not trapped, and we should take her seriously. From the very first page of *Middlemarch*, she resists conformity with almost every conceivable social expectation of a woman of her class, from whom she should marry to what should interest her. She is pulled, it is true, toward conformity with Casaubon's philosophical certainty, and, in the other direction, toward an abandonment of active participation in the world through self-denial. But she never falls fully into either of these conformities. Here, she is speaking her latent conviction, as Emerson puts it. She and Will smile and laugh; they talk as children engrossed in a favourite subject would talk. Maybe we can think of their (shared, in fact) submission to the good as neither a matter of saintly self-sacrifice (Dorothea is, in herself, *comforted* by her belief in the complex and unattainable goodness of the world) nor worldly moralism (she is not interested here in transcendence, nor in organised religion) but, rather, as a portrait of receptivity to life itself, of Emersonian-Cavellian genius. The partial sort of selfhood that animates moral perfectionist thought is grounded, for Eliot as for Emerson, in this receptivity, a state in which the self falls away completely.[33] Maybe the moral perfectionism of *Middlemarch* is anti-elitist, then, not just because it is born of the idea that each of us is

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31. For an interesting discussion of Dorothea as problematically prone to self-sacrifice here, and of the tension between egoism and altruism in Eliot's work more generally, see Suzy Anger, "George Eliot and Philosophy" in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, 2nd Edition, eds. George Levine and Nancy Henry (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 215–235.

32. Or, as Iris Murdoch called it, "unselfing", which is a state of pure attentiveness to the world. Unselfing is arguably implicit in Cavellian moral perfectionism, which, as we have seen, requires attention to the ordinary, but there are different views on the compatibility between Murdoch's perfectionism and Cavell's. For a reading of Cavell as at odds with unselfing, see Daniele Lorenzini, "Is Iris Murdoch a Perfectionist Philosopher?", *Iride*, 2 (2017): 373–384. For a reading of Cavell as more congenial to humility as an aspect of moral perfectionism, see Lesley Jamieson, "The Case of M and D in Context: Iris Murdoch, Stanley Cavell, and Moral Teaching and Learning", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 54: 2 (2020): 425–448.

33. "Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" in *Nature and Selected Essays* (Penguin, 2003), 4.

able to seek better versions of ourselves and of our lives in language but also because it possesses a profound humility, wherein a "selfless respect for reality" helps us see that moral perfectionism takes place within a vast and fragile human form of life.[34]

Moral Perfectionism in a Different Voice

Cavell takes the title for *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* from a passage in Emerson's "Experience": "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition."[35] Emerson comes to these lines through a bitter admission that the loss of his son two years before, and the horrible grief that followed that loss, have not once and for all changed him. If the survival of such an experience and its aftermath were not enough to perfect his soul—if even the truth glimpsed in that suffering might "slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest"—then nothing can perfect us.

The handsome condition, on the other hand, is the pull toward perfection that somehow abides despite the impossibility of perfection (though, of course, we all too commonly lose to despair). The moral perfectionist impulse is what shows us that we know better than to stop trying to make ourselves better and the world more just.[36] It is a touchstone even in the darkest times. Cavell imagines it existing as a place: "[t]here is a place in the mind where the good books are in conversation, among themselves and with other sources of thought and pleasure; what they often talk about, in my hearing, is how they can be, or sound, so much better than the people who compose them, and why, in their goodness, they are not more powerful."[37] The good books capture the best of us, but they perfect neither our selves nor our shared community. I want to suggest here that the moral perfectionist impulse that calls us to stay with the struggle for a just community is accordant with the radically relation-

34. Iris Murdoch. *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 1970), 95.
35. Emerson, "Experience" in *Nature and Selected Essays* (Penguin, 2003), 288.
36. In *Cities of Words*, Cavell writes, "our sense of an unattained self is not an escape from, it is rather an index of, our commitment to the unattained city, one within the one we sustain, one we know there is no reason we perpetually fail to attain." 18.
37. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 4–5.

al and anti-hierarchical core of feminist care ethics. Cavellian moral perfectionism, like feminist care ethics, acknowledges that moral life is collaborative, messy and non-linear. As Carol Gilligan describes this insight: "[t]he failure of women to fit existing models of human growth may point to…a limitation in the conception of the human condition, an omission of certain truths about life. The different voice I describe is characterised not by gender but theme."[38] In other words, moral life (for people of all genders) is not a matter of individual progress or achievement but is, instead, a constant acknowledgment of the complexity of moral questions raised in the course of living an ordinary life and a continuous pursuit of more just configurations of self and community in response to this complexity.

This brings us back to the tension between simultaneously following my perfectionist whim as a reader or thinker and existing in the world as an ordinary person who suffers and cares for others. How does the pursuit of philosophy, even a philosophy precisely antithetical to academic philosophy, sit alongside the everyday reality of caring? Does Cavell's attempt to expand philosophy to include certain texts and not others serve to reinscribe a different sort of a canonical thinking, one that endorses the authority of "culture" and is troublingly circumspect in its denunciation of patriarchy, not to mention racism, colonialism, neuro-normativity, and heteronormativity? These are questions about authority and power which bothered Cavell very much. "Men" (people speaking in the universal voice of philosophy) talking to "women" (people without access to this voice), he knew, retain what he called a taint of villainy even when those conversations go well—Cavell's sense of tragedy is embedded in this understanding of maleness as arrogance. It is commonplace to say that women "have been left out" of philosophy and politics and art and culture. But it is difficult to explain fully in the (a?) philosophical voice what this really means. Doing so involves reckoning with the tension between culture and necessity, genius understood as greatness and genius understood as receptivity. Cavell himself frames the tension this way: "If the perfectionist path exacts the cost of a great separation, is it one that women, of George Eliot's, let alone of Jane Austen's time, could have afforded?"[39] In a patriarchal society, the tension between whim and care becomes a paradox.

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38. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.
39. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 129.

This tension, "[t]he contrast between the ordinariness of Dorothea's fate and the extraordinariness of St Theresa's", as Gatens puts it, frames *Middlemarch*.[40] Is its resolution possible? Not entirely. We would not have this loving acknowledgment of Dorothea as wife and mother to work with had Eliot (an unconventional wife[41], to be sure, and not a mother) not been assured enough of her own greatness to write as she wrote. And yet, Veena Das insists that we must "wrest the very expression of spiritual exercises away from the profundity of philosophy to the small disciplines that ordinary people perform in their everyday lives to hold as the natural expression of ethics".[42] This injunction works because the "we" is a community committed to subverting the hierarchy embedded in conventional understandings of what matters in and to philosophy. Another reason *Middlemarch* belongs in the Cavellian canon of moral perfectionist texts, then, is that it is a manifesto for ordinary ethics.

Various readers of Cavell have developed the idea of ordinary ethics, which is derived from Cavell's reading of ordinary language philosophy (OLP), especially Austin and Wittgenstein.[43] OLP orients philosophy away from abstract definitions and toward the investigation of the meaning that arises out of language in its everyday use. Cavell's legacy is the insight that these sorts of investigations are inescapably ethical. We cannot rely on any impersonal structure to give our words meaning, nor can we be sure that our words will be intelligible to others before we speak. Cavell famously sums up this fragility as, "all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein called 'forms of life'." He continues, "Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying."[44] The forms of life we inhabit, in which there is a shared understanding of what we mean, are fragile—there is nothing to guarantee that we will continue to understand each other. An ordinary ethics is thus concerned with paying close attention to what we say in order to maintain our shared world.

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40. Gatens, "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot," 86.
41. See Clare Carlisle, *The Marriage Question: George Eliot's Double Life* (Allen Lane, 2023).
42. Veena Das, *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein* (Fordham University Press, 2020), 106.
43. Sandra Laugier, *The Politics of the Ordinary: Care, Ethics, and Forms of Life* (Peeters, 2020); Laugier ("The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary" and "Cavell on Feminism and the Ethics of Care"); Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*; Das, *Textures of the Ordinary*. See also Paul C. Taylor's formulation, "post-supremacist ethics", in "Moral Perfectionism" in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King*, eds. Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (Harvard University Press, 2018), 35–57.
44. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, 52.

Sandra Laugier argues that this condition of fragility—the vulnerability of each human voice—defines the ordinary. By this she means that none of us is guaranteed intelligibility, no matter how assured of it we might feel. Powerful people will often feel very assured indeed in advance of speaking that they will be understood. They are used to wielding *the* voice of authority, and as a result are unable to see both the work required to maintain the shared world and the extent to which certain voices lack the capacity for expression within that world. As Laugier puts it, "the ordinary is variously denied, undervalued, or neglected (not seen, not taken into account) in philosophy." She continues, "Such negligence (I call it carelessness) has to do with contempt for ordinary life inasmuch as it is domestic—and female—and it stems from a gendered hierarchy of the objects of intellectual research."[45] An ordinary ethics, on the other hand, emphasises the primary importance of all of those things devalued and coded as "feminine" in traditional ethics—especially vulnerability, care work, and immanence.

Middlemarch enacts philosophically the subversion of the traditional hierarchy of importance necessitated by a moral perfectionist ordinary ethics. Cavell writes that George Eliot thereby "envisions the democratization of perfectionism."[46] Her experiments in realistic fiction were designed to re-orient the reader in exactly the way that ordinary ethics requires. She was convinced, as a reader of Feuerbach and Spinoza, that morality was immanent to human experience, and she set about making patent this moral intuition through exquisitely detailed attention to ordinary life. In one of *Middlemarch*'s best-known passages, Eliot evokes the same sense of fragility as does Cavell: "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity."[47] Acknowledgment of the vulnerability, complexity, and beauty that make up our human form of life is a difficult and never-ending task. Rather than derive morality from the contemplation of religious icons, Eliot derives it from "the actual mother and father who care for us, the embodied spouse or friend who compensates for and forgives our failings, and our fellow-humans whose

45. Laugier, "Cavell on Feminism and the Ethics of Care," 57.
46. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 131.
47. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 194.

knowledge and labour are what make possible our distinctively human existence."[48] This is exactly the redirection of attention called for by ordinary ethics—from the exalted to the common and the low. The figure of Dorothea, whose evolution is toward this kind of moral attention, allows us to underscore the humility of moral perfectionism.

Throughout the novel, Dorothea is "dutiful"—she takes care of her husband and is eager to use her privilege to improve the lives of others in her community. But until she learns to dis-associate these sorts of duties from a general sense of Duty, they do not have any meaning for her. Before his death, Casaubon requests (demands) that Dorothea finish his life's work, *The Key to All Mythologies*, an endeavour cartoonishly vast and pompous. She agonises over how to answer him and finally decides that she cannot possibly accept this inheritance, though Casaubon dies before she tells him so. She then gives up the fortune he leaves her to be with Will. These decisions are rejections of the hierarchical, traditional order of things—of "Duty", "Scholarship", etc. Dorothea sides with her better self and claims community with those who are active in the world, alive to the world. But the end result of Dorothea's rebelliousness is not an ascent to greatness—it's marriage and motherhood. There is an ambivalence in this ending:

> [Will and Dorothea] were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it. No life would have been possible to Dorothea which was not filled with emotion, and she had now a life filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself. Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done.[49]

We can read this passage as a critique of patriarchal society that relegates women to care work *and* as a critique of a public that cannot make sense of care work as the

48. Gatens, "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot," 78.
49 Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 835–836.

most important thing we do. In a way, the ending calls to mind the final scenes of a remarriage comedy, in which the principal pair maintain their happy mutual acknowledgment against a less-than-ideal outside world. But it differs, importantly, by placing care work *within* that happy acknowledgment (whereas the couples in Cavell's remarriage comedies are never parents) and posing the question: is the world not wrong to deny that greatness, freedom, and power are functions of care? That they depend on care? What would it take to make Dorothea great in the eyes of the world?

Middlemarch lets us imagine that freedom and even greatness are grounded in immanence—a feminist might say caring for the world or staying with the trouble—rather than in transcendence, which is always in search of justice and dissatisfied because of its absence. I think Cavell would endorse this project, though it is neither a happy ending nor a melodramatic one. In *Contesting Tears*, Cavell lists moments of transcendence emblazoned on his memory: Barbara Stanwyck striding proudly toward the camera at the end of *Stella Dallas*, Bette Davis insisting they don't ask for the moon because they have the stars in *Now Voyager*. These moments speak to our longing for justice. They are portraits of transcendent defiance. The end of *Middlemarch*, engraved, not emblazoned (there is much to say about why it matters that we are not talking about a film) into the memory of the reader, is instead a moment of dissenting immanence. Here is the famous final paragraph of the novel:

> Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not as ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.[50]

On his way to conquer Babylon in 559 B.C.E, Cyrus the Great forced his army to work for an entire summer digging one hundred and eighty channels into which to divert the Gyndes River because its current was so strong that it had carried off one of Cyr-

50. Ibid., 838.

us' sacred white horses. [51] A great king was so angry at an element of the natural world, in other words, that he went to absurd lengths to tame it. The point is not that we should submit meekly to being diverted—we shouldn't settle for lives of conformity, and we should never lose our sense of outrage in the face of injustice. But neither is the point that there is some other thing that we certainly should do. Understanding moral perfectionism through ordinary ethics means claiming community with others who quietly grow the good of the world even as they seek to change it.

51. Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. A.D. Godley (Harvard University Press, 1920), book 1, chapter 189.