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The Main Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism

Neggie Sam Ray P. Cuaresma
National University, Philippines

Abstract: Stanley Cavell presents a moral theory known as 'moral perfectionism,' often associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson, thus coining the term 'Emersonian Perfectionism.' Scholars have debated whether Emersonian Perfectionism can be considered a viable ethical and moral theory. While Cavell proposes this ethical theory, which can be put alongside Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, he acknowledges an incoherent account of this theory in his writings. In this paper, I examined the core principles of Emersonian Perfectionism and delineated its defining features: (a) metaethical theory, (b) individualistic ethics, and (c) romantic ethics. The first feature explains how Emersonian Perfectionism can be considered both an ethical and metaethical theory. The second feature demonstrates the individualistic nature of this theory through Cavell's election of Emerson and Nietzsche as philosophers with individualistic approaches to ethics. The final feature discusses how Emersonian Perfectionism is a kind of romantic ethics, highlighting the romantic relationship between the self, others, and the world. In the end, despite being a relatively recent ethical theory, Emersonian Perfectionism introduces a new dimension to moral

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philosophy that we may have overlooked, but may be present in other established ethical theories.

Keywords: Cavell, Emerson, moral perfectionism, romanticism

INTRODUCTION

This paper will encapsulate the main constitution of Stanley Cavell's proposed ethical theory known as 'Emersonian Perfectionism.' Putting Emersonian Perfectionism into a coherent whole is no easy task, for even Cavell did not create a cohesive account of Emersonian Perfectionism as an ethical theory.[1] As he indicates, there is "no essential or closed list of features that constitute perfectionism."[2] While theoretical foundations are located in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Main Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* and in *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, the theory is not codified in these works alone, as it traverses his philosophical oeuvre. Scholars have since provided an extensive account of Emersonian Perfectionism as a moral theory. For my purposes here, the discussion will rehash the prevailing interpretations and conversations but will likewise expatiate what I think is Emersonian Perfectionism's defining characteristics: (a) metaethical theory, (b) individualistic ethics, and (c) romantic ethics. Moreover, I aim to demonstrate the distinctiveness of Emersonian Perfectionism, while also highlighting the perfectionist dimensions inherent in established ethical theories. The succeeding discussion is thus a reconstruction of Emersonian Perfectionism with supplementary features, which will aid in making sense of this moral theory.

[1] Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), xviii. In his words, "It is clear that in wishing to characterize a particular moral outlook represented best (for me) in the writing of Emerson (and Thoreau), I have made no systematic survey of the philosophical literature on the subject of perfectionism." He is also aware that he is writing "against the grain of the craft of professional argumentation" clearly shown in his scattered thoughts and writings rather than formal propositions in developing Emersonian Perfectionism as well as frequent reference to both analytic and continental philosophical tradition (xi). Hereafter cited as *CHU*.

[2] Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 14. Hereafter cited as *CW*.

EMERSONIAN PERFECTIONISM AS AN ETHICAL AND METAETHICAL THEORY

I will begin with some fundamental ethical concepts to understand where to locate Emersonian Perfectionism as an ethical theory. The branch of ethics, also called moral philosophy, systematically examines what makes an action right or wrong, good or bad. It is further categorized into metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. These categories of ethics are not exhaustive, as there are other kinds of ethics. As will be discussed, Emersonian Perfectionism nowhere falls strictly within these traditional categories.

Emersonian Perfectionism is primarily considered as an ethical theory; in its particular kind, it is categorized as a metaethical theory. To differentiate the two, an ethical theory proposes standards of right and wrong conduct. On the other hand, a metaethical theory studies the nature of morality and how we arrive at moral judgments. An essential component of metaethical theory is the linguistic element of morality which involves examining terms such as "good," "evil," "right," and "wrong."[3] The distinction between the two theories is what Bernard Williams, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, dubbed as the 'standard practice' twenty to thirty years ago (when he wrote his work), but he pointed out that such a distinction is no longer necessary today.[4] Following Williams, there is no significant difference in naming Emersonian Perfectionism as an ethical and metaethical theory. Thus, we can consider Emersonian Perfectionism as a metaethical theory, as it describes a dimension of moral thinking rather than prescribing right and wrong actions in the normative sense.

In another way of understanding it, Emersonian Perfectionism is similar to Nietzschean ethics, which describes morality. In contrast, normative ethical theory prescribes right and wrong conduct. For instance,

[3] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 72-73.

[4] *Ibid*.

deontologists define the rightness of actions based on duty, utilitarians evaluate actions by their consequences for overall happiness, Rawlsians consider justice and fairness, and Sartreans emphasize good faith in actions. While they recommend normative standards, it is worth noting that these ethical theories originate from a specific philosophical framework and proponent. Deontological ethics, to illustrate, is a broad normative ethical theory, and if we are to understand Kantian duty theory, then it is imperative to comprehend Kant's philosophical system. The same goes with Emersonian Perfectionism, albeit it does not suggest normative action. What Cavell did was to describe a dimension of moral thinking derived from his interpretation of the works of various philosophers, primarily those of Emerson. Therefore, if Cavell's interpretation is correct, which is specific to Emerson's works, one must understand Cavell, Emerson, and the figures that Cavell interpreted as participating in Emersonian Perfectionism as an ethical theory. Furthermore, Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism shares similarities with Raymond Geuss's perspective in *Outside Ethics*. Geuss distinguishes two ways by which we can understand ethics: first, "rules that contain restrictions on the ways in which it is permissible to act toward other people" and second, to a "whole way of seeing the world and thinking about it."[5] Based on these definitions of ethics according to Geuss, we can construe Emersonian Perfectionism as falling into the second manner. Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism invites us to consider ethics not merely as a set of rules to follow but a comprehensive framework through which we can understand and engage with the world.

Following Cavell's interpretation that is specific to the life and works of Emerson, I think it is necessary at this juncture to address the terminological usage of the terms 'Emersonian' and 'Perfectionism.' First, Cavell's usage of the 'Emersonian' in Perfectionism is, as I take it, a matter of style. It is apparent from the term Emersonian Perfectionism that it is

[5] Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

parasitic on the figure of Emerson. Cavell uses the terms "moral perfectionism," "Emersonian Perfectionism," and "Emersonian Moral Perfectionism" interchangeably. Any of this usage refers to the same thing. To settle on what term to use cannot be discussed here thoroughly, and I take the prudent move to use the term that Cavell uses. But evidently, one of the main intentions of Cavell is to use Emerson as a political move to defend the latter as a philosopher.[6] Emerson has been underrepresented in academic philosophy, often being cited as only an essayist and poet in the literary field. The case that Cavell wishes to present is that Emerson can be considered a philosopher.[7] While Emerson and Thoreau's writings do not measure up to serious and rigorous philosophical argumentation, nonetheless, Cavell says they are writing philosophical work.[8] But discourse on morality and moral thinking is not exclusive to professional and academic philosophy. Hence, it is unsurprising that Cavell chooses Emerson as the representative of moral perfectionist thinking, coming from the latter's work, *Representative Men*.[9] As Cavell explains:

> Emerson elects himself to be our representative man (anyone is entitled, and no one is, to stand for this election) and he warns that we have to that we do elect our (private) representative(s). In a sense his teaching is that we are to

[6] Cavell indicates, "Moral Perfectionism has for various reasons found no home in modern moral philosophizing, and this is tied up with the fact that Emerson has found no home in modern philosophizing." Stanley Cavell, "Emerson's Aversive Thinking" in *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, ed. by Kenneth R. Johnston, et al. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), 222.

[7] For this concern whether Emerson is a philosopher or not, see Lawrence Buell, "Emerson as a Philosopher?," in *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

[8] See Stanley Cavell, "The Philosopher in American Life," in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 14. Hereafter cited as *IQO*. See also "Finding as Founding" in Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Hereafter cited as *TNYUA*.

[9] *CHU*, 10. I will go back later to Cavell's idea of representativeness and individuation in creating values.

> see beyond representativeness, or rather see it as a process of individuation.[10]

Although Emerson is the nominal representative of moral perfectionism, Cavell also cites other figures such as Kant, Mill, Nietzsche, and Rawls, who qualify as well. Secondly, Cavell uses 'Moral Perfectionism' or 'Perfectionism' to refer to one's ability to perfect morals. However, according to Cavell, this notion of perfectionism should not be construed as attaining absolute human perfection, as he says:

> I do not, in what follows, take up perfectionisms based on a religious perspective, any more than I regard the Perfectionism I do follow out as requiring an imagination of some ultimate human perfection. Emersonian Perfectionism, on the contrary, with which I begin and to which I most often recur, specifically sets itself against any idea of ultimate perfection.[11]

Cavell clearly explains that moral perfectionism does not purport the attainment of total perfection. Instead, it suggests continual development of any aspect of one's life. This is the primary contention of ethicists and moralists: to strive to be a better human being despite the flawed human condition. To borrow a phrase from Paul Guyer and Martin Gustafsson, the individual has an *asymptotic* trajectory toward the ideal.[12] This means that the present self and the ideal will never meet but will move in a parallel direction. The *asymptotic* trajectory of our moral lives reminds us that ethical behavior is not about reaching some ultimate state of

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *CW*, 3.

[12] See Martin Gustafsson, "What is Cavellian Perfectionism?," in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 48:3 (2014), 99-110, and Paul Guyer, "Examples of Perfectionism," in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 48:3 (2014), 5-27.

perfection, but rather about committing to the ongoing struggle for improvement.

I now proceed to distinguish Emersonian Perfectionism from the dominant ethical theories. Cavell mentions that Emersonian Perfectionism is not a competing moral theory, such as Kantianism and Utilitarianism, but a "dimension of any moral thinking."[13] He presents Emersonian Perfectionism as:

> … a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one's society ….[14]

According to Cavell, even Kantian, Utilitarian, Aristotelian, and Rawlsian ethics have a moral perfectionist dimension on their own. For example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* describes human action as always directed to an end. Hence, this teleological perfection of action in Aristotelian ethics is determined by practicing virtues that lead to a life of happiness. Cavell, therefore, does not dispute other moral theories but presents Emersonian Perfectionism as a supplement that underlies our moral thinking. In other words, for Cavell, all these ethical theories have 'strains' of perfectionism, and the perfectionist path is the way ethical theories should be undertaken. In his words, "Our moral and religious natures must aspire to the perfection for which they have been created, and they must understand themselves as capable of changing in the direction of perfection, and this perfection has in view the goal and end of moral

[13] Stanley Cavell, "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. by David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 169. Hereafter cited as *AT*.

[14] *CHU*, 2.

struggle."[15] This is precisely what I mean about Cavell's version of perfectionism. It means that if one adheres to and practices a particular approach, one is constantly moving toward its ideal. A deontologist, for example, will incessantly strive to do actions out of duty. Perfectionism implies that we are finite and imperfect, yet nonetheless, it should motivate us to strive for a further state. Guyer, and especially Viktor Johansson, rightly say that whether in Kantian, Utilitarian, or Virtue ethics, self-intelligibility lies at the crux of these theories. In other words, even if the moral agent has performed actions according to the ideal of the ethical theory, it still faces the problem of agency and self-knowledge. As Johansson puts it, perfectionism's scope is "greater than any single moral theory."[16] In sum, moral perfectionism accommodates a fundamental aspect of all ethical theories.

It is clear that for Cavell, morality and thinking are not necessarily deontological (Kantian) nor teleological (Utilitarian).[17] Cavell mentions John Rawls' version of Perfectionism, which focuses on maximizing the achievement of human excellence in art, science, and culture. Cavell cited this as an example of teleological ethics.[18] I agree with Heikki Kovalainen that Emersonian Perfectionism does not render itself as a teleological ethics because of its "goallessness."[19] This characteristic sets it apart from Kantianism, which is based on moral reasoning concerning our duties and obligations, and from utilitarianism, which relies on calculating actions to maximize the happiness of the majority. On the other hand, the underlying principle behind moral perfectionism as a self-reflective activity is whether

[15] Stanley Cavell, "Hope Against Hope," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. by David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 174. Also appeared in *Cities of Words*.

[16] Viktor Johansson, "Perfectionist Philosophy as a (an Untaken) Way of Life," in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 48:3 (2014), 59.

[17] *AT*, 153-154.

[18] *AT*, 156.

[19] Heikki A. Kovalainen**, "**Emersonian Moral Perfectionism: An Alternative Ethics—But in What Sense?," in *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 2:2 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.899>.

we are living up to our true selves. Cavell summarily puts the distinction of moral perfectionism from other moral theories:

> Moral reasoning is not to take me from irrational to rational choice (in the distribution of satisfactions, as in the case of moral theories that take the good as fundamental, such as that of John Stuart Mill); nor from a will corrupted by sensuous concerns to one measured and chastened by the demands of the moral law (represented by Kant and in an important sense by John Rawls, who defines an idea of right or justice in independence of a definition of the good); but to take me from confusion to (relative) clarity in seeking a world I can want.[20]

Another point I wish to make is that Emersonian Perfectionism does not rest on formal argumentation, such as in the conventional practice of moral reasoning. Emersonian Perfectionism challenges traditional moral reasoning by emphasizing that ethics and morality are inherent in our everyday actions and intentional choices, rather than confined to formal deliberations of prominent moral dilemmas. By common practice, moral reasoning is the way by which we deliberate ethical issues. We understand ethics as the deliberation of pressing moral issues such as euthanasia, abortion, animal rights, capital punishment, and other social and political matters. These socio-politico-moral issues are what Cavell calls "front-page" or "headline" moral dilemmas.[21] However, for Cavell,

[20] *CW*, 32.

[21] Full quote, "And the idea bears on moral thinking because while, as I've emphasized, Emersonian perfectionism does not on the whole take up front-page moral problems such as abortion or capital punishment, it informs, or is implied by, the larger portion of ways in which ordinary human beings confront and question each other's conduct and character every day, distinguishing a slap from a slug, smarting from a slight, meeting a reasonable request ungraciously, inflicting irritation on an innocent object instead of upon the more frightening one who has caused it, withholding deserved praise or gratitude, withholding deserved rebuke, instances of an untold number of the little deaths we deliver or suffer day

ethics and morality are to be understood as everyday acts, based on the premise that all our actions are intentional.[22] This idea of deliberateness speaks of our actions having reasons for doing such actions. Some of these are merely a matter of preferences, such as deciding what to eat and what clothes to wear, in contrast to the front-page moral dilemmas stated earlier. For Cavell, even these "preferences" or amoral actions as ordinary acts of human beings are not divorced from moral life. In other words, all of our actions, from the ordinary concerns to the contending socio-political issues, necessitate reasons or justifications for doing so. As Cavell says, "I make the following fundamental assumption: What I characterized as making oneself intelligible is the interpretation moral perfectionism gives to the idea of moral reasoning, the demand for providing reasons for one's conduct, for the justification of one's life."[23] Hence, Cavell understood morality as something we do every moment. In Cavell's view, thinking and acting are not separate. Through Cavell's reading of Emerson, morality is inseparable from thinking; similarly, thinking cannot be separated from

and night," in *CW*, 316-317. Cavell also mentions these front-page moral dilemmas in Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 121. Hereafter cited as *PDAT*.

[22] Cavell explains this notion of the intentionality of our actions: "I recall the list from chapter 4 of A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*: 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money,' 'Tolerance is a virtue,' 'You ought to tell the truth,' and, most delightfully, 'I am bored.' Ayer characterizes the expressions of moral judgment, famously, by denying that they say anything and claiming that they 'are rather pure expressions of feeling, and are calculated to provoke different responses, and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood' (p. 108), 'they are not in the literal sense significant' (p. 103). Now the claim that certain familiar human utterances are compromised in their meaningfulness on the ground that 'they do not come under the category of truth and falsehood' is precisely the thesis to which Austin, in his theory of speech acts (presented in his *How to Do Things with Words*), provides massive classes of counterexamples. Austin opens with the examples 'I do' (take this woman, and so on), 'I bet you …,' 'I name this ship …,' 'I give and bequeath …,' and says of them: 'It seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing … : it is to do it. None of the utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue it' (p. 6)," *PDAT*, 16.

[23] *CW*, 24.

action.[24] Hence, for Cavell, the everyday and ordinary language is itself a medium for expressing ethical and moral reasoning. Consider the following parts from Cavell's *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* and from *Cities of Words*:

> I might say that the question whether morality has a foundation in reason is given the following slant of answer in Emerson: Perfectionism has its foundation in rethinking.) In Emerson's teaching-in which *the moral is not a separate realm or a separate branch of philosophical study, but one in which each assertion is a moral act ....*"[25]

> ... moral life is not constituted solely by consideration of isolated judgments of striking moral and political problems but is a life whose texture is a weave of cares and commitments in which one is bound to become lost and to need the friendly and credible words of others in order to find one's way, in which at any time a choice may present itself ... in pondering which you will have to decide whose view of you is most *valuable* to you.[26]

Aside from Cavell's correlation of thinking and acting, in Cavellian morality, a fundamental concept that lies is about the matter of interest and what one values.[27] There are aspects of a person's life wherein one acts not primarily because those actions are the right thing to do, but because they are *what one values*. Cavell is thus speaking of ethics and morality from the broad field of the theory of value or axiology. In this context, we act based on our interests and desires, which implies that our actions are *valuable* to us.

[24] *AT*, 153.
[25] *CHU*, xxix. My emphasis.
[26] *CW*, 16. My emphasis.
[27] I speak of values both in the ethical and aesthetic sense.

As mentioned earlier, Emersonian Perfectionism's mission is self-intelligibility. Matteo Falomi posits what Cavell is putting forward: moral reasoning is not so much about moral positions and engagement with other moral agents but primarily about attaining self-knowledge.[28] Cavell mentions Descartes, for example, in exclaiming, "*Cogito, ergo sum,*" the latter is not making an argument in the way we know of argument but positing what Cavell calls a kind of "autobiographical narrative."[29] As I will explain later, it is only by self-expression that we come to know ourselves. The next feature will further discuss self-intelligibility and moral agency, which is predicated on an individual performing moral actions.

EMERSONIAN PERFECTIONISM AS AN INDIVIDUALISTIC ETHICS

The second description of Emersonian Perfectionism is based on its individualistic character. It is worth mentioning Kant, Emerson, and Nietzsche in explicating individualism in Emersonian Perfectionism. Beginning with Kant, scholars such as Guyer and others argue that Emersonian Perfectionism is akin to the Kantian notion of the autonomous individual, i.e., the individual is capable of moral reasoning and has the autonomy of the will to one's end. In Cavell's words, "Philosophy, as in Kant, and as in Rousseau, has taken human freedom as our capacity to give law to ourselves, to be autonomous."[30] In *Cities of Words,* Cavell speaks of the notion of autonomy in the Categorical Imperative:

> The third formulation of the moral law is Autonomy or the Kingdom of Ends: "the *principle* of every human will *as a*

[28] Matteo Falomi, "Perfectionism and Moral Reasoning," in *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 2:2 (2010), 9, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.903>.

[29] Stanley Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. by David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 87.

[30] *IQO*, 40.

> *will giving universal law through all its maxims*" (Ak. 432). This third formulation makes explicit that others legislate for me as well as I for them, that I am at once the law's subject and its sovereign, that in obeying it I am obeying myself, which is to say, in obeying the law I act autonomously. This formulation joins us, so far as we join ourselves to it, in what Kant calls a kingdom (or realm) of ends.[31]

The Kantian imperative of willing the maxim to the universal law emphasizes the subjective individual's freedom in creating moral values. It is being truthful by only doing actions for the good of one's self and greater humanity. The notion of autonomy puts weight upon the individual and the responsibility of determining the end one decides for one's self. If other people decide for his or her end, then in the light of Kantian theory, it violates one's autonomy since it is a mere imposition of foreign values. While doing actions for the common good may present as doing for the sake of others, Kantian ethics shows that no universal ascent can be made without formulating maxims in the first place. Cavell shows this point by citing Emerson and Kant, in Cavell's words, "I can at least indicate something of the way the Kantian concepts of autonomy, conformity, and constraint play decisive roles in "Self-Reliance."[32] In Self-Reliance, Emerson says, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all—that is genius."[33] For Cavell, these words of Emerson are the same as Kant's formulation of the Categorical Imperative, that is to say, private thoughts are subjective maxims, and what is true for all is elevating it to the universal law. Therefore, moral actions and assertions spring from the individual, which

[31] *CW*, 138.
[32] *Ibid*., 139.
[33] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 145.

is what I mean by individualism in Emersonian Perfectionism, explained through Kant.

This spirit of individualism can be further seen in the works of Emerson and Nietzsche. Cavell read Emerson and Nietzsche as espousing the moral perfectionist stance by the individual's venture to the "unattained but attainable self" and by "becoming who you are."[34] In Emerson and Nietzsche's perfectionism, they introduce the concepts of "self-reliance" and the "*Übermensch*," respectively. In Self-Reliance, Emerson utters, "I must be myself."[35] In *The Gay Science,* Nietzsche says, "*What does your conscience say?*—"You shall become the person you are."[36] Cavell understands Emerson's critique of conformity and Nietzsche's herd mentality as a theatricalization of having an unquestioning mind or "unthinking." To prevent this threat of conformity, Cavell illustrates Emerson and Nietzsche as "aversive" to common morality.

In the literary and philosophical fields, Emerson is recognized as the champion of individualism. The Emersonian ethic teaches us of the force of the individual to rise above the crowd and assert one's being. Cavell puts it succinctly, "the entire essay "Self-Reliance," for all its fame as preaching individualism."[37] Cavell further explains: "Emerson calls by the ancient name of the genius, in each of us; it is the quest he calls "becoming what one is," and, I think, "standing for humanity."[38] One can observe again that this "standing for humanity" has a similar sense to the Kantian imperative of willing the maxim to the universal law. In *Representative*

[34] The phrase "unattained but attainable self" is from Emerson's essay *History*.

[35] Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 160.

[36] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*: *With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 219.

[37] *IQO*, 22.

[38] Stanley Cavell, "What is the Emersonian Event? A Comment on Kateb's Emerson," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. by David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 184. Hodge added a footnote, in which the two phrases can be found*; How One Become What One Is* is the subtitle of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* and "the courage to be what we are" is found in Emerson's *The Conduct of Life*, "Considerations by the Way," in *ETE,* 258.

Men, Emerson exalted Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe as great men of their time. These representatives can stand before humanity and archetypal figures of cultural critics of their specific historical milieu.[39] For Cavell, Emerson's representativeness shows the individual capacity to create values. Cavell makes the case that everyone can elect themselves as representative of humanity by acting according to what one thinks is good for one's self and for society.

Cavell also finds affinity with Nietzschean morality and Emersonian Perfectionism.[40] Cavell elects Nietzsche as one of the representatives of moral perfectionist thinking, for the latter proposes alternative moral values against herd values and envisions the metaphorical figure of the Übermensch who can transcend conventional morality. Nietzsche despises the idea of living one's life for the happiness of others, as he says in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "There is much too much sugar and sorcery in those feelings of 'for others,' of '*not* for me."[41] This living for others is celebrated in the traditional Judeo-Christian morality, deontology, and utilitarian ethics. On the other hand, Moral Perfectionism emanates from within, that is, with individual desires and valuations. Thus, Emersonian and Nietzschean ethics apparently prioritize the individual's good over the crowd.

But how can Emersonian Perfectionism be an individualistic ethics, given that ethics rests upon social relations? We are brought back to the orthodox definition of ethics, derived from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning "character" or "custom," and morality from Latin *mores*, which also means "custom." Both definitions show the social dimension of ethics and

[39] Sam McGuire Worley, *Emerson, Thoreau, and the Role of the Cultural Critic* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), 26.

[40] See also David Mikics, *The Romance of Individualism in Emerson and Nietzsche* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003).

[41] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 64. In *Cities of Words*, Cavell says, "Take the sentence from Nietzsche that Rawls quotes as ending: 'Only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable specimens.' That is actually not the end of Nietzsche's sentence, which continues: 'and not for the good of the majority, that is to say those who, taken individually, are the least valuable exemplars'." *CW*, 219.

morality. Moreover, Aristotle, in his work *Politics*, states that humans are inherently social and political animals. As for Cavell, he acknowledges that human beings as social beings have merit. However, a person is, first and foremost, an individual. The notion that moral values, whether good or bad, are acquired in society is partially true; yes, we derive most of our values from society; however, moral values are premised on a moral agent as the bearer and creator of these values. Thus, the individual, with his or her unique and idiosyncratic desired ends, should not be viewed as being against society's collective goals. The individual has the freedom of self-determination, which, if granted and acknowledged by society, benefits our democratic ideals.

Cavell clearly shows the autonomy of reason in Kant, Emerson, and Nietzsche as well as the capacity of each individual to create moral values. It shows that Cavell's conception of ethics and morality springs from the individual, albeit some moral valuations came from tradition and culture. This means we cannot neglect that some moral values are inherited and acquired through social engagements. Kant, Emerson, and Nietzsche challenge existing norms in their respective contexts and question whether the values of their societies are justified. After all, collective moral values are questioned if not critically evaluated by an autonomous and reasonable individual. Positing moral perfectionism as individualistic ethics is a shift in perspective on the conventional understanding of ethics and morality, as explicated, it emphasizes the dignity of the individual as the artist of moral values. We can call it individual moral ascendancy over herd-like, passive, and unfounded morality. Thus, the individual is sovereign in determining his or her own values. Emersonian Perfectionism's individualistic approach shows the disobedience to herd thinking and allegiance to one's own mind. Later, the primacy of the individual will have implications for keeping the democratic space alive.

It is evident that the individualistic character of Emersonian Perfectionism as ethics does not equate to a solipsistic and narcissistic pursuit of self-interest. Everyone acts based on interests, whether

emanating from the individual or society. Whether these actions will consequently accord with the majority or not, the goal is to determine which of those interests are integrated in achieving selfhood or *becoming what one is*. Again, it is undeniable that everyone is heading towards an end, a *telos* one sets for one's self. The question at stake here is what values and ends to choose for ourselves, which vary from one agent to another. No two individuals have the same *decided* end, thus moral perfectionism reminds us to follow the end we determine for ourselves. Moral perfectionism does not wish to be against the crowd but for the individual to pursue higher values and to overcome one's current state. In sum, Moral Perfectionism calls for a private and personalized reflection on our honesty, sincerity, and authenticity with the values and aspirations we live for.

EMERSONIAN PERFECTIONISM AS A ROMANTIC ETHICS

The third and last theme I want to emphasize is that Emersonian Perfectionism is a kind of romantic ethics. I connect this theme with the previous one, as Romanticism places primacy on the subjective individual. I am making an explicit assertion here about a romantic aspect that is often overlooked in the conversations regarding Emersonian Perfectionism. This last feature will mention figures whom Cavell cited, demonstrating our aesthetic relationship with the world.

At this point, it is noteworthy to mention that defining Romanticism is particularly challenging due to varying contexts and generations.[42] The Continental tradition is renowned for its German Romantics, including Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Schiller, Goethe, and Hölderlin, as well as English Romantics such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake, and

[42] Kenneth R. Johnston, "Introduction," in *Romantic Revolutions*, x. In "In Search of Definition," Isaiah Berlin mentions a litany of figures on how Romanticism is defined in various ways. See Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. by Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Byron.[43] On the American shores, Romanticism is represented by Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and Whitman.[44] Although we regard some periods as the height of Romanticism because of its representative poets, philosophers, and artists, Romanticism cannot be enclosed only within those periods. Despite Romanticism's differing contexts, some recurring themes could still be identified. In contrast with the overemphasis on reason, the romantic tradition emphasizes emotion, passion, and creativity. The romantic movement is also preoccupied with individuality, beauty, art, nature, emotion, and transcendence. It also refers to the primordial mode of *being-in-the-world*. The romantic spirit imagines alternative realities where one's being will be at home in the world. As seen in history, Romanticism has paved the way for revolutions by criticizing the dominant and sometimes oppressive ruling government, culture, and tradition.[45] In relating Romanticism with Emersonian Perfectionism, I take the idea of proposing new ways of acting and responding to the world as an ethics in itself, more specifically, a romantic one. By romantic ethics, I echo Geuss's notion of ethics in the general and second sense, which is about the relationship of the self with other subjectivities and the objective world. Emersonian Perfectionism, rather than proposing rules of conduct, speaks of the fundamental nature of existence in relation to ourselves, others, and the natural world. Cavell explains this romance:

[43] For works on the romantic movement, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988); Richard Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997). See also Paolo Bolaños, *Nietzsche and Adorno on Philosophical Praxis, Language, and Reconciliation: Towards an Ethics of Thinking* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).

[44] See Lawrence Buell, *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 2006).

[45] Historical events such as the French Revolution, Thoreau's civil disobedience, Emerson's abolitionism.

> The universe is as separate from me, but as intimately part of me, as one on whose behalf I contest, and who therefore bears the color I wear. We are in a state of "romance" with the universe (to use a word from the last sentence of the essay); we do not possess it, but our life is to return to it, to respond to its contesting for my attention, in ever-widening circles, "onward and onward," but with as directed a goal as any quest can have; in the present case, until "the soul attains her due sphericity.[46]

The passage above illustrates that from the romantic perspective, the self and the universe are closely intertwined. In other words, the self is not separate from nature but an essential part of it. The romantic also strives for wholeness or the union of the self with nature, the individual, and society. In epistemological theory, the natural world plays a crucial role in the acquisition of knowledge, for it is where the agent perceives the world. We have seen this romantic unification project, such as the Kantian synthesis of the subjective and the objective world, sense, and reason. Since Kant, we have known that cognition is possible because of aesthetics. We acquire knowledge through sense experience, and only then will the mind process it. As Cavell states, "Kant transforms our very finitude, our limitedness, into the power that creates the necessary conditions for the possibility of human knowledge of the world."[47] Thus, the manner of our situatedness in the world subsequently affects our thinking, acting, speaking, and behaving—all of which Cavell describes as comprising the moral life. The limited space and brief time we occupy in a specific historical epoch determine our consciousness and subsequently affect how we act. Essentially, moral values are derived from the immediate surroundings where one dwells. To paint a picture, the natural world—the

[46] Stanley Cavell, "Thinking of Emerson," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13.

[47] *CW*, 125.

perpetual night and day, the air we breathe, the foods we eat—all contribute to the development of one's being. In other words, we regard nature as the everlasting source of growth and inspiration.

The romantic relationship between the subject and object shows the metaphysical problem of our connection in the world and how Cavell reformulates our understanding of epistemology and ethics through language. Cavell mentions modern philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, whose aim is to attack metaphysics and metaphysical language. The tyranny of metaphysics and *a priori* concepts lie in the theoretical and practical implications of their presuppositions. The problem with the language of metaphysics is that it is far removed from one's own, and the individual is alienated from his or her words, hence, from one's self. We can also see this criticism of metaphysics in Nietzsche's writings. For Nietzsche, the nihilistic tendencies of metaphysics neglect the person's physiological and material constitution.[48] Cavell's ordinary language philosophy is informed by the materiality and historicity of human beings. Thus, Cavell's point is to recover the ordinary, which means the ordinary experience of the world, as opposed to turning away from it, as seen in the nihilistic metaphysical tradition. The redemption of the individual is thus through language, i.e., bringing back the words to the individual in his or her everyday experience. According to Cavell, philosophy's role is critique, which may involve critiquing the language of philosophy itself, including the metaphysical language.[49] Cavell posits that founded claims and assertions are only made possible through the recovery of the everyday. To recover is to detest and disown the metaphysical language in favor of the everyday one, which means to say, to speak from one's genuine *voice*.[50]

[48] Bolaños, *Nietzsche and Adorno*, 44.

[49] *IQO*, 27.

[50] Cavell cites Derrida, Austin, and Wittgenstein as philosophers who criticized the language of metaphysics, in Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

The unique way of sensing and experiencing the world is related to the formation of language. In this sense, we can observe the apparent connection between language and thinking. Paolo Bolaños pointed out that the early German romantics were informed of the dialectical and material basis of language. This view on language, Bolaños calls the "linguistic constitutivism," which he means the "cognitive relation to the material world is essentially constituted by our normative use of language."[51] Since every human inhabits a specific social and material context, this leads to diverse languages and, hence, diverse ways of thinking.[52] If knowledge is acquired through sense experience and reason, then we cannot disregard the role of experience in the formation of knowledge. It is from our unique experience that we conceptualize and create our world views. Language then plays an important role, for when we construct language, it carries the meaning and our understanding of the world. The romantic tradition has an "organic" construction of knowledge and worldviews since romantics are especially sensitive to the role of sense, feelings, and emotions. Unlike a language handed down *a priori*, romantics are grounded in a person's socio-historical and material conditions. Nietzsche and Emerson are prime examples of this kind of language, as embodied in their works, written in aphoristic and poetic forms. The Emersonian and Nietzschean perfectionism is thus a kind of romanticism—a romantic relationship with one's self and nature. This romanticism opens up new ways of thinking and acting, as different experiences yield different expressions.

It follows that there is an existential aspect of human life and that we are restless. As Cavell explicates:

> The intuitive idea captured by this systematization is, I would like to say, the idea of the human creature as essentially *restless*. Kant has a famous motto or formulation

[51] For Bolaños, the early German romantics later influenced Nietzsche and Adorno on their thoughts and philosophical writings, see Bolaños, *Nietzsche and Adorno*, 13.

[52] *Ibid*., 15.

> for this intuition as well. The opening sentence of the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* runs as follows: "Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer." The idea of the human as a burden to itself, tormenting itself, is an idea taken up by the Romantics in the generation succeeding Kant's. What I am calling human restlessness is for me a fundamental, motivating idea of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, a perpetual seeking, perpetually undermined, for what Wittgenstein calls rest, or peace.[53]

The quotation above describes our restlessness in our attempt to penetrate the noumena. Cavell frequently invokes the 'doubleness of the self' from Kant's distinction between the intelligible and sensible worlds.[54] Cavell also cited Emerson when the latter says, "The world I know is not the world I think."[55] This doubleness of the self refers to the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self, of what presently *is* and what one will potentially *become*. The implication is that we incessantly face disappointment with our current world if things do not align with the ideals we set for ourselves. Moreover, romantic self-expression may contradict societal values, as individual aspirations will diverge significantly from conventional morality. Hence, the ethos of perfectionism is to strive for

[53] *CW*, 128.

[54] *CHU*, xxxv. He also discussed this in *Cities of Words*, as he says, "Emerson's true man, whose 'standard you are constrained to accept' is a recasting of Kant's idea, mentioned in my Introduction, of the human as having two 'standpoints' on his existence, which Kant also pictures as our living in two worlds—the sensuous world in which we are governed by the laws of material things, and the intelligible world in which we are free. The true man's standard is, in short, ours so far as we live adopting the standpoint of the intelligible world." *CW*, 32. See also Kant in *CW*, 129.

[55] *TNYUA*, 10.

perfection amid human limitedness and imperfections. This is because the romantic is sensitive to human finitude by the condition of human frailty and the looming failure of coming-to-be. The search for the self arises from human dissatisfaction with the current state one lives in, and that there is a life beyond the shameful disposition. The failure to attain the ideals we set for ourselves is one of the unhandsome parts of our condition. It is what I think the psychoanalyst would say about the failure of individuation and the inability to assert one's being. This sense of inexpressiveness of one's being is a loss of the self, hence a romantic loss. Cavell cites Emerson, "This state of inexpressibility, of words not matching our needs, Emerson describes many ways, one time by saying, "Every word they say chagrins us, and we know not where to begin to set them right."[56] I reiterate here that, for Cavell, ethics is not only deliberations on the rightness and wrongness of actions, but a process of self-intelligibility, of expressing ourselves and making ourselves known to us and others. In practical ways, moral perfectionism calls for experimentation with human settlement and habituation, including activities such as changing abode, abandoning old and stupid ideas, questioning inherited and unfounded cultures and traditions, and outgrowing vices and bad habits. In contrast with the established ethical theories, it is apparent that these activities are done not for the sake of others but for personal individual good.

In sum, Emersonian Perfectionism is a romantic quest for the self—the unrelenting struggle to find one's *voice*. To speak with a borrowed *voice* and not one's own is one of humanity's greatest tragedies. When an individual no longer resonates with one's authentic and genuine desires, it is a privation of self-knowledge. Cavell refers to this as the truth and threat of skepticism, one of his significant contributions to philosophy, which discloses human limitations and partial knowledge of the self and the external world. Romantic ethics in Emersonian Perfectionism restores this estrangement through self-expression. As Cavell asserts, "The return of a

[56] *PDAT*, 220.

word requires the recovery of its object for us. This was one quest of Romantic poetry, and of the Kantian project to answer skepticism."[57] To be able to say, "This is my position" or "This is what I believe' is an indication of self-intelligibility. In Emerson's insight, it is the re-working of the genius in us, which will "come back to us with a certain alienated majesty."[58]

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to outline the constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism as an ethical theory. I discussed the distinction between Emersonian Perfectionism as a metaethical theory with other established ethical theories. As a metaethical theory, it not only addresses what we consider right or wrong but also examines the nature of moral judgments and underlying principles. I also showed how Emersonian Perfectionism can be characterized as individualistic ethics. This part showed how Emersonian Perfectionism prioritizes the autonomy and agency of the individual in creating moral values. Finally, I have illustrated Emersonian Perfectionism as a form of romantic ethics, highlighting the romantic relationship between the self, others, and the world. We understand that moral behavior is shaped by the socio-historical contexts in which we live, and therefore affects how we speak, act, and navigate through the world. Emersonian Perfectionism is a relatively unique and moral theory apart from the established ones. What is clear at this point is that Emersonian Perfectionism shows a different topography of morality, which helps us make sense of our moral lives. Human beings are complex beings since we exist in specific contexts and dimensions. Despite the differences in individual contexts, Emersonian Perfectionism reveals the possibility of shared values and morality, provided that it is premised on sovereign and autonomous individuals.

[57] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 64.
[58] Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 145.

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