5. The Notions of Self and Truth in Moral Perfectionism

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In this essay I discuss Stanley Cavell's account of Emersonian moral perfectionism with special focus on the notion of self in Cavell's characterizations of perfectionism. The question I address is how moral perfectionism would be best described, and what role the notion of the self plays in this connection. Relatedly, I discuss the way in which Cavell contrasts Emersonian perfectionism with Iris Murdoch's account of perfectionism which she illustrates with her famous example of M and D. Subsequent to problematizing Cavell's account of perfectionism as a matter of moving from a self to a next one, and his way of distinguishing Emersonian perfectionism from Murdoch's with reference to the notion of a changed self or a changed perception of oneself, I argue that essential to perfectionism is the notion of truth or the aspiration to comprehend what is true, and that it is impossible to make good sense of the perfectionist's concern with the self, unless we take into account this concern with truth. In short, rather than concerned with the self as such, perfectionism is concerned with the self as a vehicle for grasping what is true. This also explains how Cavell's and Murdoch's accounts of perfectionism can be understood as compatible after all, revealing an important similarity between Emerson's perfectionist concern with truth and Murdoch's account of objectivity in terms of the task of perfecting oneself. I conclude with remarks on how due attention to the notion of truth likewise dissolves the worry, raised by John Rawls and discussed by Cavell, that perfectionism might be elitist and incompatible with democracy. Given its concern with truth, perfectionism is not only consistent with but necessary for democracy.

1. Cavell on Emersonian Perfectionism and the Notion of the Self

Cavell writes about Emersonian moral perfectionism and the associated notion of self: "I do not read Emerson as saying (I assume this is my unattained self asserting itself) that there is one unattained/attainable self we repetitively never arrive at, but rather that 'having' self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts."[1] According to this view, the self, or in older terminology the soul, is not something fixed, either in the sense of something final and settled or something forever out of reach. Rather, it is something in a perpetual process of becoming. In Emerson's words: "the soul *becomes*."[2] More specifically, as Cavell explains, connecting the point also with Nietzsche, the concern of Emersonian perfectionism is becoming what one truly is or "becoming who you are."[3] However, when my unattained self asserts itself, calling me to become my true self, this is not meant in the paradoxical sense of me becoming what I already am, or already being what I might never become. Instead, it is a call to develop myself, moving from a self to the next, whereby Cavell regards the self as always divided rather than having a stable unity and perhaps therefore no impetus for development.[4] Importantly, however, in this process there is no predetermined telos to reach, either in the sense of an ideal self to be attained or a fixed essence/nature to be fulfilled. Perfecting oneself, rather, is a process of developing oneself, whereby one's understanding of the goal of this process may change, as one progresses.[5]

Cavell also connects this idea of perfectionism as movement from self to self with a conception of philosophy as a way of life (which, he says, he sought to articulate in part IV of the *Claim of Reason*):

> The moral dimension of experience is no longer the subject of a special field of philosophy, but becomes internal to the drive of philosophy as such. One

1. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 12.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose*, ed. R. A. Bosco and J. Myerson (Harvard University Press, 2015), 139; cf. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 10; Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 120–121.
3. Cavell, *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 145.
4. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxi, xxxv.
5. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 10–11. By contrast, Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford University Press, 1993) develops a telos-driven Aristotelian account of perfectionism based on the notion of human essence.

> might say that instead of providing the basis for judgments about courses of action philosophy seeks to understand itself as a way of life [...]. This view of philosophy, say of philosophy as the progress of the self to itself, or rather of the perpetual recoil of the self from itself as it stands, I came to call Emersonian perfectionism, commemorating, in a repeated term of this preface, Emerson's description of himself as wishing "to unsettle all things."[6]

I feel deep sympathy with this conception of philosophy as underpinned by a moral task which I take to require one, in accordance with the Socratic conception of philosophy as a way of life, to examine one's preconceptions, assumptions, and commitments in order to develop oneself and one's comprehension of reality.[7] Indeed, this kind of view of philosophy as self-examination seems essential for making sense of perfectionism at all (see section 4). At the same time, I feel uneasy with Cavell's talk about selves. For, if we talk about perfectionism as a matter of moving from a self to the next or as the "perpetual recoil of the self from itself," does this not require that we should be capable of articulating some kind of clear enough criteria for the sameness of selves, so that there is a determinate sense to saying that (or when) a next self has emerged from a former self? The question is: how do we use the notion of a self in connection with the notion of self-development? When would we say that one has moved from a self to the next? The problem is that, if there are no clear enough criteria of identity for selves, it remains unclear what it means to speak of moving from a self to the next (including from one divided self to the next divided self). Consequently, Emersonian moral perfectionism described in terms of moving between selves emerges as a suggestive but ultimately empty picture. Yet, to my knowledge Cavell does not anywhere explicitly speak of and seek to clarify such criteria for the identity of selves.

Alternatively, if speaking of a series of selves is intended merely as metaphor for a conception of self-development without a predetermined goal, it seems an un-

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6. Cavell, *Here and There*, 218.
7. See Oskari Kuusela, *The Struggle Against Dogmatism* (Harvard University Press, 2008), chapter 7 for a discussion of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as essentially involving a moral dimension, and John Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom* (Princeton University Press, 2012), chapter 1 for the Socratic roots of philosophy as a way of life. I compare Wittgenstein's and Socrates's methods in Oskari Kuusela, "Wittgenstein's Reception of Socrates," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Socrates*, ed. C. Moore (Brill, 2019), 883–907, arguing that they need not be seen as opposed to one another, contrary to Plato's portrayal of Socrates as looking for ultimate definitions or exceptionless theses to be established once and for all.

helpful one. For example, I, as someone who sees himself as having engaged in self-development throughout his adult life and who regards self-development through philosophical examination as one of the most important things that philosophy can offer to an individual, cannot describe or identify any selves that I have left behind or new ones that I have attained. This does not mean that I have not changed through this process; I most certainly have and would not wish to undo what I have achieved. But I struggle to understand or conceptualize this as "a process of moving to, and from, nexts." Perhaps Cavell is assuming a picture of the attained and unattained selves as constituting a chain: my previously unattained self which I have now attained is connected with a further unattained self which I can try to attain next, thus moving from attained selves to unattained ones as if moving along a chain of selves. But this does not answer the question of what counts as moving from a self to the next, and when this has been achieved. It also leaves unanswered this important question: Why should this movement between selves count as self-development and perfection rather than degeneration and corruption?

In this connection it is noteworthy that when Wittgenstein speaks of philosophy as a work on oneself, he does not use the notion of a self in a way that would require one to assume different selves that one moves between: "Work on philosophy—as often work in architecture—is really more working on oneself. On one's own comprehension/conception [Auffassung]. On the way one sees things. (And on what one demands of them.)"[8] Rather than speaking of different selves, Wittgenstein regards work on oneself as a matter of working on one's understanding of things, or the views and commitments one has. Here there is no similar problem with the identity of the different views and commitments that one might have in the course of working on philosophy and oneself, because such conceptions can be identified and differentiated by describing them. Accordingly, if the different selves that Cavell speaks about could be identified with reference to the views and commitments of these selves, this would help to dissolve the problem about the criteria of identity of one's different selves, because relevant views and attitudes could now be regarded as providing the needed kind of criteria. The notion of the self would consequently drop out of the picture like mental states do, when envisaged as something essentially

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript* (Blackwell, 2005), 300.

private.[9] This is not how Cavell explains the notion of Emersonian perfectionism, however, and it is easy to identify reasons for not so doing. This conception of the self would still leave us with the following problem: how much do one's views need to change in order for this to count as moving from a self to the next? Problematically, this question does not seem to allow for a correct/incorrect principled answer, because nothing clear has been fixed about the grammar of "self." One can stipulate an answer, but this is hardly satisfactory.

To further discuss this problem regarding selves and Emersonian moral perfectionism, it is helpful consider how Cavell contrasts the Emersonian view with Iris Murdoch's account of the moral task of perfecting oneself.

2. Cavell on Murdoch's M and D

Cavell comments on Murdoch's essay "The Idea of Perfection" (published alongside with two other essays in her *The Sovereignty of Good*):

> In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch presents as a central or working case of perfectionist perception that of a woman who comes to see her daughter-in-law in a new, more loving light. Without denying the interest of the case, or of Murdoch's treatment of it, I do not see it as exemplifying what I am calling Emersonian perfectionism. The principle reason for this, I think, is that I do not, from Murdoch's description, derive the sense that in the woman's change of perception she has come to see *herself*, and hence the possibilities of her world, in a transformed light. Without this sense, the case does not seem to generalize, but to be confined as one of overcoming snobbery in a particular case.[10]

Here Cavell contrasts a transformation of one's conception of oneself (not merely a change in the self, but in one's perception of oneself), which he regards as essential for Emersonian moral perfectionism, with changing one's view or perception about

9. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Wiley, 2009), §293.
10. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xviii–xix.

something other than oneself. Niklas Forsberg interprets and responds to Cavell's point as follows:

> Cavell's reasons for trying to distinguish his position from Murdoch's (as it appears in the light of the example of M and D), is that the example makes it appear exactly as if M decides to see D in a different light, just like that, and that M can accomplish this change of perception without changing herself.[11]

But, argues Forsberg, this is a misleading way to see the example. Rather than an "intentional act of deciding to look more lovingly" with the purpose of seeing D more truthfully,[12] or a matter of "*choosing* to see D differently"[13] M's change of view is better understood as "an acknowledgement of human imperfection and engagement with the endless task of continuous conceptual renegotiations."[14] Since such a task is, according to Murdoch, one that requires one to "patiently and continuously a change of one's whole being in all its contingent details"[15] Murdoch can be regarded as a "fellow moral (im)perfectionist."[16]

I find Forsberg's attempt to bring Murdoch under the umbrella of Emersonian moral perfectionism unconvincing, but nevertheless helpful with regard to thinking about the problem of selves. Why would Emersonian moral perfectionism require M to "change [her] whole being in all its contingent details," as Forsberg suggests, and what would this mean? I presume perfectionism does not require M, for example, to change her style of dressing, or to change her preference for white wine to preference for red wine. Likewise for a long list of contingent details. On Forsberg's reading Murdoch therefore seems to be exaggerating what perfecting oneself requires. Or perhaps her talk about changing "one's whole being in all its contingent details" is merely a metaphor for a complete change. (In the context of the quote Murdoch is

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11. Niklas Forsberg, "M and D and Me: Iris Murdoch and Stanley Cavell on Perfectionism and Self-Transformation." *Iride: Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate* 2 (2017), 367.
12. Ibid., 371.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Penguin Books, 1992), 25; quoted by Forsberg, "M and D and Me," 372.
16. Forsberg, "M and D and Me," 372.

speaking about Plato. Whilst the change depicted by the cave allegory is gradual and painful, perhaps it is ultimately intended to result in this kind of complete change, even though a change 'all contingent details' continues to sound more than Plato would need.) We thus face this question: how much change does Emersonian moral perfectionism require? In other words, when can we say that such a change of the self has occurred? Perhaps Emersonian perfectionism does require more than M is willing or capable of on a certain natural way of reading Murdoch's example to be shortly outlined, as Cavell seems to suggest, but still less than a complete change, such as Forsberg envisages.

I am suspicious also of the kind of voluntaristic existentialism[17] that Forsberg takes to be Cavell's reason for rejecting M as an example of Emersonian moral perfectionism. Can this really be Cavell's reason for his conclusion regarding the case of M? Given that a main point or even *the* main point of Murdoch's essay is a criticism of the view that what is essential to morality resides in a moment of decision and choice, I find it implausible that Cavell would reject M as an example of Emersonian perfectionism on the same grounds.[18] This voluntaristic-existentialist view, rather, is what Murdoch's account of perfectionism is intended to provide an alternative for. That Cavell should have missed the key point of Murdoch's essay would be surprising; this does not constitute a charitable interpretation of his comment on Murdoch. I will therefore outline a different reading of the example that can make better sense of Cavell's rejection of M as exemplifying Emersonian moral perfectionism.

Given how Murdoch describes her example, an evident problem with M's initial position is that it is shot through with class-based prejudices:

> M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him.[19]

17. Murdoch speaks of an existentialist-behaviourist view (Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. P. Conradi [Penguin Books, 1999], 305).
18. Cf. Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 327.
19. Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 312.

After reconsideration, "D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on."[20] Here the mention of D's accent, lack of dignity and refinement, insufficient ceremoniousness, rudeness, vulgarity, and M's dislike of how D dresses, for example, seem giveaways regarding M's classist prejudices. But if this is what lies at the root of the problem with how M sees D, there is, on the face of it, little reason to think that M's overcoming her prejudices about D would imply a change in herself and her conception of herself that goes beyond her view of D. Consequent to reconsidering her views about D, M may have managed to address her classist prejudices regarding D, but likely retained them otherwise. After all, revising her view about D already suffices to address M's worry that her son has married beneath himself. Thus, if a more general change regrading her class-based prejudices is what Emersonian perfectionism would require, Cavell is right to reject M as an example of it. However, at the same time, a problem remains regarding the extent of the change Cavell requires from M on this way of reading his comment.

The problem is that a very significant change, such as getting rid of one's classist prejudices generally, is not possible as a rational change, insofar as the change is assumed to take place in the course of a relatively short time period, as in Murdoch's example. I will shortly explain why. If so, however, the kind of change that Cavell requires from M as an Emersonian moral perfectionist seems inconsistent with the conception of philosophy as a way of life that he connects with perfectionism. I do not mean this in the sense of a psychological impossibility, but a logical or grammatical one in Wittgenstein's sense. That is, although such a quick and significant change of one's self might be possible in the context of religion—as exemplified by Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus—a change of this kind cannot be a rational one, insofar as a rational change is based on reasons of the kind that can be established through Socratic philosophical examination. Hence, insofar as Cavell wants to retain a connection between philosophy as a way of life and Emersonian moral perfectionism, the religious conversion-model of change does not serve his purposes. In order to explain this, let me clarify my point regarding the difference between rational, reason-based change and conversion.

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20. Ibid., 313.

Cavell's view, as interpreted by Forsberg, that addressing a misconception rooted in snobbery fails to qualify as perfectionism insofar it does not address one's snobbishness generally, is problematic in that what counts as snobbery vs. sophistication can only be decided in relation to the objects of snobbishness vs. sophistication. Whilst attitudes and commitments of a self, such as snobbishness or classist-prejudices, can indeed make one blind to how things are, what counts as such a blindness-inducing attitude or commitment can only be judged in relation to what it concerns and what it would be to see things in the right way. (Sophistication and judging matters according to high standards can easily enough be confused with snobbery; correspondingly, snobbery can disguise itself as an apparent commitment to high standards.) But this means that it is not possible for prejudices and misconceptions to be addressed in a wholesale manner, as when changing from having class prejudices or being snobbish to not suffering from these vices.

The same goes for other general attitudes, such as racism and sexism. There is no general switch to turn off such prejudices and misconceptions, but overcoming such attitudes is a gradual process of learning to think and act differently, whereby crucial for one's having achieved such a change is how one responds to particular cases. Someone with a black friend can be racist towards other black people, just like M might generally retain her classist prejudices whilst exempting D. At the risk of stating the obvious, in order for a person to be just, it is not enough for them to abstractly subscribe to the ideals of justice. They also need to be sensitive to what counts as just in particular cases, and this is why there is no quick recovery from racism, sexism, or classicism. Even though there may be significant moments or realization, a change based on reasons differs from conversion in the outlined way. For example, I have had an eye-opening realization about sexism towards women in healthcare. Clearly, however, such a realization would be compatible with otherwise retaining sexism, for instance, expecting a female to do all or most of the housework or belittling her abilities and achievements in some area traditionally dominated by men. I might continue to be sexist with regard to such matters without even realizing it.

If the preceding is correct, there is no such thing as getting rid of snobbishness, sexism, racism or classist-prejudices in general and once and for all, but the task is infinite in Murdoch's sense: "M's activity is essentially something progressive,

something infinitely perfectible. […] M is engaged in an endless task."[21]As Murdoch observes, one has to keep examining whether one might be prejudiced about this or that, remembering that addressing one's prejudices in relation to certain objects might have little implications for recognizing one's prejudices in other related cases. If Emersonian moral perfectionism, by contrast, assumes one to be able to address such issues in a wholesale manner, it is a problematic view. Similarly with the even more extensive change of "one's whole being in all its contingent details" that Forsberg proposes in order to align M with Emersonian perfectionism.

Hence, the question remains: how much change does Emersonian perfectionism require, when it is envisaged as a movement from a self to the next in Cavell's sense? For reasons just outlined, this question of "how much change does changing one's self require?" does not seem like a good question. Relatedly, given the underlying unclarity about the criteria of the sameness of selves (section 1), characterizing perfectionism as movement between selves does not seem a good way to think about perfectionism. As I argue next, that a concern with the self is essential to perfectionism does not require conceptualizing it as a movement between selves. If this point and the proposed alternative conception of perfectionism as concerned with the self is accepted, both the problem about the criteria of identity of selves as well as the problem of how much change perfectionism requires can be put to the side as misleading. This raises anew the question of how Emersonian moral perfectionism would be best characterized.

3. Perfectionism as Self-Development

Cavell would agree that self-examination and self-development are not the examination or development of a self in the sense of some kind of metaphysical entity.[22] Contrary Cavell and his interpretation of Emerson, however, arguably, self-examination and self-development need not be understood as aiming to the development of a new self or selves in the sense of "process of moving to, and from, nexts" either. The reas-

21. Ibid., 317; cf. ibid., 321.
22. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxxi, 13.

on why we speak of the self in connection with self-examination and self-development, rather, is, I believe, that no one else can undertake the task of self-development or perfecting oneself on behalf of another person. Everyone must do it themselves for themselves, and this is why self-development is essentially a task for oneself and with one's self. As Murdoch says, "M's activity is peculiarly *her own*."[23]

Here it is also important that self-examination and self-development, like the development of virtue, are necessarily tasks for historical individuals. This, as Murdoch notes, "makes it difficult to learn goodness from another person."[24] For example, if you and I are at different points in our processes of perfecting ourselves, we are likely not in a position to apply lessons from the other to our own case. Schematically, what might constitute an important insight or step forward for you need not be that for me, if I am not yet in a position to understand that insight and take the step, or have already taken it. Of course, this does not mean that another could not help an individual in their activity of self-examination and self-development. Socrates was not confused in engaging in such an activity with others, helping them to examine their views through philosophical discussion, whilst at the same time insisting that he had no knowledge to pass on to them. Achieving and maintaining the welfare of one's soul, which Socratic philosophical examination aims at, simply is not something that anyone can do on another's behalf.

Neither is self-development like the case of a student progressing through their studies. Although education too involves the development of oneself in the sense of the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, this does not involve essentially a concern with one's self like self-development and perfectionism. (Similarly, if M merely finds a way to exclude D from her classist-prejudices for the sake of her son, this need not involve any concern with herself or her perception of herself.) Importantly, although I cannot learn mathematics on behalf of another either, learning mathematics does not require working on one's own comprehension of things in the same way as self-development does. This is because learning mathematics has nothing specifically

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23. Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 317. Self-development is in this respect like dying. Just as no one else can die my death for me, so no one can develop myself for me. Socrates' characterization of philosophical self-examination as preparation for dying well captures well this essential "mineness" of dying, self-examination, and self-development, to speak in Heideggerian terms. The relationship between authenticity in Heidegger and Emerson's rejection of conformism is beyond the scope of this essay.
24. Ibid., 323.

to do with anyone's self. Although I may experience difficulties in the process of learning mathematics that have to do with the historical me, i.e., my previous education, skills, and idiosyncratic misconceptions, what both me and my fellow-students have to learn is the same. It is not specifically about me or anyone else, unlike self-development and self-examination.

As Wittgenstein notes, philosophy—and we may add self-development—differ from other pursuits in this way: "Teaching philosophy involves the same immense difficulty as instruction in geography would do if a pupil brought with him a mass of false and falsely simplified ideas about the courses and connections of rivers and mountains,"[25] As this indicates, the difference between philosophy or self-development and learning geography or mathematics is not that in the latter cases one is learning about something external to oneself which is a possible object of objective knowledge. When one achieves a better and deeper understanding of what, for example, justice, love or courage is, or a deeper grasp of human behaviour and psychology in morally relevant senses, one is likewise concerned with something external to oneself. (Justice is not whatever my conception of it happens to be.) The key difference, rather, is that in the case of philosophy and self-development what stands on the way of one's progress pertains to the self, that is, to its preconceptions, misconceptions, attitudes, and so on, that need to overcome in order for one to see things for what they are. As noted, M's activity is "peculiarly *her own*." Accordingly, for someone else, who is no blinded by classist prejudices but sexism instead, the task of coming to see D for what she is may differ from what M needs to do. This is because self-development and perfectionism always involve a historical individual developing themselves, and the task may differ for different individuals.

Against this background, the question of whether the case of M qualifies as an example of Emersonian moral perfectionism is easy to answer—even though only partly for the moment: insofar as M's activity of coming to see D for what she is involves essentially a concern with herself, i.e., with her preconceptions, attitudes, and so on, and is not merely a matter of changing her view about D, M can be regarded as exemplifying Emersonian perfectionism. (I discuss an important additional condition in the next section.) If so, it is confused to regard the extent of the change required as

25. Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript*, 311.

the issue, and to try to align M with perfectionism by taking her to be working towards a change in "all contingent details," as Forsberg proposes. The question rather is, as Cavell says, whether M "has come to see *herself*, and hence the possibilities of her world, in a transformed light." Nevertheless, as I have argued, it is questionable whether any progress can made on this issue by asking whether M has acquired a new self or moved to a next self. This only entangles us in unnecessary confusion. As I argue next, it is not possible to characterize perfectionism simply as essentially involving a concern with oneself either.

4. Perfectionism and Truth

As Cavell notes, there are also "debased" forms of being concerned with one's self that do not qualify as perfectionism. An example is the idea of being true to oneself, represented by Polonius in *Hamlet*.[26] Being true to oneself in this sense does not qualify as perfectionism, I take it, because being true to oneself may be a mere matter of holding on to one's prejudices and misconceptions, assuming that others should respect them. More generally, there are many ways of being concerned with oneself that do not count as perfectionism, because they do not involve questioning oneself or one's comprehension of things or working on oneself and one's understanding, but the person is merely dwelling on their self, for example, on what they think and feel about others, how they believe they would deserve to be treated, and so on. Rather than resulting in a changed perception of the possibilities of the world, such debased forms of perfectionism might simply solidify a person's prejudices and misconceptions.

However, the crux of the matter cannot simply be either that perfectionism involves a change of the self that results in a transformation of one's perception of the possibilities of the world, as Cavell characterizes perfectionism in response to Murdoch. For example, political radicalisation can change a person's self in a manner that leads to the transformation of their perception of the possibilities of the world. (Certain groups of humans that were previously not so perceived might now appear as le-

26. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 120.

gitimate targets of violence, for instance.) This need not have anything to do with perfectionism. This is so, for example, when such a change is the result of external manipulation and/or consuming disinformation, rather than the result of self-examination or self-development, the difference being that here the change lacks the key element of concern with one's self in the sense of self-examination and self-development. (I do not mean that political radicalization could not result from questioning oneself and one's views in a sense that would qualify as perfectionism.) Likewise, experiences such as travelling and encountering something new, for instance, witnessing levels of poverty one had not previously been exposed to, can change one's self. Although such a change may be a matter of realizing something true, again this does not qualify as perfectionism insofar it does not result from an individual working on themselves and on their perception of reality. For perfectionism the idea of self-development is thus essential, as opposed to mere change of one's self. However, if there are modes of being concerned with oneself that do not qualify as perfectionism and ways for the self to change that result in transformed perception of the possibilities of the world but nevertheless are not instances of perfectionism, how are such cases distinguished from perfectionism proper? The missing element, I believe, is the notion of truth and the aspiration to understand what is true.

Emerson writes about truth and the self:

> When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. […] Every man discerns between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions. And to his involuntary perceptions, he knows a perfect respect is due. He may err in the expression of them, but he knows that these things are so, like day and night, not to be disputed.[27]

The point is not that truth is easy to grasp and that grasping it does not require any work and suitable concepts. Rather, it is that grasping what is true is only possible when we are receptive to truth in the sense of not interfering with or interrupting its passage into our souls, that is, "allow passage to its beams." This may indeed require

27. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose*, eds. R. A. Bosco and J. Myerson (Harvard University Press, 2015), 137.

work on oneself, i.e., on one's preconceptions, misconceptions, and attitudes, including one's fears and hopes that may cause things to appear in misleading ways, blocking the beams of truth or bending them in a way that gives rise to mirages.

More specifically, it is the task of Emerson's figure of the Scholar to make sure that the beams of truth are not obstructed by him- or herself, so that s/he can also help others grasp what is true: "The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances," whereby this includes "cataloguing obscure and nebulous stars of the human mind."[28] The Scholar thus is not merely recording facts, but his/her activities also include extending thought to new areas and developing new ways to think and conceptualize matters. Accordingly, the Scholar's concern with him- or herself is not aimless dwelling on his/herself but directed to a purpose. The Scholar works on themselves and their comprehension of things in the sense in which Wittgenstein speaks about philosophy as work on oneself in the quote in section 1. The scholar's concern with their self, that is to say, is a concern with their preconceptions and commitments to the extent that they might block the passage of the beams of truth.[29]

This also helps to clarify the point in section 3 that perfectionism is not concerned with the self as opposed to something external to it. Insofar as moral perfectionism involves self-examination and self-development with the purpose of seeing things for what they are, it is just as much a concern with external reality as with oneself, and with the self only to the extent that this is relevant for grasping what is true. This concern of perfectionism with the self as vehicle for grasping what is true distinguishes genuine instances of perfectionism from its debased forms. The problem with debased forms of perfectionism is that here the self becomes one's main occupation, rather than truth or the self with respect to truth.

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28. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose*, eds. R. A. Bosco and J. Myerson (Harvard University Press, 2015), 100 and 101, respectively.

29. For Wittgenstein a key commitment of this kind, which he had to dismantle and rethink, was the requirement of the simplicity and therefore the uniformity of logic across different areas of language use, i.e., the alleged topic-neutrality of logic (*Philosophical Investigations*, §§89–94, 100–102; see Oskari Kuusela, *Wittgenstein on Logic as the Method of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2019) for discussion. As Wittgenstein's philosophy brings to view, becoming receptive to how things are may involve complex methodological considerations, as illustrated by his rejection of exceptionless or universal philosophical theses and rethinking of the logical function of philosophical accounts in order to address the problem of false simplification and dogmatism in philosophy (see Oskari Kuusela, *The Struggle against Dogmatism* and *Wittgenstein on Logic as the Method of Philosophy*; Cavell, *Here and There*, 219 comments on Wittgenstein as a perfectionist).

Cavell writes accordingly:

> A moment of what I respect and wish to characterize as moral perfectionism is expressed in the opening sentence of the closing paragraph of [Emerson's] "Experience": "I know the world I converse with in the city and in the farm, is not the world I *think.*" The world I converse with—the one that generally meets my words—is under a kind of judgment [...]. My judgment of the world expresses a search for self, but not for a given state (call it perfection) of a given self [...].[30]

As the Emersonian moral perfectionist is aware, the world s/he takes as her/his object of thought and engagement might not be as s/he thinks or judges it to be. This gives the impetus for the search for a further developed self who is able to see things for what they are, as opposed to, for example, being blinded by common prejudices. (This is the root of the objection of perfectionism to conformism, championed by Emerson and further developed by Nietzsche.[31]) Although such a self might never be actualized, it is nevertheless something to aspire for, whereby the motivation and direction for this aspiration provided by the desire to grasp what is true and just. (For Murdoch the motivating force is love or eros.) More specifically, as Cavell further explains, this desire for truth and justice requires one to make oneself intelligible both to oneself and others.

> Moral Perfectionism's contribution to thinking about the moral necessity of making oneself intelligible (one's actions, one's sufferings, one's position) is, I think it can be said, its emphasis before all on becoming intelligible to oneself, as if the threat to one's moral coherence comes most insistently from that

30. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 10.
31. Kuusela, "Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and Future Philosophers: The Notion of Truth in Philosophy," in *Wittgenstein and Nietzsche*, eds. S. Takagi and P. F. Zambito (Routledge, 2024), argues that Nietzsche's objections to the dogmatism of metaphysicians and his notion of future philosophers can be understood in Wittgenstein's terms. In short, philosophical theories are an instrument for comprehending what is true without exhausting it; metaphysicians cannot possess truth in the sense of containing it in their theories. Consequently, philosophy becomes an open-ended, endless task of perfecting one's comprehension of things, whilst it can also provide a "complete clarity" about particular issues and problems, whereby the criterion of completeness is provided by the particular problems under consideration.

> quarter, from one's sense of obscurity to oneself, as if we are subject to demands we cannot formulate, leaving us unjustified, as if our lives condemn themselves. Perfectionism's emphasis on culture or cultivation is, to my mind, to be understood in connection with this search for intelligibility, or say this search for direction in what seems a scene of moral chaos, the scene of the dark place in which one has lost one's way.[32]

The requirement of intelligibility placed upon the self thus is a moral requirement, in accordance with Cavell's conception of philosophy as a way of life underpinned by a moral task, as outlined in section 1. (Cavell emphasizes that this moral task is a dimension of philosophy instead of moral questions constituting particular area of philosophy.[33]) The intelligibility of the self to itself, which is also a condition of one's intelligibility to others, is what releases the self from the moral chaos where one cannot see clearly one's way, as when making judgments on the basis of fear or baseless hope, or on the basis of class-prejudices like M, that is, without a clear comprehension of what is driving one. Crucially, the motives of a self who is obscure to itself may be such that they could not even be spelled out clearly without their problematic character, including the inconsistencies of one's thinking, becoming evident, as in the case of classist, racist, and sexist prejudices. Obscurity to oneself (either in the form of unclarity or self-deception) is thus a condition for maintaining them. By contrast, trying to make oneself intelligible to others can also help to make oneself intelligible to oneself.

Accordingly, intelligibility is what is required for preventing moral judgments from collapsing into mere moralism, as when one takes one's own point of view as the basis of judging others without any attempt to understand their perspective.

> [...] perfectionism, of the sort I identify, is essentially if not exclusively motivated as an internal check against the tendency of moral judgment to become moralistic, against, let us say, the tendency of one confronting another morally to fail to examine his/her own standing as moral judge.[34]

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32. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxxi–xxxii.
33. Ibid., 2, 62.
34. Cavell, *Here and There*, 220.

Moralism can in this sense be understood as a failure to make the grounds of one's moral judgment intelligible to oneself and consequently to the other. From the point of view of the other, a moralistic judgment may nevertheless be readily recognizable as unfair and thus unintelligible, given the assumption that one ought to be fairly judged. Accordingly and as noted, others can also help one to recognize one's moralism, even though this requires openness to their perspective which moralism is apt to obscure. Accordingly, Cavell characterizes, in the same connection, the perfectionist point of view as follows:

> But moral confrontation—call it the attempt to get another to confront herself or himself—requires a willingness for argument, to demand and to provide intelligibility for one's conduct, including one's motivation in judging, and one's standing as a moral judge is determined by what arguments you are prepared to take, and ask others to take, seriously.[35]

Given my elucidation of the connection between perfectionism and truth, and relatedly the task of making oneself intelligible to oneself and others, let me now return to the question concerning the relationship between Murdoch's idea of perfectionism and Emersonian perfectionism. It seems that Cavell's notion of intelligibility, as a particular mode of the Emersonian concern with truth, can be quite naturally connected with Murdoch's conception of objectivity and objective reality, understood from the point of view of the moral task of perfecting oneself. According to Murdoch: "The idea of 'objective reality' [...] undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to 'the world described by science', but in relation to the progressing life of a person".[36] I interpret this as follows. From a perfectionist point of view, objectivity can be understood as something that is possible to achieve by removing obstacles to it, for example, one's misleading preconceptions and biases or fantasies regarding oneself and reality. Objectivity can thus be thought of as something that is achieved when anything that might falsify one's perception of things, such as M's classist prejudices, is removed through work on oneself or by perfecting

35. Ibid.
36. Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 320.

oneself. (As noted in section 2, this is an endless piecemeal task.) Thus understood, the achievement of objectivity is then not merely a matter of acquiring knowledge of something external to oneself that is independent of oneself, a characteristic mark of objectivity in this sense being the agreement of others with one's judgment. (In suitable circumstances we can all agree, for example, that what is in front of us is a chair.) Rather, the achievement of objectivity requires the self's becoming intelligible and transparent to itself so that its preconceptions and commitments will not block the beams of truth, to connect Emerson's metaphor with Cavell's point about intelligibility.[37]

Part of what I want to say then is that Murdoch's example of M, insofar as it is understood as an illustration of the achievement of objectivity in her sense (as I proposed to interpret her view), can be readily comprehended as exemplifying Emersonian perfectionism, contrary to how Cavell construes the case. It qualifies as such an example, if M is working on herself and her perception of D in order to do justice to her and to comprehend what is true, despite of and contrary to her classist prejudices that prevent her from seeing things for what they are. Read in this way, M is indeed concerned with her self in the relevant sense of addressing prejudices that might prevent her from seeing how things are. Hence, the question is not the extent of her change, *pace* Forsberg, nor whether M consequently perceives herself in a different way or whether this amounts to moving from one self to a next one, *pace* Cavell. The key issue, rather, is what kind of task M is engaged in, i.e., whether she is engaged in the examination of her views with the purpose of removing any obstacles that her self and its commitments might put on the way of her being able to see things truthfully. As I have argued, this task is not helpfully thought of in terms of movement between selves, but M's case is better understood as an illustration of perfectionist self-examination and self-development motivated by the grasp of truth and the achievement of objectivity. (Thus, M's motive is also clearly distinguished from motives such as

37. The question of how objectivity in science relates to this Murdochian conception of objectivity is beyond the scope of this essay. However, objectivity in Murdoch's sense need not be seen as fundamentally different from how scientific methodological principles, such as the repeatability of experiments, make objectivity possible by eliminating any personal biases and related mistakes from science that might block or bend the "beams of truth.". Whilst moral thought is not impersonal in this sense due to it requiring an individual to take a stand, Emerson's metaphor of the passage of beams of truth brings out the similarity of the two types of cases.

kindness towards D or the egoistic-classist concern of finding a way to see her son as not having married beneath himself.)

Against this background it seems a reasonable guess that it may have been due to his thinking about perfectionism in the problematic terms of movement between selves that Cavell failed to recognize M's case as an example of perfectionism. Whilst Cavell is certainly right that not every change of view is an example of perfectionism, it is also true that every change of the self that results in a transformed view of the possibilities of reality is not a case of perfectionism, as noted earlier. To this extent Cavell's question to Murdoch of whether M's perception of herself has changed, and his attempt to judge whether M falls or does not fall under the concept of Emersonian moral perfectionism, is misleading. Likewise, it is misleading to try to bring M under the umbrella of perfectionism by relying on Cavell's problematic condition for so doing, as Forsberg tries to do. I conclude with some remarks on the importance of perfectionism for democracy.

5. Perfectionism and Democracy

Part of Cavell's discussion of perfectionism is his engagement with John Rawls's account of social justice or what a well-ordered society based on the principles of justice would be like, in particular with Rawls's doubts about the compatibility of Emersonian perfectionism, as represented by Nietzsche, with democracy. As Cavell explains: "My direct quarrel with *A Theory of Justice* concerns its implied dismissal of what I am calling Emersonian Perfectionism as inherently undemocratic, or elitist, whereas I find Emerson's version of perfectionism to be essential to the criticism of democracy from within."[38] The problem with Rawls's account, as Cavell describes it, is that, "Rawls takes [Nietzsche's perfectionism and therefore also Emerson's perfectionism which Nietzsche directly builds on] straightforwardly to imply that there is a separate class of great men (to be) for whose good, and conception of good, the rest of society

38. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 3; cf. Ibid., xxiii–xxiv, 1, 4, 48–49. From the point of view of the problem of elitism questions could also be raised about the compatibility of perfectionism with morality to begin with (Ibid., 2). I hope that the preceding sections have done enough to put this worry to the side.

is to live."[39] That such a view would be problematic, Cavell does not deny. "Rawls is surely right to reject this as a principle of justice pertinent to the life of democracy."[40]

Cavell's disagreement with Rawls, rather, has to do with Rawl's identification of Emersonian and Nietzschean perfectionism with undemocratic elitism. By contrast, for Cavell perfectionism in the sense of Emerson and Nietzsche means:

> [...] holding oneself in knowledge of the need for change; which means, being one who lives in promise, as a sign, or representative human, which in turn means expecting oneself to be, making oneself, intelligible as an inhabitant now also of a further realm [...] and to show oneself prepared to recognize others as belonging there; as if we were all teachers or, say, philosophers. This is not a particular moral demand, but the condition of democratic morality; it is what that dimension of representativeness of democracy comes to which is not delegatable.[41]

I hope that it is now easy to see, in light of my discussion of the connection between perfectionism and truth in section 4, how the problem for Rawls can be dissolved, i.e., made to disappear by viewing it from the outlined point of view.[42] An assumption I make in this connection is that democracy depends on truth. This can be understood in the sense that in the absence of truth and the aspiration for it in public discourse, it is not possible for citizens to make informed decisions about political matters that concern them, including how and by whom they should be governed. But if so, the Emersonian scholar has a very important role to play in a democratic society, given his/her concern with truth, as described in the preceding. In short, insofar as democracy depends on truth, it depends on the office of the Scholar. Far from being incompatible with democracy, Emersonian perfectionism can therefore be regarded as essential to it.

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39. Ibid., 49.; see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Belknap Press, 1971), 325.
40. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 49.
41. Ibid., 125.
42. See James Conant, "Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*," in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, ed. R. Schacht (Cambridge University Press, 2001) for an illuminating discussion of problems with the interpretation of Nietzsche that underlies Rawls's portrayal of Nietzsche's perfectionism as undemocratic and for an alternative interpretation that solves the problem in the case of Nietzsche.

Moreover, as Cavell points out in the last quote, it is not necessary to associate the role of the Scholar with any particular persons.[43] Rather, in a democratic society we should all think of ourselves as Emersonian scholars, by which I mean that democracy requires us all to hold ourselves responsible for promoting truth in the sense in which the scholar is meant to do so. This, I take it, is Cavell's point in the preceding quote when he says we should recognize and treat each other as teachers or philosophers. In this regard it is crucial, as Cavell points out, that the task of aspiring for truth in the sense of the Emersonian perfectionist is not delegatable. The citizens of a democracy, rather, are all responsible for their political life being based on and informed by truth. Notably, the fact that not everyone might be willing or capable of promoting truth in the sense of the Emersonian scholar is here irrelevant, because what is in question is an aspiration to meet a requirement that underlies the possibility of democracy. Analogously, the ideals of Christianity are not undermined by the fact that all Christians sin, and that most Christians, it seems, are not followers of Jesus in any recognizable sense. If they want to call themselves "Christians," they must, nevertheless, make an effort to live according to the teachings of Jesus. (The analogy can also be run in terms of being a thinker and thinking according to the principles of logic. That we make mistakes in logic and some do not care about its requirements, such as consistency, does nothing to undermine the importance of logic.) What goes for Christians goes likewise for the citizens of a democracy. If they want to be citizens of a democracy, they must respect truth and aspire to promote it. This is why Emersonian perfectionism can be regarded as necessary for democracy. Although democracy does not require everyone to agree on what is true, and there may be many views about what is true, democracy does require everyone to aspire for truth and to respect it. This is why undermining truth by saying things one knows not to be true in political discourse is incompatible with democracy. Hence the justified outrage of citizens towards politicians who lie or mislead.

To conclude with a brief comment on contemporary matters, in light of the preceding it can be said that the dependence of democracy on truth makes it is un-

43. I have argued similarly in connection with Wittgenstein: the role of the philosopher as clarifier cannot be associated with anyone in particular, as indicated by the problem of whom the role should be assigned to in a philosophical discussion between apparently equally competent persons (Kuusela, *The Struggle against Dogmatism,* 250–251). As this illustrates, claiming the title to oneself can only be a rhetorical move in the sense of an attempt to raise oneself above others. The title can only be earned.

democratic to spread and promote disinformation, whether willingly or unaware. This is because of its capacity to undermine truth, and consequently democracy. Accordingly, maintaining good information hygiene is a key virtue of the citizens of a democracy, something that they must all cultivate insofar as they want to live in a democratic society. Sadly, this virtue has been largely neglected in contemporary Western societies. Indeed, I take it that it is partly the neglect of the development and cultivation of this virtue in many Western democracies that explains the current influence of populist demagogues on and in them, and how such demagogues have succeeded in undermining democracy in certain Western countries. To amend a well-known proverb about war, when a democracy dies the first victim is truth. This is why the Emersonian scholar and his/her perfectionist aspirations are crucial to democracy. Perfectionism necessary for keeping democracy alive.[44]

44. I would like to thank Paul Deb, Thomas Greaves, Matheus Do Nascimento, and Federico Testa for discussion and comments on the paper.