



Politics in Emersonian Perfectionism: Democratic Conversations in Friendship and Marriage

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Abstract

In this paper, I disclose the political and concrete praxis of Stanley Cavell's proposed ethical theory, Emersonian Perfectionism. I divided my discussion into three parts: first, I provided a material grounding of the individual by invoking Heideggerian themes of habitation and the ordinary situatedness of an individual in the specific historical context. In the second part, I presented the dynamics of private and public moral life in the community by drawing a picture of the individual in her co-existence with other autonomous beings. I argued that the preservation of freedom and individual autonomy is precisely what Emersonian Perfectionism dramatizes, and I take these as necessary components in establishing a democratic society. Lastly, I showed Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism concrete praxis in the microcosm context of friendship and marriage. For Cavell, it is within these relationships that the conversation of justice takes place through the reciprocal recognition of another's *voice*. These interactions with others help us determine whether we are speaking our genuine *voice* or merely conforming to others. In the end, Cavell shows how the pursuit of the "unattained but attainable self" in the ethics of Emersonian Perfectionism parallels the pursuit of attaining the kind of society we envision.

Keywords: Emersonian Perfectionism, democracy, friendship, marriage, ethics, politics

Introduction

One of the concerns of Stanley Cavell's proposed ethical theory, called "Emersonian Perfectionism," is its applicability in moral and political life. Emersonian Perfectionism, as an ethic that draws heavily on individual self-transformation in pursuing the "unattained but attainable self," faces challenges of social conditions since ethics inherently deal with social relations. In other words, just as with any other formulated ethical theory, Emersonian Perfectionism needs to address the fact that while an individual being is autonomous, she co-exists with other autonomous beings. This paper will discuss the concrete manifestation of Cavell's proposed ethical theory and explain how this theory is carried out in everyday life. The discussion followed a progression from general to specific or from one sphere to another: from the individual's habitation with the world to the individual relation with the community, and finally, to a concrete and specific relationship in the context of friendship and marriage.¹ In the first part, Heidegger was referenced in establishing the embeddedness of the individual in the material world. This shows how every individual is de facto residing in the world, and only in it can she attain the good life. The next section takes into consideration social relations, especially the dynamics of private and public moral life. This clarifies whether we can construe Emersonian Perfectionism as an elitist ethics that disregards social relations or a kind of ethics that is informed precisely by the social nature of human beings. The first part of the last layer examines and compares the kind of perfectionism of Cavell and Rawls. This further talks about the conversation of justice, which takes place within the context of friendship and marriage. In this light, Emersonian Perfectionism acknowledges autonomy and mutual recognition in building a democratic society. Finally, we can see how Cavell shows that individual transformation is parallel to societal transformation.

¹ I am loosely adapting Emerson's phrase, "that around every circle, another can be drawn," in Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles" in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 279.

The Ordinary as Political: Situating Emersonian Perfectionism in the Political and Material World

For my purposes here, let me clarify my working definitions of ethics and politics. I construe politics and ethics to be inextricably related. I think that the difference is merely academic inasmuch as they are seen as separate branches of philosophy, but both are related, in very similar ways, to social relations and valuations. Both are related to human interests and values, i.e., we advance the interests and values that we possess.² In other words, I mean politics here, not in the grand sense of governance and civic participation, but mainly in advancing interests and values. If, for example, an individual is acting on what she thinks is good, I consider this a moral act and, at the same time, a political move. Ethics and politics are also in the same field regarding agreement and disagreement on social issues. Hence, my point in discussing politics is to show how Emersonian Perfectionism, as an ethical theory, is carried out and practiced in social relations.

I will now speak about Cavell's notion of the ordinary and the social agent's everyday situatedness in the world. Cavell explicitly mentioned that his idea of the ordinary did not come from Heidegger, but his formulation of the truth of skepticism came from his reading and interpretation of J.L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein.³ Nonetheless, I find it helpful to invoke some Heideggerian themes to frame how an individual is habituating in the world. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims that *Dasein* is a temporal and historical being.⁴ *Dasein* is also a *being-in-the-world*, which may be interpreted as a being thrown into this world in a specific socio-historical context.⁵ As a *being-in-the-world*, only *Dasein* is conscious of its being, which makes it recognize the existence of things and other beings. Now, we get a picture of an individual residing in the world, and Cavell calls this the ordinariness of being. He says, "The everyday is ordinary because,

² Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics comprise the overarching branch of philosophy called Axiology.

³ Stanley Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 154.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, foreword by Taylor Carman (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

after all, it is our habit, or habitat.”⁶ Consequently, the individual’s specific and unique experience as a daughter of her historical context will yield different ways of thinking, speaking, and acting in the world.

Conscious of the fact that what I just said is obvious, i.e., humans exist as historical beings, but it is necessary to explain domestication and dwelling in the world because I think this idea of domestication (from domestic) shows *Dasein*’s ordinary ways of being. In *Cities of Words*, Cavell describes her natural dwelling:

Part of the idea is that, as we have learned to understand the motions of the heavenly bodies as functions of the motion of the earth, the human habitation, so we have to understand the motions (the essential properties) of the objects of knowledge (let’s say, the earthly bodies) as functions of the motions (the essential powers) of the human mind and its concepts and perceptions. So, part of the idea of a philosophical Copernican Revolution is that it turns our ideas of the relation of earth and heaven upside down again, reconceiving the human habitation at the center of the known universe.⁷

The quotation presents the ordinary ways of being in the world as mortals, that we are at home with the world or, as Michael Fischer puts it, our “neighboring the world.”⁸ This speaks of an individual’s materiality, her being in the world – the ground for her possibility. However, the aspiration to the idea of becoming human cannot be divorced from the fact of the biological and physiological composition of human beings. Cavell demonstrated this connection between material body composition and language construction through Nietzsche, Emerson, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. For example, Nietzsche’s idea on the physiological and somatic basis of language

⁶ Stanley Cavell, “The Philosopher in American Life (Toward Thoreau and Emerson)” in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 126. Cited as *CW*.

⁸ Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 121.

simultaneously reveals one's existential nature.⁹ In this sense, Nietzsche shares the same view as Wittgenstein's psychological basis of language and Heidegger's *Dasein* as a *being-in-the-world*, and language as one of the modes of *Dasein*.¹⁰ Furthermore, to put Emerson in the scene, Steven G. Affeldt finds a connection between Emerson and Wittgenstein, as Affeldt explains:

...both Emerson and Wittgenstein reject the idea that they need to hunt up new facts, penetrate phenomena, or explore remote and far-off lands because what they want to understand is precisely what is right before them—the familiar or what is present and open to view. That, they suggest, is what we somehow fail to understand. Hence, the familiar, ordinary, everyday is both present to us and remote from us, or, more accurately, we are both present to it and remote from it.¹¹

The passage shows the Heideggerian irony of how near we are to the objects of the world, and yet we are too far. Heidegger illustrates this as being oblivious to the things around us, and thus the challenge of remembering and shifting our attention to our existence alongside

⁹ For a discussion on the material basis of ethics and language, see Paolo Bolaños, *Nietzsche and Adorno on Philosophical Praxis, Language, and Reconciliation: Towards an Ethics of Thinking* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).

¹⁰ The dynamics of thought, language, and behavior are evident in Wittgenstein's notion of the human person through the *private language argument*, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, revised 4th edition by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). As P.M.S. Hacker points out, "The behaviour of others is the outer husk behind which lies private experience" in P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: On Human Nature* (London: Phoenix, 1999), 19. Cavell also correlates the themes of dwelling and nearness of Heidegger's interpretation of Holderlin's hymn "The Ister" and Thoreau's Walden Pond. Stanley Cavell. "Night and Day: Heidegger and Thoreau." *Revue française d'études américaines*, no91, no. 1 (2002): 110-125, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rfea.091.0110> and also appeared in Stanley Cavell, "Night and day: Heidegger and Thoreau" in *Martin Heidegger: International Library of Essays in the History of Social and Political Thought*, edited by Stephen Mulhall (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹¹ Steven G. Affeldt, "At the Feet of the Familiar: Thoughts on Cavell on Emerson and Wittgenstein," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 7 (2019): 63-78, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18192/cjcs.vi7.4913>, 68.

things and in the world.¹² But why does it matter to disclose *Dasein's* apparent nearness to objects of the world? This is to show how near we are to ourselves and the minds of others. For Cavell, it is the ordinary and the everyday that we take for granted. It is a picture showing the banality of existence and the inescapability of this world, that no matter where we reside, we cannot depart from this place we call home. It matters to embrace reality, for it is only through the material and political world that self-realization and society's transformation are made possible.

Emersonian Perfectionism, as an ethical theory that Cavell develops, is sensitive to whether we speak our own *voice* or simply imitate others. I assert here that perfectionism's incessant appeal in finding one's *voice* is made possible in one's specific socio-historical context. It shows one's being and her understanding of the objects and the people around her, which comes from a raw and organic inhabiting of the world. For instance, a person becomes aphasic when confronted with whether abortion is right or wrong when she lacks knowledge and experience pertinent to the issue. She might admit her ignorance and say, "I do not know *yet* whether abortion is right or wrong," or adopt a position based on another's. But an imposed moral judgment renders itself an illegitimate moral position since it is not her *own*. Though moral perfectionism is not primarily concerned about these front-page social and moral issues, but with other ordinary activities of human beings. A person needs, for example, to justify why she possesses certain values and not simply imitate the opinions of others. This is the "truth of skepticism" working, and according to Cavell, it is the condition that we do not know ourselves *yet*.¹³ In this manner, we can construe skepticism as a barrier between the subjective individual and herself and to other autonomous beings.¹⁴ Hence, Cavell posits that the recovery of the self is through the recovery of the ordinary, which is in the concrete, material, sensible, and, as I call it, the political world. To put it succinctly, the everyday is the potential ground for becoming and self-transformation.

¹² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 94.

¹³ In the traditional view of skepticism, it is the position that the world and the minds of others are ultimately unknowable. For Cavell, skepticism means that we have a partial understanding of the world and the minds of others. Hence, skepticism must be accepted as a fact of the psychological human condition, showing the human limitation of comprehending the world.

¹⁴ *CW*, 164.

Thus, Cavell shows that attaining knowledge of the ordinary and the everyday is not an issue, i.e., we are to regard the material world as indubitably existing.¹⁵ It follows that the question is not, "Do the world and other minds exist?" but rather, "Is my existence acknowledged?" "Am I speaking my own authentic *voice*?" – questions which are important in political and social relations. As Cavell puts it, "...if I am to exist, I must name my existence, acknowledge it."¹⁶ In the political sphere, for instance, the clamor for recognition is at the core of social movements. As we shall encounter later, the Cavellian version of recognition is situated in the context of intimate relationships in friendship and marriage. The reciprocity in these relationships is crucial in perfectionism's goal of developing one's autonomy and self-intelligibility.

That the individual is situated in the everyday world does not call for an immediate celebration. While Cavell was able to show the individual's everyday dwelling and nearness in the world through Heidegger, this notion of everydayness differs from Heidegger's notion of everyday *Dasein*. Heidegger warns about the tendency of *Dasein* to wallow in "idle talk," which Heidegger says is the turning of *Dasein* into an 'everyday *Dasein*' – an unfortunate state of being the same as others, otherwise known as conformity.¹⁷ In Cavell's words, "Heidegger attributes this muffled or baffled state of our being sunk in the everydayness of existence, Wittgenstein attributes it to a craving for, or in, the metaphysical, call it the flight from the everyday."¹⁸ Not to be confused with the Cavellian notion of everyday, for Heidegger, being an everyday *Dasein* obstructs the portals of understanding Being, which is *Dasein*'s primary *raison d'être*. Moreover, Cavell posits the notion that the everyday is what Heidegger and even Kierkegaard and Nietzsche call "chatter" – phrasing inauthentic speech and being "estranged from our words."¹⁹ This perilous state is what Emersonian Perfectionism unrelentingly combats, for being unable to answer the

¹⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), xvii. Cited as *MWMWS*.

¹⁶ Stanley Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)" in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, edited by David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 84.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 211.

¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 220.

¹⁹ *MWMWS*, xxvii.

existential question of "What does Being mean to me?" is one of the predicaments of *Dasein*. Therefore, Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism opposes the Heideggerian everyday *Dasein*, for the former is an ethics that calls for genuine speech and action.

The Private is Public and The Claim to Community

Now that a person's situatedness in the material and political world is already established, I begin this next part with Cavell's words, "It is a favorite idea of Emerson's that the passage from private to public ideas is something open to each individual."²⁰ I also find Emerson's assurance that "for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost" in explicating the strength of the individual in creating moral values and how these values will naturally manifest in the public.²¹ Taking these cues, I proceed to show the dynamic relationship between private and public life.

Cavell has anticipated the accusation of Emersonian Perfectionism as elitist and asocial ethics. Paul Patton addresses this concern by saying, "By elitist, he (Cavell) means undemocratic."²² I trace Cavell's concern as he says:

Is there politics somewhere, the political, or prepolitical, Emerson's idea) of a political association disturbs [an individual's] self-reliance when association moves out of a small circle of friends and includes numbers of people, many of them strangers or only acquaintances." The picture is of self-reliance as

²⁰ Stanley Cavell, "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche" in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, edited by David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 151. Cited as *AT*.

²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 145. Cited as Self-Reliance. This phrase has a relation to Emersonian Perfectionism which Cavell is developing, saying "An obvious moral interpretation of the image of figuring from the innermost to the outmost is that of moral perfectionism (on a current understanding) at its most objectionable, the desire to impose the maximization of one's most private conception of good on all others, regardless of their talents or tastes or visions of the good," in *AT*, 153-154.

²² Paul Patton, "Cavell and Rawls on the Conversation of Justice: Moral versus Political Perfectionism," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 2 (2014): 54, <https://doi.org/10.18192/cjcs.v0i2.1108>.

essentially unsociable, a condition in which the individual puts distance between himself or herself and society at large. But this is not the unique topology of Emerson's writing.²³

In response to the abovementioned concern, I move outside of the individual and talk about her conflicting relationship with other autonomous beings. The moral perfectionist ethics will have to face the attack of its assumed solipsistic and asocial character; I wish to argue otherwise. The concept of individualism is commonly associated with isolationism, where the individual distances herself from social and worldly concerns. Sam McGuire Worley opines the same sentiment: "Political evaluations of Emerson and Thoreau have generally either celebrated them as exponents of an extreme form of individualism or chastised them for their purported neglect of man's social nature."²⁴ But in the *Gleam of Light*, Naoko Saito argues that Cavell presents a social Emerson, not an individualist.²⁵ This means that while Emerson's transcendentalist and romantic writings may appear idealistic and even esoteric, his writings are engaged with social and political issues of his time. Emerson's critical stance on his culture and society only shows that he is not an isolated individual. Saito also concurs with this idea of Emerson's critical and nonconformist outlook, as she says, "Cavell revives Emerson's spirit of nonconformity not for the cause of isolationism, but for the sake of the betterment of self and society, as a form of social participation."²⁶ In other words, having an independent and critical mind, as Emerson exemplifies, is imperative in social participation and in improving society.

As I previously mentioned, the individual must face the fact of co-existence with others, which means confronting the inescapable

²³ Stanley Cavell, "What is the Emersonian Event? A Comment on Kateb's Emerson" in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* edited by David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 188.

²⁴ Sam McGuire Worley, *Emerson, Thoreau, and the Role of the Cultural Critic* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), x.

²⁵ Naoko Saito, *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson*, foreword by Stanley Cavell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 56-57. See also John Dewey, "Emerson-The Philosopher of Democracy," *International Journal of Ethics* 13, no. 4 (1903): 405-413.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

collision of values. According to Nadav Arviv, "...autonomy is a task that cannot be accomplished alone."²⁷ In this way, we recognize other people's contributions to developing our moral life while maintaining our autonomy. Indeed, the self only becomes one in the presence of the Other. Moreover, Emersonian Perfectionism proposes that our aspirations or the good that we determine for ourselves will produce a net amount of good, better than if we do actions mainly for the sake of others. While external social factors partly determine an individual's dreams, goals, and desires, she will eventually decide which of those will be part of her ideals. The personal freedom and choices that come with it will inevitably be in tension with other free beings, but it does not necessarily follow that what one decides *to be* is wrong. This tension is what Cavell calls the Emersonian and Nietzschean aversiveness and disagreement of the established societal moral values.

From the discussion above, Cavell demonstrates that the individual is undoubtedly embedded in society and is not too far removed from the rest. It is apparent how everyone is connected to others in the social sphere. However, communal living is not without its perils, and Emerson has been warning us about the threat of the public, as he says, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members...The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs."²⁸ Emerson further laments, "Our housekeeping is mendicant, our arts, our occupations, our marriages, our religion, we have not chosen, but society has chosen for us."²⁹ Emerson, in *Self-Reliance*, says that the truth of the crowd and common people "is not quite true."³⁰ These words of Emerson present the cultures and traditions of society that shape the individual's values, perspectives, and principles, but which may be different from one's personal values. As a response to the threats Emerson mentions, Cavell highlights Emersonian Perfectionism's reflective capacity for authenticity and finding one's truth, saying: "But then wherever there really is a love of wisdom – or call it the passion for truth – it is

²⁷ Nadav Arviv, "Autonomy Here and Now," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2010): 18, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.915>.

²⁸ *Self-Reliance*, 148.

²⁹ *Self-Reliance*, 161-162.

³⁰ *Self-Reliance*, 150.

inherently, if usually ineffectively, revolutionary; because it is the same as a hatred of the falseness in one's character and of the needless and unnatural compromises in one's institutions."³¹ Every individual's allegiance should be to what she considers the truth she determines for herself. The spirit of Emerson's Self-Reliance is thus to safeguard oneself from the crowd's opinions. What Emerson, Nietzsche, and Heidegger find in being lost in the crowd is its demoralizing outcome and the forgetfulness of one's genuine values.

This leads me to what I call the claim to community.³² To say it deliberately: the society we want to be part of must be chosen deliberately. By deliberate, I mean an active conformism instead of a passive one. Arviv rightly states that the "moral life calls for deliberation and assessment of choices."³³ It is the case that we will eventually conform to certain cultures and values. The willingness to be part of a society is, Cavell thinks is evident in the thoughts of Kant, Emerson, Thoreau, and Rawls: in Kant's, the imperative to will maxim to the universal law; in Emerson's essays on individualism and society; in Thoreau's civil disobedience and his residing in the Walden Pond; and in Rawls' hypothetical thought experiment of going back to the original position. To illustrate as an example, Rawls says in *A Theory of Justice* that we need to choose the principles of justice behind the veil of ignorance. Rawls suggests a deliberate signing of a contract with the society we want to be part of. The speaking of "we" also illustrates the working of the Kantian universal voice, wherein the subjective inclinations accord with the inclinations of other autonomous beings. In like manner, Emersonian Perfectionism is an inner voice asking, "Which of my private thoughts are true and good for me and for others?" As pointed out by Matteo Falomi, we can sense the idea of deliberateness from existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard; to paraphrase the latter, one simply cannot be Christian just because one is born one.³⁴ As for Emerson himself, the deliberateness of

³¹ *MW*, xxxix.

³² I owe the term "The claim to community" from Andrew Norris. See Andrew Norris, *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

³³ Arviv, "Autonomy Here and Now," 8.

³⁴ Matteo Falomi, "Perfectionism and Moral Reasoning," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2010): 2, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejap.903>.

participating in society is evident in his writings, which I will show in a specific instance later.

Through these philosophers, Cavell therefore shows that only when individuals are granted an assurance for deviation from standards can we call it a legitimate society. That is why he considers Emerson, Nietzsche, and Heidegger “aversive” or representatives of those who do not easily conform to society’s standards. They embody the words of Emerson as those who believe in their thought and what is true for all men, as answering the call of genius in them.³⁵ Cavell opines that Emersonian aversiveness is the latter’s term for conversion.³⁶ Speaking of Emerson, Cavell notes, “Since his aversion is a *continual turning away* from society, it is thereby a continual turning toward it.”³⁷ It means the individual criticizes the unhandsome parts of society precisely because she wants to improve it. This comes from the assumption that every individual desires a union or community where they can share the same values. Consider the following words of Cavell:

Human beings do not naturally desire isolation and incomprehension, but union or reunion, call it community. It is in faithfulness to that desire that one declares oneself unknown...The wish to be extraordinary, exceptional, unique, thus reveals the wish to be ordinary, everyday...So both the wish for the exceptional and for the everyday are foci of romanticism. One can think of romanticism as the discovery that the everyday is an exceptional

³⁵ As Kovalainen notes “...the quintessential Emersonian ideal of representativeness, a position multifarious enough to carry connotations both private and political. Indeed, the notion of individuals being representative for one another is one important sense in which Cavell sees Emersonian perfectionism aligning with democracy...” in Heikki A. Kovalainen, “Emersonian Moral Perfectionism: An Alternative Ethics – But in What Sense?” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2010): 11, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejppap.899>.

³⁶ Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 81. Cited as *TNYUA*.

³⁷ *AT*, 166. Cavell further notes, “Then Emerson’s writing is (an image or promise of, the constitution for) this new yet unapproachable America: his aversion is a rebirth of himself into it (there will be other rebirths); its presence to us is unapproachable, both because there is nowhere *else* to go to find it, we have to turn toward it, reverse ourselves; and because we do not know if our presence to it is peopling it,” in *TNYUA*, 92-93.

achievement. Call it the achievement of the human. — I believe I know something of the impatience such ideas can inspire. Think of the spectacle of the likes of Rousseau and Thoreau and Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, and Wittgenstein going around hoping to be ordinary, preaching the everyday as the locale of the sublime!³⁸

The passage again tells us that it is in the everyday and social relations by which we can create values and recover being. Therefore, non-participation in a particular culture does not equate to passivity but could only mean that the individual has different valuations. This aversive character is a picture presenting our democratic engagement alive. As Stefano Di Brisco summarily puts it:

Cavell holds that it is crucial, in moral conversations, to leave open the possibility of disagreement: the presumed lack of rationality of moral discourse turns out to be our permanent possibility of questioning the practices and the concepts we share. That is, this possibility is constitutive of the kind of rationality proper to moral discourse and has a central role in the process of coming to know ourselves and others.³⁹

In sum, Emersonian ethics prioritizes the individual good more than the collective.⁴⁰ The task of philosophy, as seen in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, is to become at home and to be a citizen of the world. Similarly, Cavell mentions an insight in Plato's *Republic*:

³⁸ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 463.

³⁹ Stefano Di Brisco, "The Difficulty of Moral Perfectionism," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2010): 3, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.913>.

⁴⁰ Jacques Rancière has the same sentiment, as he says, "...the Emersonian revolution does not propose any collective emancipation. It entrusts exemplary individuals with the task of giving the meaning and enjoyment of spiritual and sensible wealth to a community. The poet 'stands among partial men for the complete man'; he is the one to reattach words to things, and thus inform his contemporaries of a common wealth, that of the universal soul which exteriorizes itself in the material world" in Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, translated by Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), 63.

philosophy's task is to find our own "city of words."⁴¹ In *Society and Solitude*, Emerson says the formation of self is a balance of individuality and society, stating,

"Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our heads in one and our hands in the other. The conditions are met if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy."⁴²

Emerson also says, "Every word they say chagrins us, and we know not where to begin to set them right."⁴³ Cavell explains these words of Emerson, "To be chagrined by every word that most men say is going to put you at odds with those men and make your common sense sound paradoxical. This is the crisis out of which moral perfectionism's aspiration takes its rise, the sense that either you or the world is wrong."⁴⁴

Cavell shows the relationship between the private and public self as he remarks, "For Emerson, you could say that this requires both a constitution of the public and an institution of the private, a new obligation to think for ourselves, to make ourselves intelligible, in every word."⁴⁵ Cavell meant to say that it is a personal duty to realize one's self, and is crucial in realizing and attaining the society we wish to be part of. This shows individual autonomy as a precondition and foundation for constructing society. In other words, it needs to be clear on the part of the individual what she wants and what sort of society she envisions. Emersonian Perfectionism makes one assert one's genuine values to participate in society with those individuals who share the same, or even those with whom one disagrees. Put another way, we can call it claiming one's reason as the discovery and rediscovery of individuality and the willingness to enter into society as claiming to the community.

⁴¹ *AT*, 167. See also Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8. Cited as *CHU*.

⁴² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Society and Solitude" in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 745.

⁴³ *Self-Reliance*, 150-151.

⁴⁴ *CW*, 29.

⁴⁵ *AT*, 153.

Democratic Conversations: Friendship and Marriage

I have come to the narrowest, concrete, and locus of my discussion on how Emersonian Perfectionism is practiced in everyday social relations. I argue that one need not go far and speak of an abstract society, for Emersonian Perfectionism can be seen in everyday close ties in the context of friendship and marriage. For Cavell, it is through friendship and marriage that one enters a democratic conversation about socio-politico-moral issues and the mundane matters in life. In the earlier parts of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Cavell anticipates moral perfectionism's implications on socio-political engagements, most especially on the notion of justice. The previous discussion shows that we are entering into a necessary contract with the community where we belong. If we are to enter a society we want to be part of, Rawls introduces the hypothetical thought experiment of returning to the original position, in which the principles of justice are chosen behind the veil of ignorance. In the light of Emersonian Perfectionism, Cavell conflates Kantian, Utilitarian, and Rawlsian ethics with his version of moral perfectionism this way: it is just and fair if everyone is given the equal opportunity to exercise individual autonomy to determine their end, which will cause their happiness. It is justice to be in a society where individual freedom and autonomy are respected, giving due acknowledgment to one's *voice*.⁴⁶ The recognition of *voice* makes the individual partake in political conversations, especially in conversations of justice.

It is essential at this point to differentiate the competing versions of democracy in Rawls and Cavell. Rawls' version of democracy, according to Cavell, is a mode of living that benefits the majority. As opposed to Rawls, Cavell emphasizes Emerson and Nietzsche's "disdain" or "aversion" to society's values, which puts primacy on the individual good. For Cavell, Emerson and Nietzsche show the dangers of losing one's self in the crowd and the majority. I agree with Patton that moral perfectionism is necessary for democracy, for it permits individuals to advance their personal interests, which may present themselves as dissimilar from those of

⁴⁶ *CW*, 168.

others.⁴⁷ Pursuing our self-interest propels us to a functional democracy and naturally refutes societal stagnation. Moreover, co-existing is a constant decision amidst our domineering tendencies and hostility towards each other. In other words, in political life, we engage in democratic conversation and make a series of compromises with others, whether we can live together in quotidian life as mortals. It is thus clear that Cavell is concerned more with the everyday private moral lives rather than political ones, as in Rawls.

In moral perfectionist ethics, we can see that as we encounter other subjects and their moral positions, it sharpens our position as well as theirs. In other words, knowing the positions of others, whether they are different or the same as ours, increases the possibility of self-intelligibility, which is the aim of moral perfectionism. As Cavell explains, "Becoming intelligible to oneself may accordingly present itself as discovering which among the voices contending to express your nature are ones for you to own here, now."⁴⁸ Cavell further argues, "Perfectionism's tuition of this intuition will tend to portray its vision of social as well as of individual misery less in terms of poverty than in terms of imprisonment, or voicelessness."⁴⁹ These passages show that the recognition of one's *voice* and acknowledgment of one's being are primary concerns when speaking about living a good life. Moral perfectionism as ethics does this by constantly knowing our nature and that of others. Take, for example, the dialogues of Plato, wherein Socrates engages with interlocutors, and in the process, the issues presented and talked about become clearer on both ends.

⁴⁷ Patton here cited Cavell's words in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, as the latter opines, "Only within the possibility of democracy is one committed to *living* with, or against, such culture. This may well produce personal tastes and private choices that are, let us say, exclusive, even esoteric. Then my question is whether this exclusiveness might be not just tolerated but treasured by the friends of democracy," in Patton, "Cavell and Rawls on the Conversation of Justice," 60. Patton further explains, "The identification of citizens of a democratic and pluralist society with the basic structure of that society will not imply agreement with or even acceptance of all aspects of the society: consent may well be confined to the principles of justice and their implementation in a constitution and laws relating to questions of basic justice," *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁸ *CHU*, xxxvi.

⁴⁹ *CHU*, xxxi.

According to Cavell, "Perfectionism's mission is the discovery of the possibility of democracy."⁵⁰ Education, character, and friendship are the common themes of moral perfectionism, as evident in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Emerson, Thoreau, and Nietzsche. These elements are indispensable in building a democratic society.⁵¹ As Saito explains, "In intimate social relations, democracy as a way of life is the process of mutual education—learning how to think, communicate, and act together."⁵² For Cavell, Emerson and Dewey, "praise the communal dimension of human experience, and both call for an ethical engagement as the necessary basis of political democracy."⁵³ This leads me to the discussion on friendship and marriage as the concrete context where Emersonian Perfectionism is practiced. Cavell does not have an elaborate discussion on friendship, but he has an extensive account of marriage, specifically in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* and *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*.⁵⁴ In the earlier parts of this paper, I explicated the notion of individual dwelling in the world. However, she only occupies a limited space at a given time. To further illustrate her infinitesimal place in the world, while she resides in a specific state, she will have limited interactions and relationships with other human beings. When she engages in moral and political conversation, what she meets are individuals *as* individuals. Cavell names this connection with fellow human beings as friends and romantic partners. The individual encounters and engages dialectically with others, whether the relationship is friendship or marriage.

Cavell mentions Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, wherein the latter discusses friendship as part of attaining the good life.⁵⁵ He states, "Aristotle speaks of a friend as 'another self.'⁵⁶ A conversation occurs

⁵⁰ *CHU*, 16.

⁵¹ *AT*, 163.

⁵² Saito, *The Gleam of Light*, 64.

⁵³ Piergiorgio Donatelli, Roberto Frega and Sandra Laugier, "Pragmatism, Transcendentalism, and Perfectionism," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2010), <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/888>.

⁵⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), cited as *PH*, and *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). His readings of films are seen throughout his works, such as in *Cities of Words*.

⁵⁵ The title of his work, *Pursuit of Happiness*, draws inspiration from Aristotle. See *CW*, 357.

⁵⁶ *AT*, 166.

either in the context of friendship or, for that matter, with an enemy.⁵⁷ Friendship is the experience of connecting with another person, encountering another soul or an autonomous individual. For Cavell, friendship is crucial in the project of moral perfectionism, as he explains:

The second dominating theme is that the other to whom I can use the words I discover in which to express myself is the Friend—a figure that may occur as the goal of the journey but also as its instigation and accompaniment. Any moral outlook—systematically assessing the value of human existence—will accord weight to the value of friendship. But only perfectionism, as I understand it, places so absolute a value on this relationship.⁵⁸

However, a friend is not limited to how we understand it in the conventional sense as a real person. A friend, for Cavell, need not be an actual person who is physically present.⁵⁹ We can also consider a text, written works, and even the arts as our friends, insofar as an author or an artist creates these works.⁶⁰ Their works are products of human

⁵⁷ As he phrased it, “The idea of conversation expresses my sense that one cannot achieve this perspective alone, but only in the mirroring or confrontation of what Aristotle calls the friend (what Nietzsche calls my enemy, namely one who is, on my behalf, opposed to my present, unnecessary stance), what Emerson calls the true man, the neutral youth, my further, rejected self,” *CW*, 174. Enemies may mean people who hold differing viewpoints from our own. For Cavell, we find this in Plato’s dialogues with Socrates’ conversation with various interlocutors, such as Thrasymachus. See *CW*, 320.

⁵⁸ *CW*, 27.

⁵⁹ In *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida presents Aristotle as a central figure and expounds on Aristotle’s claim, “Oh friends, there is no friend.” For Derrida, there is intimacy in friendship—one which transcends the bounds of physicality, specifically the experience of the death of a friend and the haunting memory of seeing oneself in the eyes of the other. The politics of friendship is the dialectics of social relationships, inasmuch as alliances make possible the creation of moments and things. Ultimately, for Derrida, true friendship is the praxis of engaging with a friend’s ideas. See Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2020).

⁶⁰ Speaking of how works of literature can become our friends, Cavell states, “The friend becomes, as it were, my next self. (A book may call on this unattained self, Emerson attests—depending, of course, on our reading’s being willing to take it to heart. A book, Aristotle says, may be a further actualization of its maker, who then

thought and imagination, and just like a real person, they *speak to us* and contain the author's principles, perspectives, beliefs, or assertions. A work of literature where the author is absent has a didactic purpose that contributes to the self-realization of the reader. For example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* tells us something about human nature and teaches us about ourselves. But Aristotle's work is his *own* assertions as an autonomous being and stands as the only one among the diversity and plurality of *voices*. Thus, when we encounter these works, we recognize their similarity and distinctness from our own.

By the pronouncement of the palpable democratic conversations in friendship, nothing seems to be remarkable here. We exchange ideas, perspectives, and moral assertions with our friends, thereby opening the possibility of either maintaining or changing our held positions. In order for us to better understand the role of a friend through literature, I invited our good friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, to join the conversation. Emerson's writings speak to his day and even to the readers of his works in the present generation. Cavell seems to elect Emerson as the representative of moral perfectionism because of the latter's political and critical stance in his time. I am, of course, referring to Emerson's abolitionism.⁶¹ In his address on "The Fugitive Slave Law," Emerson makes a moral critique of American slavery and its adherents, specifically Daniel Webster.⁶² Emerson laments, saying, "...Mr. Webster, most unexpectedly, threw his whole weight on the side of Slavery, and caused by his personal and official authority the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill."⁶³ In his address in honor of John Brown, also a prominent critic of slavery, Emerson decries, "Indeed, it

loves it as a child. Then, as such, it is better, more advanced, than its maker.), in *CW*, 367-368.

⁶¹ For a compilation of Emerson's abolitionism, see Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, edited by Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). See also the chapter on Lawrence Buell, "Social Thought and Reform: Emerson and Abolition," in *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). For a political discourse on Emerson's writings, see Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, eds, *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), where Cavell's "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche" is also part of the publication.

⁶² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law" in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 861-876.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 865.

is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Slavery, when the governor of Virginia is forced to hang a man whom he declares to be a man of the most integrity, truthfulness and courage he has ever met."⁶⁴ For Emerson, no amount of culture, tradition, or legality can justify slavery.⁶⁵ Emerson's criticism of the moral and legal presuppositions of slavery makes him all the more an exemplar of the ideal of moral perfectionism—a cultural leader, someone who disapproves of the herd and unjustified values of his society. Emerson says, "He only who is able to stand alone is qualified for society."⁶⁶ Speaking about Emerson's general criticism of culture and his anti-slavery sentiments in particular, Worley notes, "Emerson...takes his stand with individual agency and self-reliance, the strength to stand alone in dissent."⁶⁷ Emerson's moral ascendancy speaks volumes about his character. Emersonian Perfectionism shows that a single individual can influence virtually all the social and political discourse. Thus, we can consider dead philosophers such as Emerson as our friends because his writings communicate moral assertions, whether we agree or disagree with him, which inspires us to be critical of our present-day values.

Another human relationship where moral perfectionism takes place is in the context of marriage. Married life is bound by a contract, as if it is a minuscule representation of an individual entering a contract in a particular community. Similar to political life, married couples make compromises to co-exist if they want to live harmoniously and sustain their relationship. Cavell's interpretation of films in the Hollywood comedies of remarriage and melodrama centers on the heroine's (un)consciousness and the struggle for recognition from her husband. Both parties need to realize their state as autonomous beings, and living together as a couple is a mutual decision. In Cavell's words, "Perfectionism proposes confrontation and conversation as the means of determining whether we can live together, accept one another into the aspirations of our lives."⁶⁸ The relationship between the husband and wife displays the imperative of

⁶⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "John Brown" in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 880.

⁶⁵ In his words, "These things show that no forms, neither constitutions, nor laws, nor covenants, nor churches, nor bibles, are of any use in themselves," in Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law," 870.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 871.

⁶⁷ Worley, *Emerson, Thoreau, and the Role of the Cultural Critic*, 72.

⁶⁸ *CW*, 24.

reciprocity if they wish to attain their independent selves. At the end of these films, there is reconciliation and compromise of living together as one, yet both remain as individuals. What we can see in these films is conjugal relations as a minute representation of the democratic drama.

George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), a representative film that Cavell interpreted from the genre comedies of remarriage, theatricalizes moral perfectionism in the context of marriage. This film genre was a popular one in the 1930s-1940s, in which the stories center on husband and wife (re)marriage.⁶⁹ In *The Philadelphia Story*, Tracy (Katharine Hepburn) is divorced from her drunkard ex-husband, Dexter (Cary Grant). Because of the failed marriage, Tracy is set to marry for the second time with her fiancée George (John Howard). Hailing from a socialite family, Tracy and George's wedding is announced publicly and is much anticipated. Mike (James Stewart), a reporter, together with Liz (Ruth Hussey), a photographer, will cover the wedding. The three gentlemen – Dexter, Mike, and George – express their genuine feelings of admiration towards Tracy. Tracy, on the other hand, is like a lost soul searching for what she truly desires and whether she can find these among the three men surrounding her. Each of the main characters visibly undergoes an introspective reflection and an honest look at their wants and desires. In the latter part of the film, the anticipated marriage between Tracy and George is called off. Dexter then admitted that he was throughout the scene to win Tracy's heart back. Tracy asks his father to guess how she feels before the re-wedding, now with Dexter, to which she exclaims, "Like a human. Like a human being," finally reclaiming her being and happiness.

The film puts weight on the heroine's consciousness and the exploration of her genuine feelings. Although the entire film is a comedy, it shows the seriousness of being able to be recognized, especially one's inner desires. The film depicts that we are at times unsure of our desires, and hence the need for a re-evaluation of ourselves. In the context of Tracy and Dexter as husband and wife, the decision whether to stay in a married relationship or not is a legitimate option to choose. In Cavell's interpretation, these married couples are not concerned about doing their actions out of obligation nor about doing their actions for the happiness of everyone. What we

⁶⁹ See *CW*, 35-48 and *PH*, 133-160.

can observe is rather fundamental – of making themselves known to each other.⁷⁰ Further, perfectionism focuses on individual desires and questions these very desires. Cavell clearly demonstrates the necessity of the existence of other autonomous beings – this time through husband and wife – and their roles in the development and realization of their independent selves. This reinforces the idea that self-intelligibility is not attained in isolation but through engagement with the Other. A film such as *The Philadelphia Story* shows Emersonian Perfectionism's romantic calling for intimacy and union, with the self, with others, and with the world. Cavell writes:

For *The Philadelphia Story*, I am about to claim that its conversation more narrowly focuses such questions on the question of America, on whether America has achieved its new human being, its more perfect union and its domestic tranquility, its new birth of freedom, whether it has been successful in securing the pursuit of happiness, whether it is earning the conversation it demands.⁷¹

It shows the human longing to be at home in this world, where one can fully express one's authentic self. In both friendship and marital relationships, conversations are the way to make ourselves known to ourselves and others.

In comedies of remarriage, the wife was able to attain her “unattained but attainable self,” but in melodramas, she may find herself outside of marriage.⁷² In melodramas, the woman is often portrayed as an “unknown woman,” reflecting her negated existence and the dismissal of her perfectionist aspirations.⁷³ The woman in melodramas “rejects marriage as the arena in which she is to discover a life for herself.”⁷⁴ In marriage, the husband and wife enter into a

⁷⁰ In his words, “This is the aim of moral reasoning in perfectionism, not to assess pluses and minuses of advantage, nor to assess whether the act is recommendable universally, but yet to see to what those two standard theories wish to accomplish, namely that the one in question make himself intelligible, to others and to himself,” in *CW*, 42.

⁷¹ *PH*, 153.

⁷² *CW*, 108.

⁷³ *CW*, 234.

⁷⁴ *CW*, 271.

mutual relationship, even if there is a possibility of disengagement through divorce. Divorce can be a moral decision that allows both individuals to live better separately.

We can see, therefore, that marriage is not a static union but a dynamic relationship between autonomous individuals. This perspective challenges the notion that marriage is a fixed contract that aims for homogeneity. Instead, marriage must be viewed as a partnership where individuals can exercise their freedom and maintain their autonomy. Marriage is also faithful to Emersonian Perfectionism's journey to constantly develop the relationship. This implies that a marriage cannot be perfect from the outset, which underscores the time and effort needed to build the relationship.

For Cavell, the film's characters, such as Tracy and Dexter, "understand their marriage as exemplifying or symbolizing their society at large."⁷⁵ In the previous section, I discussed how private life is essentially public. According to Cavell, the same principle applies to marriage, as private individuals become public through their union. The bond between a man and a woman is not only personal but also public and legal. In his analysis of the wedding in *The Philadelphia Story*, Cavell remarks that the event becomes a matter of "national importance."⁷⁶ Thus, marriage serves as an announcement of private life to the public. This leads me to my final point, in the sphere of the larger community, in which Cavell finds an analogy between the idea of moral perfectionism striving towards the "unattained but attainable self" and the unattained but attainable society. Cavell sees the consent between the husband and wife in marriage parallel to the consent of the individual she entrusts to society.⁷⁷ The Emersonian and

⁷⁵ *PH*, 147. Cavell also notes this in *Cities of Words*, "It is to capture something of the idea of a mutual criticism of marriage and society at large that I speak of *The Philadelphia Story*, in its rediscovery of marriage, as inviting a conversation with the society of which it is a reflection and upon which it permits perspective, the society it reflects and the principal pair it depicts each being recognizable as embarked upon an adventure, and each valuing itself because of that aspiration," in *CW*, 53.

⁷⁶ *CW*, 40.

⁷⁷ We find this in Cavell's discussion on Locke: "Both revolutionary doctrines depend on a notion of something like a contract or a covenant between those who are to be governed and those who are to govern, or, as in marriage, between those who are to govern each other; hence both depend upon a notion of the consent or agreement to the contract. It is here that the idea of the individual voice comes into play. The idea of my consent is evidently pictured as my giving my voice to the contract," *CW*, 52.

Nietzschean perfectionism also shows self-overcoming and society's overcoming of itself. Not only do we fail to pursue our ideals, but we also most often fail to construct the society we want. As Saito opines, "That democracy can always fall into a state of conformity means that it must never be allowed to settle down in some fixed telos; it is a state forever to be worked toward, never finally to be achieved."⁷⁸ She says further, "For both Dewey and Emerson, democracy is the ongoing and endless task of perfection. It is also the ongoing task of creation as it is related to newer and better experiences of each and all individuals, and hence, the constitution of culture itself."⁷⁹ In other words, if the realization of the self cannot be accomplished alone, then it follows that the realization of society cannot be accomplished alone either. What we are doing in our engagement with others is that we are criticizing each other's culture or way of life. We are making a series of compromises within the democratic space to construct a shared community. It also shows that after conversation follows conversion, both on the agency level and in the greater sphere of the community.

Conclusion

I have sketched above the political ramifications of Emersonian Perfectionism as an ethical theory. I began by providing a material grounding of the individual as situated in the world through Heidegger's thoughts on *Dasein*. My point is for us to be conscious of the earthly and corporal human condition, and it is only through realizing this that we can engage in genuine moral relationships. I move to the next layer of her relationship with other autonomous beings and the greater community. I clearly showed that private life is public, that is, we are not as remote from each other as we might think. For Cavell, the ordinary and the everyday are political, where we advance our values and interests. Lastly, I provided a discussion of the praxis of Emersonian Perfectionism in friendship and marital relationships. As I argued above, it is in friendship and marriage that we enter into a democratic conversation. In democratic conversations, we listen to the *voices* of others, consider their opinions, which opens the possibility of being convinced and changing our minds on socio-politico-moral issues. Besides, no genuine politics happens without the

⁷⁸ Saito, *The Gleam of Light*, 3.

⁷⁹ Saito, *The Gleam of Light*, 67.

willingness to listen to and dialogue with others. Politics is not a solipsistic monologue. Democratic conversations, as seen in the context of friendship and marriage, temper our despotic tendencies. A robust democratic society is built upon autonomous citizens waging and fighting for the values they hold. Emersonian Perfectionism insists on creating a life where the private individual self is in harmony with the public, but that can only be achieved by being grounded in respect, autonomy, and mutual recognition.

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