

Perfectionism as Friendship, Democracy, Education

Derek Gottlieb

University of Northern Colorado

I am honored to respond to Naoko Saito's paper.¹ No one except maybe Paul Standish can claim to have done as much to bring Stanley Cavell's work to the attention of philosophers of education.

The response that I offer here is mainly one of affirmation and rearticulation. There is nothing in Saito's work that I strictly wish to contest. I rather want to push the locus of the education in the paper a little farther afield and say some additional things, with respect to perfectionism, about the notions of wholeness, partiality, and elitism. And I want to just *mention*, though it will be all too brief, something about the role of perfectionist representativeness and democratic education. This means that I will basically pass over the sections of Saito's paper devoted to Michael Sandel and Paul Standish, where I find nothing either to quibble with or to add. Instead, the majority of my commentary will be addressed to section three, "Perfectionism Reclaimed."

But first, a word about John Rawls' slander of perfectionism that Saito underscores. Cavell's perfectionism, exactly as Saito describes, combines epistemic humility, ethical commitment, and fundamental other-directedness into something that, if I understand him correctly, he eventually comes to call "not a particular moral demand, but the condition of democratic morality; it is what that dimension of representativeness of democracy comes to which is not delegatable."² This basic sensibility is not only missing from Rawls' characterization of perfectionism, which he takes from Friedrich Nietzsche, and which also seems to owe something to Karl Popper's pejorative sense of historicism, but it is also conspicuously absent from Rawls' elaborations of liberal theory as a whole. Danielle Allen noted this quite some time ago, of course, but there is also a sudden outpouring of work in the field of political theory seeking to recover the "normative core" of democracy, as though in belated recognition that democratic life really might require substantive normative commitments, specifically regarding relations to others.³

I would like to start by saying something about Saito's critique of the "metaphysics of wholeness" and what I see as a crucial paradox internal to Cavellian perfectionism that may help me to push on the links among the ideas of representativeness, liberal education, and acknowledgment. Cavell's use of Emersonian images in describing perfectionism—specifically the figures of the staircase and the circles—suggests to me that "partiality," as Cavell and Saito use the term, ought to imply a different target than wholeness. Specifically, my worry is that, inheriting the intellectual skirmishes over postmodernism and relativism from the previous decades as we do, it is too easy to misconstrue an opposition between partiality and wholeness along the lines of a relativism-truth debate, which Cavell held up as a paradigm case of "theorizing in the wrong place."⁴

Here is the paradoxical positionality of the self in Cavellian perfectionism: We are simultaneously complete at every instant and also always on the way to ourselves or, as it were, open to the next to step, the further self. This is, to me, the real import of Cavell's phrase that Saito quotes: "the self is always attained, as well as *to be* attained."⁵ Elsewhere, Cavell describes Ralph Waldo Emerson's "finding as founding" in terms of "the establishing of thinking as knowing how to go on, being on the way, onward and onward. At each step or level, explanation comes to an end. There is no level to which all explanations come, at which all end."⁶

In various places, Cavell connects this insight to Immanuel Kant's two standpoints, but his use of it from the late 1980s onward, and his reliance on Emerson in bringing it out, resists what I think is so distasteful in Nietzsche, for example: namely, the triumphalism and superiority—the elitism—in *having* attained a self, as well as the shame—one might say, the deficit thinking—in not, at present, measuring up to the standard of the next self.⁷ I will only note in passing the similarity of what I have just described to Sandel's depiction of the political fallout of meritocracy, with its elite scorn and underclass resentment. What is unique in Cavell, it seems to me, is the bothness or the simultaneity of attainment and its lack, of the self and the further self, of this step and the next, of standing and retaking our stance, of stasis and motion. The epistemic humility in Cavell's perfectionism comes out in the substitution of nextness, of series,

of sequence for the infinite concepts of universality and eternity. In Cavellian perfectionism, stances are never simply taken but also always retaken. The infinity of a series—of moments, of human others, of actions in a practice—is not to be known or guessed at, but learned, step by step, onward and onward.

It does not seem to me that *wholeness* is the thing we must deny in ourselves in the process of acknowledging our partiality. It seems to me rather something like finality, or maybe closure.

Partiality, when arrayed in opposition to finality or closure, has implications for liberal education and democratic representativeness that, I think, follow the path that Saito and Standish mark out—a path involving “conversion,” “transformation,” “greater demands upon the teacher,” and especially “multiple voices”—but our partiality also ought to carry us much farther down that path than Saito’s paper suggests. It is *true* and *right* that, as she says, erasing the divide between liberal and vocational education is something we should do, and that the “cultivation of the aesthetic imagination in the lives of those whose emotions are unacknowledged is crucial.”

But I think these suggestions are short of the mark in a couple of ways. Saito’s suggestions seem to assume that vocational education is what the working class receives and that the cultivation of an aesthetic imagination—the fruit of a liberal education restricted to the upper classes—will permit the working class to reorient their unacknowledged resentments. But the rise of meritocracy that Sandel points out corresponds almost exactly with the transformation of *all* education (in a US-American context certainly, but also elsewhere) into vocational education, explicit preparation and qualification for working life. It is the meaning of “college and career readiness” as the goal and the mission of US-American schooling. The complete absence of the aesthetic imagination as a publicly valued goal for *anyone’s* education is also how meritocratic winners—the upper classes—come both to scorn their fellow citizens and anxiously to work themselves to the bone in continually proving their worth.⁸

To be clear, I am not at all arguing that Saito goes astray in demanding a liberal education for all; I am saying that, at present, this will be a matter of

recovering something that we have lost sight of or buried rather than widely distributing something an elite few are hoarding. It is a matter of reanimating the spirit of a liberal education rather than providing universal access to the parody of liberal education that currently stalks our school hallways. The cultivation of the aesthetic imagination *is* that spirit, precisely because of the way it dovetails with Cavellian partiality.

It is important to see that Cavell's sense of partiality, like Emerson's, involves both a sense of incompleteness and a sense of bias. Bias, in this case, implies conviction in the world.⁹ Partiality understood as incompleteness can tempt us to engage in what Cavell calls avoidance. Avoidance works in two ways: First, it fundamentally denies our structural publicness, the way that who we are and what we do are bound up with forms of life in which we agree with others, to use the Wittgensteinian parlance. Second, in service of this denial, it *intellectualizes* our relations to others, making our obligations contingent upon adequate knowledge. Both of these are at work in Cavell's reading of *Othello* at the end of the *Claim of Reason*. Othello's call for ocular proof is a way of denying his own existence "as dependent, as partial."¹⁰ It seals him up while casting Desdemona out. By conditioning his love on a fantasy of sufficient knowledge, he violently destroys his love, both the relation and, literally, the object.

So, the kind of Cavellian blindness or falling in love with the world in the passage that Saito quotes does not strike me as well described as "living *with* doubt." It is better described as rejecting the temptations of idle doubts. There are, after all, plenty of *real* doubts that we really *do* have to put to rest in one way or another in order to carry on together. If I think it is permissible, and indeed what one does, to eat with my hands in a restaurant of a particular kind, and you, as my date, let's say, do not, then suddenly it is *impossible* for either of us to follow the rule blindly, as Ludwig Wittgenstein describes it. I can shut my eyes at your evident revulsion. but I would not say that I am thereby living with doubt as much as I am refusing to acknowledge the person who is raising the doubt.

This is the key feature for me: we are not ethically bound to work through all abstract hypotheticals in advance in order to live properly in the world, but we *are* ethically bound to work through *actual practical divergences* with

others as far as it is possible to do so. That these divergences exist and arise is a sign of our partiality—a sign that we are *convicted* in the world, blindly in love with it. That is *why* we are doing things our way, so to speak. *And yet*, we may still have more to learn about our own habits, our practices, our words, etc. There is more for us to become. And it is in and with others—Saito’s multiplicity of voices—that we stand to discover our next self. Living with doubt *must not* mean suffering constant low-grade doubt, as if it were a fever, but it must rather mean, as Cavell beautifully says, “holding oneself in knowledge of the need for change; which means, being one who lives in promise, as a sign, or representative human.”¹¹ We are simultaneously representative and—if we allow it—find ourselves represented in others. We are attained selves, you might say, surrounded by selves that we might *yet attain to*. Again, this self-understanding, this sense of one’s own partiality, is what Cavell calls the *condition* of democratic morality. It is the normative commitment to equality that democracy requires, and it is a condition *undermined*, as Sandel shows us, by the way that meritocracy launders our shared fate into individualized portions of dessert.

Saito does very well to conclude with thinking about the function of difference and the uncommon, and her willingness to think about diversity and inclusion beyond a simple and self-congratulatory sense of tolerating otherness in our midst is to be commended. Education, as she develops Cavell’s perfectionist thinking, is never something to be *given*, tolerantly. It is something to be undergone, together—the open possibilities of thought, action, and community that Saito references are ours, too, if we would recognize other selves as an education for us. In keeping with the amplificatory aim of this response as a whole, I will just steal her concluding line: “This is a hope for democracy in undemocratic times.”

REFERENCES

1 Naoko Saito, “Meritocracy and Perfectionism: Towards a Liberal Education for Democracy,” *Philosophy of Education*, 79, no 1 (2023).

2 Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 125.

3 Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Melvin Rogers, *The Darkened Light of Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023); Stephen White and Molly Scudder, *The Two Faces of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

4 Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 134-135.

5 Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 12.

6 Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 116.

7 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1; Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 399-400. For a view of Cavell in which shame is a central feature of becoming, however, see Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are* (Oxon: Oxford University Press, 2017).

8 Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019) emphasizes this perspective.

9 Naomi Scheman suggests that Wittgenstein is urging partiality-as-incompleteness *against* partiality-as-bias, which calls for an “epistemology of largesse.” This is *right*, but not enough. Naomi Scheman, “Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed., eds. Hans Sluga and David Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 397.

10 Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 492.

11 Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 125.