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Cavell's "Moral Perfectionism" or Emerson's "Moral Sentiment"?

Joseph Urbas

- 1 As I have argued elsewhere (Urbas 2009), what Stanley Cavell gives us is an Emerson recast in a form more congenial to postmodern sensibilities. And nowhere is this tendency more apparent than in his representation of Emersonian selfhood as detached from any metaphysical ground. In the preface to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, for example, Cavell cautions his readers against "attaching any fixed, metaphysical interpretation of the idea of a self in [his] understanding of Emersonian Perfectionism" (1990: xxxi). *In Quest of the Ordinary* asserts, similarly, that the Emersonian self is essentially free-floating:

[T]he idea of relying in Emerson's word *self-reliance* knows its relation to the idea of binding or bonding in the word *religion*, so that the self's (perpetual, step-wise, circle-wise) construction of the self, say in "Self-Reliance," has to pass through an idea of the self's alliance with and rallying of itself, its self-authorizations, as on a path, or succession, in the aftermath of religion's dominance. (Cavell 1988: xii)

- 2 Cavell further asserts that Emerson abandoned any hope of a "resubstantializing the self, the hope for which Hume and Kant, let us say, had shattered" (*ibid.*).¹ It should be noted too that the same strong aversion to metaphysics ("metaphysical suggestions I say I want no part of") and to the very idea of foundation ("an old thought for an old world") leads Cavell to exaggerate the power of skepticism and "groundlessness" in Emerson's thought (Cavell 1990: 13; 1989: 109; 1988: 5).
- 3 The overall result, though in perfect keeping with the footloose, nomadic, open-ended spirit of an age that prefers "finding" to "founding" (Cavell 1989: 77-118) and writes its own obituary to ontology (Putnam 2004: 71-85), is blatantly inconsistent with Emerson's own writings.
- 4 Whether we like it or not, the Emersonian ethical self *does* have a secure metaphysical ground. In Emerson, the causality we share with nature is the foundation of autonomous selfhood. Thus, very explicitly, "Self-Reliance":

We first share the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature, and forget that we have shared their cause. *Here is the fountain of action and of thought.* Here are the lungs of that inspiration which giveth man wisdom, and which cannot be denied without impiety and atheism. (Emerson 1971-2007: 2.37; my emphasis)

- 5 Quaint though such a doctrine may seem to us, Emerson's conception of moral selfhood is inseparable from his ontology; it is firmly grounded in what he calls "the moral cause of the world" ("Morals," Emerson 1859; 2001: 2.133). This same causal ground is the "universal reliance" upon which Emersonian *self-reliance* is based. The "aboriginal Self" into which the essay "Self-Reliance" inquires – "the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded" – is "Supreme Cause" (Emerson 1971-2007: 2.37, 40). Causality is the ultimate basis of selfhood for Emerson: "Only Cause can say *I*" (Emerson 1959-72: 2.248). The permanent enabling background of selfhood and ethical action is our secure place in the causal and ontological continuum. As Emerson puts it in "The Over-Soul," there is "no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins. The walls are taken away." (Emerson 1971-2007: 2.161). In the early as in the late Emerson, ethical empowerment presupposes not a dualism but rather a deep continuity or alignment of self and world: "the true man in every act has the Universe at his back" (Emerson 1835 1960-82: 5.48); "whilst a man seeks good ends, he is strong by the whole strength of nature" ("Divinity School Address," Emerson 1838; 1971-2007: 1.79); "all power is of one kind, a sharing of the nature of the world" ("Power," Emerson 1860; 1971-2007: 6.30).
- 6 It is the Emersonian "moral sentiment" that substantiates this continuity and shared causality with the world. The moral sentiment "speaks to every man the law after which the Universe was made" (Emerson 1903-04: 11.486). It is "all we know of the Cause of Causes" (Emerson 1959-72: 2.352). As our felt, vital link to Being, the moral sentiment makes us at home in the universe and secures our universality as moral selves: "It puts us in place. It centres, it concentrates us. It puts us at the heart of nature, where we belong; in the cabinet of Science and of Causes; there, where all the wires terminate which hold the world in magnetic communication, and so converts us into universal beings" ("Morals," Emerson 2001: 2.133). Emerson's ethical doctrine thus finds its metaphysical foundation in his causal monism (thereby providing a perfect illustration of Hilary Putnam's thesis, in *Ethics without Ontology*, that an ethics *with* ontology entails a commitment to monism, Putnam 2004: 18-9). To quote the conclusion of the late lecture on "Morals" (which contains, as we shall see, Emerson's revision of Kant): "You will see the results of inquiry into the moral nature: it is *the same fact* existing as sentiment and as will in the mind, which works in nature as irresistible law, exerting influence in nations, intelligent beings, or down in the kingdoms of brute or of chemical nature" (Emerson 2001: 2.139; my emphasis). As this quotation shows, Emerson sees the universe as a causal and moral continuum. The moral sentiment is not limited to human nature or individual psychology; on the contrary, as a manifestation of universal causality, it has ontological status. Which is why Emerson uses the term *indifferently* to designate both the sentiment within and the law without. For him the two are ultimately *one*. This fundamental causal and moral continuity of inside and outside, self and world, is something Emerson emphasized consistently throughout his career. Here is an early expression of it, from *Essays: First Series* (1841):

All things are moral. That soul which within us is a sentiment, outside of us is a law.
We feel its inspiration; out there in history we can see its fatal strength.
("Compensation," 1971-2007: 2.60)

- 7 And now, two decades later, "Worship" (*The Conduct of Life*, 1860):
- Skepticism is unbelief in cause and effect. A man does not see, that, as he eats, so he thinks: as he deals, so he is, and so he appears; he does not see, that his son is the son of his thoughts and of his actions; that fortunes are not exceptions but fruits; that *relation and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always*; no miscellany, no exemption, no anomaly, – but method, and an even web; and what comes out, that was put in. As we are, so we do; and as we do, so is it done to us; we are the builders of our fortunes; cant and lying and the attempt to secure a good which does not belong to us, are, once for all, balked and vain. But, in the human mind, this tie of fate is made alive. The law is the basis of the human mind. In us, it is inspiration; out there in Nature, we see its fatal strength. We call it the moral sentiment. (1971-2007: 6.117; emphasis added)
- 8 The Emersonian law of compensation rules a universal order that is moral as well as causal. "Emerson equated ethics with being" (Van Cromphout 1999: 35). The essay "Compensation," where Emerson defines virtue as an "influx" from "the aboriginal abyss of real Being," makes this equation quite explicit: "In a virtuous action, I properly *am*; in a virtuous action I add to the world." Likewise, "Self-Reliance" identifies virtue with reality and causal substance: "Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms. All things real are so by so much virtue as they contain" (1971-2007: 2.70, 71, 40).² "Spiritual Laws" makes the equation still more explicit, if that were possible: "Virtue is the adherence in action to the nature of things, and the nature of things makes it prevalent. It consists in a perpetual substitution of being for seeming, and with sublime propriety God is described as saying, I AM" (2.92).
- 9 Clearly, then, Emerson's ethics is firmly grounded in his ontology. The moral sentiment provides a metaphysical foundation for ethical selfhood and assures us – notwithstanding recurrent bouts of skepticism – that we are fundamentally at home in a world governed by universal moral and causal law, a world where *relation and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always*.
- 10 What is especially problematic in the Cavellian thematics of "Emersonian Perfectionism" is the blithe disregard for the core doctrine of the moral sentiment, which David M. Robinson has rightly called Emerson's "bedrock of consistency" and "the most important point of continuity in his thinking from first to last" (Robinson 1993: 7, 195). The moral sentiment, Emerson insists at the close of his essay on the "representative skeptic," "never forfeits its supremacy" ("Montaigne, or the Skeptic," 1971-2007: 4.103). It gives ethical selfhood a secure metaphysical ground in "the moral cause of the world" and provides what Emerson himself identifies unequivocally, in the same essay, as the "solution" to skepticism – a problem which is not, as Cavell would have it (Cavell 1989: 79), "unsolvable" in the later writings. The paragraph from "Worship" quoted above, which begins by defining skepticism as "unbelief in cause and effect" and ends on a bold assertion of the "fatal strength" of the moral sentiment, confirms this idea a decade later. And as Emerson insisted yet again in "The Sovereignty of Ethics" (1878): "The commanding fact which I never do not see, is the sufficiency of the moral sentiment" (1903-04: 10.212).

- 11 The consequence of this centrality would appear obvious, and may be stated simply: When it comes to Emerson's ethics and his vision of human perfectibility,³ *reference to the moral sentiment is not optional*, even if we find the doctrine dissatisfactory (e.g. Van Cromphout 1999, 34-5, 47, 57). We cannot speak of Emerson's "moral perfectionism," much less of its *constitution* (Cavell 1990), without considering his core metaphysical doctrine. Here is the fatal flaw in Cavell's account, his fundamental departure from Emerson, and the source of a number of unfortunate confusions.
- 12 First among these I would cite Cavell's overemphasis on skepticism, and on the "loss of ground" or "sense of groundlessness" that is its "truth" (Cavell 1990: 61; 1988: 5). Abandoning what he considers an illusory resubstantialization of the subject, Cavell seeks to preserve skepticism (one of philosophy's principal "tasks," Cavell 1988: 5), to privilege finding over founding or abandonment over inhabitation (Cavell 1981: 137-8) – in a word, to enlist Emerson into this perfectionist program. "Metaphysical suggestions" are something that Cavell says he wants "no part of" (Cavell 1990: 13). Hence if "founding" there is, it "reaches no farther than each issue of finding." Or as he puts it elsewhere in the landmark lecture "Finding as Founding": "The existence of one of these worlds of life depends on our finding ourselves there. They have no foundation otherwise" (Cavell 1989: 114, 96-7). With Cavell, this much seems clear, then: no metaphysics. Where Emerson himself is concerned, however, there is a major problem, for the whole point of his particularly emphatic reminder in "Self-Reliance" is to insist that though we "forget" its existence, a secure ground for selfhood in our shared causality with nature is always ready to hand: *Here is the fountain of action and of thought*. Thoreau concludes similarly in Walden – itself an earnest metaphysical search for a "hard bottom" or "*point d'appui*" – that "there is a solid bottom every where" (1971: 98, 330).⁴ The movement known as Transcendentalism was a quest for permanent grounds for being, selfhood, and religious faith. Its distinctive "ontological turn" was one of the things that made the movement "new."
- 13 A second and related confusion lies in the identification of the metaphysical ground with *fixity*. Over and against this, Cavell proposes an anti-metaphysical alternative in the Emersonian principle of onwardness. As appealing as the choice may seem, especially for the "open-ended thematics" of perfectionism (Cavell 1990: 4), the terms of the opposition, as presented, do not apply to Emerson's philosophy. The onwardness that Cavell celebrates at the end of "Thinking of Emerson" as proof of a bold abandonment of the "metaphysical fixture" is in reality an ontological necessity – "the necessity of progression or onwardness in each creature," as Emerson calls it in an 1845 Journal entry (Emerson 1960-82: 9.301).⁵ In "Experience" Emerson dubs this the "onward trick of nature" (Emerson 1971-2007: 2.32), which Cavell, in a piece of hedging characteristic of his approach, "guesses" is not realism exactly" (1981: 126-7).⁶ Of course it is. Realism is exactly what it is. Onwardness is a *trick of nature*. It is evidence of the "flowing law" of causality that rules throughout the universe, the law that is *not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always*, the universal law to which even the skeptic must finally submit (Emerson 1960-82: 9.295), since the moral sentiment *never forfeits its supremacy*. What Emerson's dynamic, causationist metaphysics provides is precisely the sort of philosophy he called for in the "Montaigne" essay – "one of fluxions and mobility" (Emerson 1971-2007: 4.91). The same philosophy informs the later essay "Power," which makes wordplay do the serious work of metaphysics by defining self-reliance, "original action," and success in life as our ability, when faced with a world moving at a dizzying pace, to

"enter cordially into the game, and whirl with the whirling world." Nearly two decades earlier "The Transcendentalist" had decried the world as "spinning away" like a "wild balloon" (1.202). But in the midst of all the furious agitation Emerson discerns order, in the figure of Law – "Law riding sure through wild and prodigious motion" (1959-72: 3.28). No false problem of "fixtures" here, but rather a permanent foundation for selfhood and an ever-present source of power and movement. In Emerson the metaphysical ground is not synonymous with fixity. Emerson agreed with his friend Cyrus Bartol, who put the idea nicely when he said, "God, who is my Cause, is my Causeway" (Bartol 1872: 406). Small wonder, then, that Emerson should conclude "Self-Reliance" on an exhortation to deal exclusively with "Cause and Effect, the chancellors of God," or that his considered response to the skeptic should be: "Truth or the connection of cause and effect alone interests us" (Emerson 1971-2007: 2.50, 4.96). Emerson's philosophy overcomes the opposition between the "fixed" metaphysical foundation and the principle of movement by making causation the ultimate ground of being and selfhood. Universal causation thus embodies "home" and "onwardness" at the same time. "Let us sit at home with the cause," says Emerson in "Self-Reliance" (2.41). We find our home in "that which affirms itself to be the Cause of all" (Emerson 1959-72: 3.29).

- 14 These last quotations point to a third misunderstanding, here again concerning the metaphysical ground. Perfectionism expresses Cavell's conviction that the very idea of a "ground" has to be somehow rethought, or made "more human" (Cavell 1989: 9). Cavell appears to think that to posit a ground for selfhood elsewhere than in the task of onwardness itself is somehow to imperil our humanity. This position, whatever its pertinence to Cavell's own philosophy, makes no sense as a commentary on Emerson. The Emersonian moral subject is fundamentally at home in the world, and in this particular regard there is – Cavell's claims notwithstanding (Cavell 1989: 79) – no fundamental difference between *Nature* and a later essay like "Experience." Both emphasize man's close kinship with "dearest nature, strong and kind," to quote a line from the motto to this last essay (Emerson 1971-2007: 3.25). Emerson's critique of idealism in *Nature*, for example, should be understood to include not only the Berkeleian denial of the existence of matter – the obvious target – but also the Kantian opposition of mind and nature: "Nature is so pervaded with human life, that there is something of humanity in all, and in every particular. But this theory makes nature foreign to me, and does not account for that consanguinity which we acknowledge to it" (1.38). This "consanguinity" or shared life is what Emerson will later identify in "Self-Reliance" as shared *causality*. The causal ground of universal reliance is not felt by Emerson to be a threat to his humanity or selfhood but rather *their very condition*. Thus Emerson, in an 1837 journal entry: "A certain wandering light comes to me which I instantly perceive to be the Cause of Causes. It transcends all proving. It is itself the ground of being; and I see that it is not one & I another, but this is the life of my life" (Emerson 1960-82: 5.337). As the "Montaigne" essay shows, the moral sentiment – the "solution" to the "superficial" problem of skepticism – bears witness to this consanguinity by allowing us to feel our kinship to the thought that is "parent of the universe" and dynamic principle of all being:

The final solution in which Skepticism is lost, is, in the moral sentiment, which never forfeits its supremacy. All moods may be safely tried, and their weight allowed to all objections: the moral sentiment as easily outweighs them all, as any one. This is the drop which balances the sea. I play with the miscellany of facts and take those superficial views which we call Skepticism but I know that they will presently appear to me in that order which makes Skepticism impossible. A man of

thought must feel the thought that is parent of the universe: that the masses of nature do undulate and flow. (4.103)

- 15 A final difficulty centers on the Emersonian theme of "nextness." Cavell misdescribes both this and onwardness as "tasks" (Cavell 2005: 228-9; 1981: 138). Tasks for *perfectionism*, no doubt, but not for Emerson. Like onwardness, nextness characterizes our spontaneous life and being, our natural place in the causal continuum; it is not, strictly speaking, an object of effort. We are always at home with the cause, whether we realize it or not, even though the powers immediately available to us have been concealed by familiarity and conformism ("wrapped up under the coarse matings of custom," Emerson 1971-2007: 3.167), even though we live and move among appearances and "forget" that we share "the life by which things exist." To make nextness or onwardness a task, as Cavell suggests, would be quite literally *to make work for oneself*, in an act of willfulness, of needless meddling in the natural order of things. Emerson, by contrast, is a stern and consistent critic of voluntarism in matters ethical and political. To those who would "represent virtue as a struggle," he replies: "there is no merit in the matter" (2.78). Political reform movements commit a similar voluntarist error – an error that Cavell himself identifies at the end of "Experience" (Cavell 1990: 20; 2004: 139, 141) but without acknowledging that the very basis of Emerson's critique is his belief that the true source of empowerment and realization lies *in the world*, not in an individual subject seen, through the skeptic's eyes, as divorced from it (Cavell 1989: 95). As Emerson remarks wryly in "New England Reformers" (a lecture that closes, like "Experience," with fitting emphasis on our empowering position in the causal continuum): "we need not assist the administration of the universe" (3.166). In "Spiritual Laws," which insists likewise that "our moral nature is vitiated by any interference of our will" and points to "the preponderance of nature over will in all practical life," Emerson denounces voluntarist meddling as interference in the natural order of things:

The lesson is forcibly taught by these observations that our life might be much easier and simpler *than we make it*; that the world might be a happier place than it is; that there is no need for struggles, convulsions, and despairs, of the wringing of the hands and the gnashing of the teeth; that we miscreate our own evils. We interfere with the optimism of nature, for, whenever we get this vantage ground of the past, or of a wiser mind in the present, we are able to discern that we are begirt with laws which execute themselves. (1971-2007: 2.78, 79; emphasis added)

- 16 As "The American Scholar" had famously declared, "the highest spiritual cause" is always nearby, lurking everywhere – in "the common," "the familiar," and "the low," in the "suburbs and extremities of nature," in the merest "trifle" (1.67-68). Thus, also, *Walden*:

Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are. (Thoreau 1971: 134)

- 17 Nextness is not a task, then, any more than onwardness is. Cavellian perfectionism sees as requiring work that which requires, in reality, a form of obedience or passiveness.⁸ It is no accident that one of Emerson's favorite lines from Bacon is *Imperat parendo*: "Command by obeying" (Emerson 1990-94: 2.332; 2001: 1.182). Here the attitude is not one of voluntarism but of piety: "By piety alone, by conversing with the cause of nature, is [man] safe and commands it" ("The Method of Nature," Emerson 1971-2007: 1.131). It is not nextness that requires effort but what Emerson stigmatizes as "roving" – a form of private willfulness, of resistance or opposition to the Supreme Will. Thus the "Divinity

School Address," in a passage where Emerson also develops his causal monist doctrine of the moral sentiment:

[T]he world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind; and [...] one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool; and whatever opposes that will, is everywhere balked and baffled, because things are made so, and not otherwise [...] All things proceed out of the same spirit, and all things conspire with it. Whilst a man seeks good ends, he is strong by the whole strength of nature. In so far as he roves from these ends, he bereaves himself of power, of auxiliaries; his being shrinks out of all remote channels, he becomes less and less, a mote, a point, until absolute badness is absolute death. (1971-2007: 1.78-79)

- 18 Willfulness throws us out of our natural home, out of our "parallelism to the course of thought" (2.79), out of our alignment with the causal power of nature. "My wilful actions and acquisitions are but roving," Emerson declares in "Self-Reliance." Hence the subsequent exhortation, in the same essay: "let us not rove; let us sit at home with the cause" (Emerson 1971-2007: 2.37, 41). The essay "Spiritual Laws" is right: our life might indeed be much easier and simpler *than we make it*: "We need only obey" (2.81). The successful man is a conduit for the causal force, a "conductor of the causative influence" (to borrow a phrase from Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, a favorite among the Transcendentalists, 1993: 267). In Emerson he is a "visible conductor"; his object, "to suffer the law to traverse his whole being without obstruction" (Emerson 1971-2007: 2.79, 93). We are here, as Emerson says at the close of the Montaigne essay, "not to work, but to be worked upon" (4.105). With "our miserable interferences" (2.82), we have already taken on far too many needless "tasks." Why multiply them, when it is not positive, painstaking effort but simple *alignment* that is needed? All we need to do is to sit at home with the cause, to go with the flow, to "whirl with the whirling world":

Why need you choose so painfully your place, and occupation, and associates, and modes of action, and of entertainment? Certainly there is a possible right for you that precludes the need of balance and wilful election. For you there is a reality, a fit place and congenial duties. Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are *without effort* impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment. Then you put all gainsayers in the wrong. Then you are the world, the measure of right, of truth, of beauty. ("Spiritual Laws," 2.81; emphasis added)

- 19 Ontological alignment, as it turns out, is the key to Emerson's revision of Kantian moral philosophy. Here again, Cavell's dogged refusal of metaphysics leads to distortions. Much the best summary of Cavell's view of the relation between the two thinkers appears in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*:

The doubleness in Kant's two standpoints, or two worlds, that the human takes upon itself, or lives in, is, I think, understandable as a projection of reflexiveness. The intelligible world would be the scene of human activeness, the sensuous world that of human passiveness. Then Kant's moral imperative, his "ought," which the doubleness of human habitation is meant to explain, or picture, is also an explanation, or shows the place for one, of the self's identity, that it is the *same* self that is active and passive. [...] My reading of Emerson takes him [...] as looking everywhere to inherit Kant's insight without his architectonic (he isn't the only one); to account, for example, for "constraint" without the conditions of the imperative "ought" and so without Kant's fixed differences between the intelligible and the sensuous realms, between the imposition of the categories and the receptions of their intuitions – departures from Kant that will require Emerson to

find freedom and knowledge as much in the passive (patience, passion) as in the active dimensions of selfhood. (Cavell 1990: xxxv-xxxvi)

- 20 There is frankly much to admire here in the way of philosophical insight, particularly in the conclusion, but Emerson's differences with Kant need to be stated more perspicuously. Whether or not Emerson had Kant specifically in mind in the closing paragraph of "Experience" (I am not convinced he did), Cavell is certainly right to see him as rejecting the "fixed differences" between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds. But, we need to be clear about the reason for the rejection. If in Emerson the worlds "of nature and understanding" are not "perennially, ineluctably in metaphysical combat" (Cavell 2004: 141), it is not because he has abandoned metaphysics for perfectionism, it is because he is a causal monist. For him there are not "two worlds." Cavell portrays Emerson as seeking to transform the Kantian idea of constraint into a perfectionist notion of onwardness: "this Emersonian constraint is precisely not expressed as an 'ought.' Rather it is *as like a desire as like a law*; Emerson figures it as a form of attraction, as if to my further self" (Cavell 2004: 140, my emphasis; cf. also 32). By contrast, the "true" or "grounded" self – "a fixed, metaphysical interpretation of the idea of a self" – is one that Cavell has dismissed consistently for over two decades, from "Thinking of Emerson" and *Conditions* to *Cities of Words*, as "beyond desire, beyond change" (Cavell 1981: 137-8; 1990: xxxi, xxxiv; 2004: 140) – as excluding, in other words, any principle of onwardness. But the constraint of Emersonian onwardness is not *as like a desire as like a law*. We can dispense with the circumlocutions: it is a law – a law *of being*, a law that grounds an ethics *with* ontology.
- 21 Cavell cites the Kantian Categorical Imperative in a discussion of what he calls "constitutional judgment" in the essay "Fate" (Cavell 1995: 35-6), declaring vaguely and unhelpfully that Emerson is appealing to "something of the kind" when he speaks of the "insight" that "throws us on the party and interest of the Universe, against all and sundry; against ourselves, as much as others" (Emerson 1971-2007: 6:14). The insight in question is in fact nothing of the kind, simply because, as yet another expression of the moral sentiment (which Emerson discusses three paragraphs later in the essay), Kant would have considered it heteronomous (Van Cromphout 1999: 47). But it is less to "Fate" than to the late lecture "Morals" that we should turn for Emerson's most explicit revision of Kant. The ontological origin – our first sharing of "the life by which things exist" – also turns out to be a moral end in Emerson's recasting of the Categorical Imperative. Only individuals acting in accordance with "central and constitutional reason," only individuals who embody virtue – that is to say, *who substitute being for seeming* – may be called real:
- I choose to will with reason, the right of all souls, and not for the pleasure of me. So deep is our sense of the necessity of resting on nature and of universal motives, that, we call such, real men; – whilst men acting for by-ends, or not from central and constitutional reason, false and superficial. This acting after your constitution and for that which is always the same, as, justice goodness, human freedom, and benefit, – we call reality. (2001: 2.134)
- 22 For Emerson, universal ends are not formulated by an isolated, sovereign subject, in the exercise of its noumenal freedom; they are an integral part of nature. Hence the crucial pairing of necessities – and, even more crucially, their specific order: *resting on nature* and *universal motives*. Our dependence on nature, on the causal ground of selfhood, is prior. Nature and the universal ends—the ends which constitute the "strict" moral counterpart of "universal material force" (Emerson's term, 2001: 2.133) – are the ontological ground of

all moral action, and secure our reality as moral beings. What Emerson calls above the "central and constitutional reason" is not Kant's pure practical reason; rather, it is the individual's precise point of alignment "with the axis of things": "There is somewhat constitutional to him to do, somewhat which he does with joy, and with the consent of all men and things, and which nature backs him in doing" (Emerson 2001: 2:133, 134). Resolving the conundrum of how to make the pure reason practical (Cavell 1989: 95; 2004: 139) is irrelevant to Emerson, a causal monist and champion of the moral sentiment. As "a man of thought," he feels his immediate kinship to the empowering thought that is "parent of the universe." As an ethical philosopher, Emerson is not interested in a Kantian "contracausal autonomy" (Schneewind 1998: 3) – there can be no such thing in his philosophy – but rather in the precise point of coincidence or alignment with the axis of things that gives human action its efficacy, its substance or grounding in reality. "Acting for by-ends" – *roving*, in other words – is not only a violation of some abstract, universal principle of morality or reason; it robs us of part of our being: "we become less and less, a mote, a point," to recall the words of "The Divinity School Address" quoted above. By ignoring universality of motive and acting willfully, simply "for the pleasure of me," I have less of a purchase on reality because I myself have less substance; and as a result (since for Emerson substance is cause), I also have less freedom: "Reality rules Destiny. They may well fear fate who have any infirmity of habit and aim. But he who rests on what he is, has a destiny above destiny, and can make mouths at fortune" (Emerson 2001: 2.133).

- 23 Moral autonomy in Emerson is resting or relying on what we are, on the reality of our individual being as it meshes with the causal power of material and spiritual being as a whole. Morality for Emerson is thus action "according to nature." Consequently, our moral freedom is not noumenal in the Kantian sense, in the sense that it stands in opposition to the necessity of the causal order, but is always grounded in and continuous with the powers of nature. The Emersonian moral subject must have this direct grounding in "universal force," without which virtue is otiose and "goodness dies in wishes" (Emerson 1971-2007: 6.16). Thus Emersonian autonomy is not "contracausal" but on the contrary firmly rooted in his causal monist metaphysics. Self-reliance is grounded in "universal reliance" on the Cause. It is, we might say, however paradoxical it sounds, a "morality as self-governance" based on a "morality as obedience" (Schneewind 1998: 4).⁹ Emerson saw no contradiction between the two. If in the motto to "Experience" the weak, unprepossessing figure of "little man" turns out to be the "founder" who rules over "the lords of life," that is because his reliable guide – "dearest nature, strong and kind" – declares him such (Emerson 1971-2007: 3.25). Power is always a "sharing of the nature of the world" (6.30).
- 24 Onwardness, nextness, preserving skepticism, humanizing the ground, transforming the idea of constraint – these may be "tasks" for perfectionism; they are not for Emerson. At the end of the day, it is perfectionism's resolutely anti-metaphysical vocation that makes it peculiarly *un-Emersonian*. One might argue that when Cavell is philosophizing "after" Emerson – or even openly "fantasizing for" him (Emerson 1989: 107), the approximations, hedgings, and circumlocutions – the *I guesses*, the *not exactlys*, the *as likes*, the *something of the kinds* – are not only expressions of prudence or uncertainty but also ways of avoiding the disagreeable fact of Emerson's strong metaphysical commitment. The conceptual consequences of this avoidance are a misrepresentation of Emersonian selfhood as free-floating, a persistent mislocation of the effort of the moral subject, and a marked

tendency to substitute the social (or linguistic) for the metaphysical, as a possible though of course "unfixed" ground for onwardness. Thus, on this last point, *Cities of Words*: "In Emerson's words mankind is still pictured as living in two worlds, but the worlds now are not those of nature and of understanding, perennially, ineluctably in metaphysical combat, but those of society as it stands and as it may become – hidden in, in struggle with, the present" (Cavell 2004: 141).¹⁰ Cavell's aversion to metaphysics also explains the glaring inconsistency noted in passing above – on the one hand, his superb insight into "the power of passiveness"; on the other, his stubborn refusal to see *exactly* the same power at work in a passage he considers a *locus classicus* of perfectionism, the conclusion of "Experience," which defines practical empowerment as a shifting of the burden of realization onto a world that is here to assist us, not we it.¹¹ Here is the *true* romance of practical power that Emerson continued to celebrate in his late lecture "Perpetual Forces" (1862): "Like the hero in our nursery tale, who has one servant who eats slices of granite rocks, and another who can hear the grass grow, and a third who can run to Babylon in half an hour, so man in Nature is surrounded by a gang of friendly giants who can do harder stunts than these" (Emerson 2001: 2.289). No wonder Emerson loved the poet George Herbert's lines, "More servants wait on man/Than he'll take notice of" (*Nature*, Emerson 1971-2007: 1.41; "Perpetual Forces," 2001:2.289). Power always means sharing the nature of the world, "borrowing the might of the elements" (Emerson 1903-04: 7.14).

- 25 Whether we like it or not, Emerson is a strong – Putnam would say "inflationary" (Putnam 2004: 17-22) – ontologist who proposes an ethics akin to rational intuitionism, an ethics *with* ontology, an ethics which sees moral action as necessarily rooted in "the nature of things" ("Ethics," Emerson 1959-72: 2.144). Whether we like it or not – even if we consider, here again with Putnam, that "monism is a bad outlook in every area of human life" (1990: 131), Emerson's core doctrine of the moral sentiment is indeed rooted in a causal monism. This is the Emerson we must clearly acknowledge before claiming him as one of our own.
- 26 The real question for us, then, is which will it be? Cavell's "moral perfectionism" or Emerson's "moral sentiment"? We cannot have both.

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NOTES

1. Gould describes perfectionist selfhood as "a continual undermining of a false ideal of wholeness" (Gould 1998: 104). See also Mulhall's summary of the perfectionist self "as ineluctably split or doubled," as "conditioned by an ineliminable internal doubleness," with "attained" and "unattained but attainable" sides (Mulhall 1996: 13-4; cf. also Mulhall 1994: 256-7, 298-9).
2. The equation was by no means new to Emerson, who identified virtue in an early (1829) sermon as "of the very nature and substance of God Himself" (1989-92: 2.90). Self-reliance may be described as the best resemblance we have, as creatures lower down the scale of being, to the self-existence that characterizes the Supreme Cause.
3. Though perhaps a useful distinction from our late perspective, one of Cavell's stated reasons for adopting the word perfectionism – that, unlike *perfectibility*, it embraces onwardness and refuses a *final* state for selfhood (Cavell 1990: 3, 12-3; 2004: 445-7; 2005: 121) – is a distinction without a difference for Emerson's Unitarian cultural milieu, where the ideal of perfection carried no hint of a term to the ongoing process of self-development. Emerson's teacher William Ellery Channing described the path leading "onward to perfection" as properly "interminable" (Channing 1896: 965); his Transcendentalist friend Cyrus Bartol, who declared "the essence of faith" to be "advance," put it more trenchantly: "The infidel is he that asserts finality anywhere, makes a term of any achievement or conception, sees or puts a block in the eternal road. To affirm any stop or period is unbelief" (Bartol 1872: 73, 223). For a critique of Cavell's "aversion" to Christianity, see Mulhall (1994: 282-312); on religion, see also Hammer (Hammer 2002: 145-6).
4. Cavell writes off Thoreau's search for foundations as mere joking (Cavell 1989: 109).
5. This journal entry is part of a series of notations on skepticism that constitute Emerson's preparatory work for the Montaigne lecture.
6. For another example of hedging, due to a similar reluctance to acknowledge Emerson's realism, see the treatment of the closing paragraph of "Experience" (a *locus classicus* of perfectionism), and in particular the last line ("the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power," Emerson 1971-2007: 3.49, my emphasis), which according to Cavell "does not exactly shift the burden from the genius onto the world" (Cavell 1989: 95, my emphasis; cf. also 1990: 13; 1989: 10). Here I would reply: of course it does. The shift is precisely what makes the romance *true*. See also the rather telling omission of the crucial adjective in the same passage of "Thinking of Emerson" where Cavell eschews the "metaphysical fixture" (1981:128), as well as in *Conditions* (Cavell 1990: xxi).
7. Emerson (1971-2007: 6.29; cf. also 1990-94: 1.50). The second paragraph of "Power," which builds up to the vision of the "whirling world," is an excellent illustration of Emerson's causal monism: "All successful men have agreed in one thing; – they were *causationists*. They believed that things went not by luck, but by law; that there was not a weak or a cracked link in the chain that joins the first and last of things. A belief in causality, or strict connexion between every pulse-beat and the principle of being, and, in consequence, belief in compensation, or, that

nothing is got for nothing, – characterizes all valuable minds, and must control every effort that is made by an industrious one" (Emerson 1971-2007: 6.28-29; see also "The American Scholar," written over two decades earlier, 1.67-68). It is worth re-emphasizing that though Emerson's is a "whirling world," where "everything tilts and rocks" ("The Method of Nature," 1.121), it is governed "not by luck, but by law." And therein lies Emerson's optimistic, causationist response to Montaigne's melancholy vision of the world as a *branloire pérenne* (a world that "eternally turns round," in Emerson's favorite Cotton translation of the *Essais*, 1892: 2.268). Emerson responds to Montaigne's famous declaration that we have "no communication with Being" (1.617) by appealing to the moral sentiment – that is to say, to "that Thought through which we communicate with absolute nature" ("The Transcendentalist," 1971-2007: 1.182).

8. This confusion is rather surprising, in light of Cavell's superb insight into what he calls "the power of passiveness" in Emerson (Cavell 1989: 114-5). I return to this inconsistency in my conclusion.

9. It should be noted, however, that roughly from the Divinity School Address onward, Emersonian "morality as obedience" detaches itself from the idea of a personal God. For the definitive expression of Emerson's controversial doctrine of impersonality, which set the Unitarian establishment against him, see the conclusion of "Fate," where he pleads for a new form of worship: "Let us build altars to the Beautiful Necessity" (Emerson 1971-2007: 6.26).

10. In a similar move, Stanley Bates's useful description of the "internal dialectic" of perfectionist selfhood opens out onto a form of loose and presumably non-binding social determination: "What perfectionism wants is the possibility of self-transformation according to an ideal that is internal to the self's constitution rather than one that comes from without. However, we need to remember that what is 'internal' and what comes 'from without' are themselves not fixed and permanent categories. If the transfiguration of any particular state of the self is to be possible, then these categories will be capable of transformation. Of course, part of every state of my self is how I relate to the society that has helped to form me" (Bates 2003: 42). This seems consistent with Cavell's own writings, which emphasize the social dimension and "the importance to perfectionism of the friend" (Cavell 1990: xxxii). On language as ground, see Greenham's Cavellian reading of "Self-Reliance" as "an attempt to found the self on words" (Greenham 2007: 277). To a large extent, it seems, the "work" of onwardness is to be performed in or through language and writing – in Emerson, through the essay. To quote "Finding as Founding": "The step I am taking here is to receive the work of 'Experience' as transforming or replacing founding with finding and to ask what our lives would look like if the work is realized" (Cavell 1989: 109).

11. In Cavell's view, by contrast, the closing line of "Experience" expresses the "unsolvability" of skepticism and "says the world exists as it were for its own reasons" (Cavell 1989: 79).

ABSTRACTS

What is properly Emersonian about moral perfectionism? Perhaps the best answer is: not much. Stanley Cavell's signature concept, which claims close kinship to Emerson's ethical philosophy, seems upon careful examination to be rather far removed from it. Once we get past the broad, unproblematic appeals to Emerson's "unattained but attainable self," and consider the specific content and implications of perfectionism, the differences between the two thinkers become too substantive – and too fraught with serious misunderstandings – to be ignored. It is above all

Cavell's complete disregard for the Emersonian "moral sentiment" that jeopardizes his claim to be a continuator of Emerson's legacy in ethical philosophy. I would not deny that Cavell's own work stands as an extraordinary contribution to contemporary ethics. Nor would I dispute his title as the living philosopher who has done more than any other to restore Emerson to his rightful place in the history of American philosophy, as a thinker worthy of the highest consideration. Still less would I discount the boldness and originality of Cavell's readings of Emerson. What I am contesting, rather, is the propriety of attaching the label "Emersonian" to the notion of perfectionism, especially in view of its strong anti-metaphysical bias. The Emerson canon provides ample grounds for rejecting Cavell's claim as largely unsubstantiated and in a number of crucial ways inconsistent with the moral sentiment's firm grounding of ethics in ontology.