

Meritocracy and Perfectionism: Toward a Liberal Education For Democracy

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In an essay he wrote between the two World Wars called “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us (1939), John Dewey expressed his hope that people are open to the possibility of reconciliation even during a crisis of war. Fundamental to this statement is the idea that democracy is not only a political mechanism but also involves principles about how we should live. One’s moral life and experiences can be shared with others as “friends” through mutual respect and learning from difference.¹ Today, this very idea of democracy as a way of life is being tested in various tensions and divisions. We can see it tested not only in the most obvious cases, such as the war in Ukraine. It also appears as political divides *within* a country: between the haves and the have-nots; between workers and elites; between ethnic groups, and so on. The world-wide spread of COVID-19 has elucidated what underlies these political divisions. In the book *The Tyranny of Merit*, Michael Sandel describes the undemocratic culture in our times as follows:

These are dangerous times for democracy. The danger can be seen in rising xenophobia and growing public support for autocratic figures who test the limits of democratic norms. These trends are troubling in themselves. Equally alarming is the fact that mainstream parties and politicians display little understanding of the discontent that is roiling politics around the world.²

Sandel identifies meritocracy as the cause of the crisis. The crisis of democracy is not simply political but, on a more inconspicuous level, emotional, psychological, and existential. An urgent task for democracy and education is to acknowledge the intensity of suppressed negative emotions and to channel this energy into a renewed sense of freedom while reclaiming a sense of unity and community. Against this background, this paper addresses the follow-

ing question: How can we find a way to transcend the deep divides between people whose feelings are not acknowledged or well expressed, and those who are oblivious to such a condition. How can these divided people come to learn from each other as “friends”? In response, the purpose of this paper is to find an alternative approach to democratic education in these undemocratic times. As a way of resisting the tyranny of merit, I shall reappraise the contemporary significance of Stanley Cavell’s concept of Emersonian Moral Perfectionism and present an alternative vision of perfectionist liberal education.

SANDEL AND THE TYRANNY OF MERIT

Sandel declares that democracy faces a crisis in our “deeply polarized time, when large numbers of working people feel ignored and unappreciated, when we desperately need sources of social cohesion and solidarity” (*TM*, 211). As public problems are treated as matters requiring technical expertise, ordinary citizens end up suffering a growing sense of disempowerment, and public discourse becomes hollow (*TM*, 20). Behind this tendency prevails *the tyranny of merit*—the hubristic idea that “the talented deserve the outsize rewards that market-driven societies lavish on the successful” (*TM*, 24). The hubris is intensified because “[t]he notion that the system rewards talent and hard work encourages the winners to consider their success their own doing, a measure of their virtue” (*TM*, 25). This is tied up with a “market friendly, technocratic conception of globalization” (*TM*, 20). Consequently, at the root of social division are “ugly sentiments” such as humiliation, anger, loss of dignity, lack of self-confidence, the “loss of social esteem,” and “an intolerant, vengeful nationalism” (*TM*, 18; 25; 30; 31). It was the failure of liberal politicians to recognize the underlying emotions of the losers in the system that, according to Sandel, produced the populist reaction and the deep division of American society symbolized by the election of Donald Trump. This has created a “politics of humiliation” (*TM*, 25). Sandel’s analysis exposes a kind of blindness peculiar to our time that blocks mutual understanding. He writes, “Meritocratic elites had become so accustomed to intoning this mantra [of meritocracy] that they *failed to notice* it was losing its capacity to inspire.

. . . [T]hey *missed* the mood of discontent” or “overlooked” the sense of the pain of those who were underappreciated (p. 201, emphasis added). Workers are suffering from a sense of alienation where “[y]ou are a stranger in your own land” (*TM*, 153).

Interestingly, Sandel not only points out the negative emotions on the part of the losers but also the “damaged psyches of the privileged,” the “wounded winners” (*TM*, 183; 177). College students are afflicted by “the soul-destroying demands” that meritocratic striving imposes (*TM*, 177). They spend their energies “jumping through hoops of high achievement” (*TM*, 181). These are the sources of “the sentiments of depression, anxiety and anger” that he alleges are symptomatic of a “hidden epidemic of perfectionism” in the form of a “meritocratic malady” (*TM*, 179; 181). Sandel’s observation is similar to what William Deresiewicz identifies in *Excellent Sheep* as the wrong-headed perfectionism of young students in elite universities: “panicked perfectionism” or “anorexic perfectionism.”³ The apparently happy “winners” are also in the grip of the tyranny of merit.

Sandel’s analysis demonstrates the real difficulty of creating a democratic society in an undemocratic culture: a means to transcend the deep divides that originate in the invisible psyche and to re-unify society. Sandel’s solution for social cohesion and solidarity is to acknowledge the hubris and complacency of the meritocratic mind—the concept of human beings as “self-made human agents, the author of our fate, the master of our destiny”—and to move toward humility (*TM*, 123; 25). Differences in talent are morally arbitrary and a matter of luck (*TM*, 25; 128; 193). Hence, rewards from talent “should be shared with the community as a whole” (*TM*, 129). We need, he writes, “a politics of the common good” for “our collective well-being” (*TM*, 112; 221).

As much as Sandel’s analysis is pertinent for today, it also has its limitations. First and foremost is his dichotomous view of freedom and fate (luck or fortune), which intersects the contrast to which he appeals between the liberal, autonomous subject, on the one hand, and the communal, dependent being with a sense of belonging, on the other. Within this

framework, he argues that merit and talent are a matter of good fortune. Yet, this discloses his more-or-less fixed view on the innate talent of each being, which underplays human freedom and the possibility for change. Ironically, his solution slides into another form of suppression: the assimilation of the negative and invisible human psyche into the inclusive whole of the common. This seems to imply a dogma of wholeness at the metaphysical level. Furthermore, when it comes to the question of how to create a path for dialogue between people who cannot understand one another, his views on education do not consider how people might be motivated to convert the “ugly features of populist sentiment” into positive sentiments of “gratitude and humility” (*TM*, 18; 14). Even though Sandel says, “[t]o understand this [populist] protest is to identify and assess the grievances and resentments that animate it,” he does not delve into the dark side of the human psyche (*TM*, 121). Instead, his solution is in a way behavioristic. For example, he proposes a lottery for college admission so that “the exploratory character of a liberal arts education” is open to many people (*TM*, 187; 188). He does not, however, mention what this “exploratory character” of education is and how such an education can be in service of cultivating positive sentiments. To bring about a radical change in the sentiments of people, and to find a way to transcend deep divides, it is necessary to present an alternative view of human nature and education.

CHANGING THE SUBJECT: PERFECTIONISM RECLAIMED TOWARD AN ALTERNATIVE PATH OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

Paul Standish indicates an alternative perfectionist path beyond liberalism and communitarianism that shifts thinking about freedom and equality. His paper provides an account of the exploratory nature of a liberal arts education in service to human transformation. He questions multiple, interrelated facets to “the cultural spirit that has characterized the university.”⁴ First, the drive toward use, effectiveness, and accountability, which he calls a “metaphysics of calculability,” has eroded the spirit of liberal learning in universities (*TM*, 324). Second is the policy of “wider participation” in universities (*TM*, 324; 329). How can liberal learning be sustained when the opportunity

to study at a university is extended, the diversity of the student population is increased, and commensurate funding for these forms of expansion is not available? Third, there is a drive toward solidifying cultural identities, for example, under the political slogans of multiculturalism. Does this not suppress the voice of those who cannot escape or resist such consolidation? Fourth, there is a crisis of knowledge that derives from instrumentalism. In today's prevailing knowledge economy, any "broader conception of knowledge, which might have been the source of complications and resistance, is incorporated into a transparent and univocal discourse" (*TM*, 326). Standish was writing more than two decades ago, but his diagnosis still applies to today's tyranny of merit.

In times of crisis, Standish claims that "it will seem important to assert the perfectionist spirit" (*TM*, 319). In speaking of the spirit of the university as needing to be reclaimed, he is invoking a certain kind of perfectionism—the quest of perfection with the lingering sense of incompleteness, imperfection. It is here that he refers to Allan Bloom's idea of the quest for the "perfect soul."⁵ Standish also finds something similar in Michael Oakeshott's vision of liberal education, in its seeking "a perfection of human nature by adding to it what is more than nature, and directing it towards aims higher than its own" (*TM*, 324). In invoking perfectionism for liberal learning, Standish raises some philosophical issues relevant to democracy and education. First is the question of how the instrumental and the spiritual horizons of education are to be related. Unlike Bloom or Deresiewicz, both of whom in their respective ways call for a reactionary, even nostalgic turn to older forms of liberal learning, Standish acknowledges the need for higher education to be useful in some of its aspects. He calls for a third way beyond the dichotomous choice between a purified perfectionism (non-instrumental, non-useful) and instrumentalism in our thinking about education. Second is the question of how democracy can be reconciled with perfectionism. What would be a vision of perfectionism for those who are "less able than Bloom's elite" (*TM*, 329)? In the tide of "mass participation," democratic participation

is a realistic phenomenon that we cannot ignore. So is personal growth. If so, Standish's question is: "Whose spirit?" (*TM*, 328). In response, Standish seeks a kind of perfectionism that is not elitist like Bloom's but responds to the "spiritual need" of ordinary people (*TM*, 330). What he envisions for the quest of the perfect soul is not some purified, perfected state of mind but rather a "humble perfectionist yearning" derived from the realistic, actual problems that ordinary people face (*TM*, 326). Third, Standish raises the issue of how it is possible to go beyond the democratic (political) discourse of multiculturalism and equal opportunities that, with its protocols of identarian thinking, can stand in the way of seeing the different as the other. Bloom's perfectionism does not help here as it succumbs to a kind of "academicism or to solidification in the cult of the intellectual" (*TM*, 330). Standish proposes a kind of perfectionism that resists "the forms of wholeness that solidified cultural spirit might offer—forms of cultural takeover" (*TM*, 325).

Standish's argument gives some pointers that lead beyond the limitations of Sandel's account. He destabilizes the conventional notion of perfectionism that is associated with elitism and suggests an alternative path of liberating human potential and freedom that goes beyond liberalism and communitarianism. Standish presents us with an alternative vision of perfectionism: perfectionism for ordinary people. In contrast to the exceptional autonomous spirits Bloom has in mind, the greatness Standish wishes to cultivate is a greatness in each of us. It is an aristocracy of the self.⁶ Furthermore, against a solidifying cultural spirit, Standish indicates a path beyond the metaphysical dogma of wholeness, suggesting that the full grasp of the whole and its closure are impossible. Behind his vision is the view that human beings are conditioned by incompleteness and humility. He encourages us to hear multiple voices without succumbing to a solidifying cultural spirit. Standish invites us to an exploratory conception of liberal education for human transformation.

EMERSONIAN MORAL PERFECTIONISM: CAVELL'S WAY OF
GOING BEYOND THE TYRANNY OF MERIT

Stanley Cavell's Emersonian Moral Perfectionism gives substance to the possibility of an alternative path toward perfectionism that is along the lines of what Standish indicates. It is in some degree a response to John Rawls, who Cavell considers an "anti-meritocrat."⁷ The way that Cavell is *anti-meritocratic*, however, differs from Rawls, and for that matter, Sandel. The issue of perfectionism in Rawls is most clear in paragraph fifty of *The Theory of Justice* where he argues that Friedrich Nietzsche's perfectionism is inherently elitist.⁸ In response to Rawls, Cavell draws attention to the common spirit of perfectionism in Nietzsche and Ralph Waldo Emerson, considering the ample evidence of Emerson's impact on Nietzsche's work. In Cavell's view, Emersonian perfectionism is "non-elitist" and has a "democratic aspiration." It is essential to "the criticism of democracy from within." Hence, "Perfectionism [is] not only compatible with democracy, but [is] its prize."⁹ While Rawls' focus is on "*the duties and obligations* of individuals so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, science, and culture," Emersonian Perfectionism "is not primarily a claim as to the right to goods . . . but primarily as to *the claim, or the good, of freedom.*"¹⁰ While Rawls' theory of justice enjoins us to mitigate the burdens of the natural and social orders to "[share] one another's fate," Cavell's Emersonian Moral Perfectionism is directed "less to restraining the bad than to releasing the good."¹¹ Provocatively, Cavell declares that his audience is not the "disadvantaged, the oppressed," or "greatly advantaged" (*CHU*, 30). Rather, he speaks—as Henry David Thoreau does to people in "*moderate* circumstances"—to "the relatively advantaged," who, he claims, are "subject to an oppressive helplessness" of compromise and cynicism.¹² Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism is a resistance to "false or debased perfectionisms," which constitute the state of conformity (*CHU*, 16; 12; 47).

There are several features that distinguish Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism from meritocracy. What is at stake here is not so much "a scouting for talent" but an awakening of "genius" in each of us (*CHU*, 25). In Cavell's account, "the capacity for self-reliance is universally distributed" among each of us, not only as a "capacity" and "an opportunity" but also as "a threat"

(*CHU*, 9; 26). This is his perfectionist reconfiguration of the idea of equality: “The issue of consent becomes the issue of whether the voice I lend in recognizing a society as mine, as speaking for me, is my voice, my own. This, however, is not and cannot be a matter of self-centeredness as “my” voice is always a part of the language community of the “we,” a participation in the “conversation of justice” (*CHU*, 28). Unlike Sandel’s “collective well-being” this “we” is not pre-given. As Cavell writes, “Who these others are, for whom you speak and by whom you are spoken for, is not known a priori, though it is in practice generally treated as given.” My voice represents both myself *and* “humanity,” and these representations can never be in perfect unison.¹³

Cavell’s Emersonian Moral Perfectionism shows a way to resist meritocracy and how to do so without falling into the metaphysical dogma of wholeness. The key concept here is *partiality* (*CR*, 31; 41; 42). “Emerson’s ‘partiality’ of thinking is, or accounts for, the inflections of partial as ‘not whole’ together with partial as ‘favoring or biased toward’ something or someone” (*CR*, 41). He keeps space for the “spiritual outsider” who “break[s] the communal” (*CR*, 17). This does not mean, however, the negation of the common. Paradoxically, in Cavell’s idea, partiality is a condition for achieving the common. In Cavell’s endorsement of Emerson’s “discontinuous encirclings,” the trajectory of expanding circles is a path in which there is no “single, or any, direction,” hence, “no path” (*CR*, xxxiv). “The self is always attained, as well as *to be* attained” (*CR*, 12). If there is anything called the whole,” it is to be discovered only and always from a particular angle, in a particular context. This is Cavell’s indication of the contextual notion of the whole.

One may wonder if this is still too elitist because of its notion of the self as autonomous, independent, and characterized by power, as Cornel West says.¹⁴ There is, however, another dimension to Cavell’s Emersonian Moral Perfectionism that overturns conventional interpretations of power. In opposition to Rawls’ description of the “good democrat as managing to live a life ‘above reproach,’” Cavell claims that, when you “take the sins of society upon you,” you can never say you are “above reproach.”¹⁵ The humility that

is suggested here extends into the thought that you owe others what can never be fully repaid. A strong sense of separation, gap and rift, and a poignant sense of the ungraspable, which Emerson calls “the most unhandsome part of our condition,” permeate these sentiments.¹⁶

Furthermore, Emersonian Perfectionism offers us a key to transcend the deep divides between people who suffer from unacknowledged negative emotions and those who are oblivious to them. Faced with this infinite asymmetrical responsibility to others, one has to go through unsettling experiences. Such a sense of disturbance is captured most saliently in Cavell’s response to skepticism. What Cavell calls the “truth of skepticism” exemplifies the attempt to re-place philosophy—to question what it is for human beings *to know*, and to take the terms of this question beyond those of traditional epistemology (CR, 448; 241). Our relationship to others is not only a matter of *recognition*—the recognition of characteristics that has become typical of the politics of recognition—but of acknowledgment, to acknowledge the invisible, the unknown. He elaborates on a line from the *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein appears to face out his skeptical interlocutor: “‘But if you are *certain*, isn’t it that you are shutting your eyes in face of doubt?’—‘They’ve been shut.’”¹⁷ What can this apparent evasion, this shutting of the eyes mean? Cavell phrases his own answer as follows:

‘They (my eyes) are shut’ as a resolution, or confession, says that one can, for one’s part, live in the face of doubt. – But doesn’t everyone, everyday? – It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the threat of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it (CR, 431).

It is precisely because of this fated human tendency toward denial and avoidance that we have to learn how to live with doubt, and this is the crucial aspect of acknowledgment. It is notable that Cavell speaks of the shutting of the eyes rather than simply of opening them fully. Preoccupation with completeness leads to the wrong kind of perfectionism¹⁸ There is “[s]omething

of the totalitarian” in the drive toward completeness, and this is the face of the anxious quest for certainty.¹⁹ As Cavell says, self-knowledge is not a matter of moving “from uncertainty to certainty” but “from darkness to light” (CR, 102). This implies that what is crucial for education is the gradual shedding of light on the world. As Wittgenstein says, “Light dawns gradually over the whole.”²⁰ But it is important that light for human beings is partial. We learn to see in the ambiguous, in twilight. In Cavell’s idea of correct blindness, there permeates a sense of humility over our partiality and over what exceeds our full grasp. This is what underlies his contextual approach to the whole and his idea of *acknowledgment* (in place of recognition).²¹ We need to accept “ugly sentiments” as part of the unhandsome human condition, without covering them over by fantasies of a coherent whole and without forcing unity on experience from the beginning. Separation is something to be achieved, and even in the state of reunion, it is never gone. Remarriage with the world is not a permanent state. It is the process of a continual return. In response to the original question— of how we can find a way to transcend the deep divides and learn from one another as friends—acknowledgment is key to creating a path for dialogue amongst seemingly incompatible others.

TOWARD PERFECTIONIST LIBERAL EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

Liberal education, following Standish’s and Cavell’s perfectionism, is in service to democracy and education for human transformation, and it involves a conversion for each of us in the ordinary. For example, such moment of conversion can be brought about in many ways, including learning how to read books. As Standish says in the aforementioned article, in contrast to the model of reading a book as a canonical, securely established text, “the essential non-presence that the written text (fore)shadows is a better indicator of that incompleteness that is at the heart of the perfectionist quest.”²² What is to be learned here is the impossibility of full understanding—the sense that the meaning of the text are never finally to be determined, that reading is never complete.²³ This mode of reading requires students and teachers to be exposed to multiple voices in the text and, that is,

to incompatible readings. This is distinct from the multiculturalist discourse of democratic participation, which acknowledges diversity but does not adequately register the tension and incommensurability between different ways of life and thought. Rather than lessening the role of the teacher, perfectionist liberal education imposes greater demands upon teachers—asking them to guide students into the reading of difficult texts and to sensitize them to the subtle vibration of multiple voices therein.

In Cavell's Emersonian Moral Perfectionism, liberal education is not limited to the non-vocational track. It goes beyond the divide between vocational and liberal arts education, a position that Dewey calls for in *Democracy and Education*.²⁴ It is in service to the cultivation of the perfectionist spirit for all. It points us to a kind of integrated notion of vocational education and liberal arts studies. As Dewey says, the liberal arts should not only be integrated with natural sciences; they should also be integrated with vocational studies, with their focus on experiment, use, and practical ends.²⁵

In order to respond to the crisis of blindness that is at the heart of social division, in the way that Sandel problematizes the situation, and to cultivate relationships of acknowledgment, cultivating aesthetic imagination in the lives of those whose emotions are unacknowledged is crucial. One of the greatest lessons that Cavell's contextual approach to the whole offers us is the significance of changing aspects, which, with the projection of our words into new contexts, enables us to see the world in a new way. This can be introduced not only into aesthetic education but also, for example, into language education, citizenship education, and history education.

Most importantly, Cavell's Emersonian Moral Perfectionism preserves space for the uncommon, and dissidence and deviation. An emphasis on disturbance and disequilibrium is a crucial component of agreements in judgment, thereby retaining space for deviation. Such action brings with it uncertainty and risk. Yet, ambiguity is a crucial condition for creating a healthy community and for avoiding falling into the metaphysical dogma of wholeness. Thoreau's idea of the uncommon school, which is in pointed contrast to the idea of the "common school," points to possibilities and

practices of education that extend beyond the learner's inculcation into society, beyond the modern rhetoric of "inclusion," and toward open possibilities of thought, action, and community.²⁶ This is a hope for democracy in undemocratic times.

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