**Review of Andrew Norris’ *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell***

**Review Essay**

**Jonathan Havercroft**

**1. Introduction**

When Stanley Cavell passed away on June 19, 2018, the numerous obituaries noted his distinct prose style, his philosophical interest in such wide-ranging topics as film, music, and theater, and his contributions to ordinary language philosophy.[[1]](#footnote-2) None of the obituaries made any mention of Cavell’s contributions to political philosophy. On the one hand, this is not terribly surprising. Of the eighteen books that he wrote, perhaps only *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, with its extended engagement with Rawls and its presentation of justice as a conversation (rather than a theory), might count as a work of political philosophy.**[[2]](#footnote-3)** On the other hand, the lack of mention of the political dimensions of Cavell’s philosophy is an oversight. Cavell never writes about one thing, nor have his writings ever been about one topic or one field of inquiry. Part of his method has always been to juxtapose ideas drawn from as disparate fields as one can imagine in order to disclose serendipitous commonalities. His book on Hollywood remarriage comedies evokes the Declaration of Independence in its title and explores the similarities between a marriage contract and the social contract throughout.[[3]](#footnote-4) His long essay on *King* *Lear* contains a powerful meditation on the fate of American democracy during the Vietnam War.[[4]](#footnote-5) In *The* *Claim of Reason*, Cavell’s notoriously impossible-to-summarize *magnum opus*, discussions of criteria in Wittgenstein feed into subtle re-readings of the social contract tradition,[[5]](#footnote-6) and ruminations on the other minds problem bleed into meditations on the color line in America asan instance of soul-blindness(CR 372–8).[[6]](#footnote-7) So, while Cavell may not be a political philosopher in the sense of one who offers theses about politics, his philosophical meditations on politics appear throughout his writings from his very first essay through to his philosophical memoir.

Andrew Norris’ *Becoming Who We Are* is the first book-length study of Cavell’s political philosophy.[[7]](#footnote-8) This is both surprising and significant. It is surprisingbecause political theorists have engaged with the political dimensions of Cavell’s thought since his earliest publication.[[8]](#footnote-9) It is significant because publication of a full monograph on Cavell’s political philosophy signals that his work is not simply something that might speak to political philosophers but that his thought is actually worthy of consideration as a political philosophy in its own right. In order to make this second claim, Norris locates Cavell as the inheritor of two major traditions in western political philosophy: the Socratic tradition that sees politics as requiring citizens to go through an (occasionally painful) process of self-examination in order to sustain and renew the πόλις, and the Rousseauian tradition of freedom as self-authorization that sees the free citizen as one who self-authorizeshis own law (BWA 5). This book is eloquently written and offers lucid interpretations of some of the most difficult dimensions of Cavell’s thought. Norris carefully reconstructs Cavell’s political philosophy by weaving together the different strands of his thought, from his earliest essays on ordinary language philosophy through to his very last writings on Emersonian perfectionism. As Tracy Strong says in his blurb of the book, “If you have resisted Cavell, this book should lead you to reconsider; if you have been attracted to Cavell, this book will help you on your way; if you have not known Cavell, this is where to start.”[[9]](#footnote-10) In thisreview, I will first situate Norris’ book within the broader conversation about Cavell’s political philosophy, before considering the argument of the text as a whole. I will then conclude by asking three questions about Cavell’s political philosophy that are provocatively raised by Norris’ interpretation.

**2. On Seeing Stanley Cavell as a Political Philosopher**

Norris’ *Becoming Who We Are* begins with the observation that Cavell’s contributions to political philosophy have not received as much attention as they should have (BWA 2). The impetus for Norris’ text is to draw our attention to the political aspects of Cavell’s work. Political theorists were among the first academics to take Cavell’s work seriously, beginning in the 1970s with Hanna Fenichel Pitkin’s *Wittgenstein and Justice* and Strong’s *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*.[[10]](#footnote-11) In more recent years**,** political philosophershave drawn upon Cavell’s ideas in work on such diverse areas as political judgment,[[11]](#footnote-12) critical theory,[[12]](#footnote-13) debates about the separation of church and state in American public life,[[13]](#footnote-14) cinema and politics,[[14]](#footnote-15) the ordinary in American democracy,[[15]](#footnote-16) the relationship of skepticism to sovereignty,[[16]](#footnote-17) liberal perfectionism,[[17]](#footnote-18) and democratic theory.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Despite the breadth of engagement in Cavell’s ideas by political philosophers, Norris’ observation confirms my own anecdotal experience. When I tell fellow political theorists that I work on Cavell, I have been met with three different kinds of response. They too have read him and makeuse of his ideas in their work. They have read him and either “don’t get him” or see no use for him in political theory. Or they have not heard of him at all. From personal experience, the third group is by far the largest and thefirst group is the smallest. It is the middle group, though, that is the most interesting. One theme that runs throughout Norris’ book is the trope of philosophical conversion—beginning with a discussion of Cavell’s own conversion to ordinary language philosophy with his encounter with Austin (BWA 19), through Cavell’s conversion to a life of “meaning every word he says” (BWA 42), to the idea that a claim to community is an attempt at converting one’s fellow citizens (BWA 138), to the exemplar in Emersonian perfectionism: shaming one into attaining one’sunattained yet attainable self (BWA 212–4). One could say that the “not getting Cavell” report comes from someone who has not yet been, and perhaps never will be, converted to the Cavellian enterprise and the practice, more generally, of ordinary language philosophy. This immediately raises the question of why some people are converted to Cavellian philosophyand others not. (As an aside: the language of conversion that Norris deploys is of a philosophical conversion**,** not a religious one—although the language has obvious resonances with religion.) Norris invokes Socrates’ idea of philosophy as a kind of turning around (BWA 38–40). Cavell describes it as “a mood” that “all of a sudden you feel.”**[[19]](#footnote-20)** Wittgenstein describes this feeling as “aspect dawning” and speculates that those who do not feel it are “aspect-blind”[[20]](#footnote-21)—in a manner akin to being color blind. In the case of Cavell, the conversion or turning around might involve two steps. The first is to take on Cavell’s (and by extension ordinary language philosophy’s) vision of language, best experienced by grasping the significance of his question, “Must we mean what we say?” The second step is to see how this projects into our (by which I mean political theorists’) conversations about freedom, authority, autonomy, the social contract, responsibility, recognition, America, and judgment (to name just a few political themes in Cavell’s work).

The great achievement of Norris’ book is that he guides the reader through both steps in the conversion. The first two chapters are a careful elucidation of Cavell’s interpretations of skepticism and ordinary language philosophy. While neither of these aspects of Cavell’s work is obviously political, both have implications for Cavell’s understanding of human subjectivity and politics. Without first grasping how Cavell responds to the challenge of skepticism and to the uncanniness of the ordinary, one cannot grasp how Cavell develops the political implications of ordinary language philosophy. One cannot understand what Cavell means when he says that we are making claims to community when we search for our criteria (BWA 32). These two chapters masterfully unpack some of Cavell’s philosophically most difficult work, situating him in the intellectual context of ordinary language philosophy and explaining the relevance of these ideas for political theory. The subsequent chapters explore what is entailed in making a claim about who we are as a political community, followed by an exploration ofCavell’s development of Emersonian perfectionism as his most significant contribution to political thought. I found that I learned much from this book, and my hope is that it will convert others to the political philosophy of Cavell.

I also hope that this book will open up more space to consider Cavell as a political philosopher in his own right. While Norris has focused on one central theme of Cavell’s work—his elucidation of a democratic perfectionism—there are many other avenues of Cavell’s thought that remain underexplored, including aunique reading of the social contract, the implications of his interpretation of tragedy for political theory, the political import of his analyses of film and theater, his discussions of gender, and the relevance of his methods of reading texts for interpretive political theory. This is not so much a shortcoming of Norris’ book as evidence that there is much more work to do on Cavell’s political philosophy. The themes from Cavell’s work that Norris has selected, however, are important, not only in understandingCavell’s thought, but also because they help us rethink some of the basic concepts and categories at use in contemporary political theory.

**3. Democracy as a Perfectionist Practice**

After introducing his project, Norrisbegins by considering Cavell’s early engagement with the writings of J.L. Austin and ordinary language philosophy. While the early essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* were not his first publications, Cavell takes them as a starting point for all his later philosophical work. This is significant in no small part because Cavell continuously refers to hisearly works in later scholarship in order to pull out surprising commonalities between, say, the idea in Austin and Wittgenstein that we should pay attention to the everyday use of language to avoid bewitchment by metaphysical thinking, and the call by the American transcendentalists Thoreau and Emerson to awaken to the present moment as a means for undoing the great existential suffering that individuals experience in the alienating conformism of nineteenth-century American culture (and by Cavell’s reading, contemporary American culture, too).**[[21]](#footnote-22)** While beginning a book on Cavell’s political philosophy with his encounter with ordinary language philosophy may be surprising, part of Norris’ purpose in this book is to draw our attention to how Cavell’s politics are deeply embedded in other aspects of Cavell’s thought.

While J.L. Austin is not read much in politics or philosophy departments today, his influence is still experienced through several other thinkers of the linguistic turn, including Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, and Quentin Skinner. Each of these philosophers has drawn on Austin in distinct ways, yet they have all primarily been interested in Austin’s discussion of the performative utterance (i.e. an utterance that entails doing an action through being voiced in front of an audience). While Cavell has drawn upon this idea of performativity in his own work,[[22]](#footnote-23) Norris argues that Austin’s greatest influence upon Cavell is with the idea of “the ordinary” (see BWA 39–41). In Austin’s work, turning to ordinary usage is a methodological injunction. In his essay “A Plea for Excuses,” Austin argued that examining “what we say when” is a useful approach for linguistic philosophy because “our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing,and the connections they have found worth marking.”[[23]](#footnote-24) Austin’s point is that by studying the ordinary uses of words, philosophers will discover more subtle examples than the ones that a philosopher can generate by think**ing** abstractly. Cavell draws upon this empirical dimension of Austin’s work, the claim that paying attention to “what we say when” enables us to access the ordinary. While many commentators on Cavell have noted this dimension of Austin’s influence, Norris focuses on a second, thusfar unexplored dimension, namelythat Cavell shows that “Austin had not adequately appreciated the uncanny nature of the fact that our access to the ordinary is not immediate and unreflective but requires philosophical work” (BWA 17). By “uncanny” Cavell means that “what is most familiar and ordinary is itself a site of mystery” (BWA 19). For Cavell, the import of this turn to the ordinary is found in his claim that philosophy should be a “willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about.”[[24]](#footnote-25)

The political significance of Cavell’s appropriation of ordinary language philosophy rests in the question of authority. Critics of Austin, such as Benson Mates—one of Cavell’s first interlocutors—, often mistake the authority of Austin’s claims about ordinary language as resting in the first-person singular—i.e., Austin simply asserts his opinions about what people mean when they say things in ordinary conversations.[[25]](#footnote-26) From this perspective, Austin is advancing a radical subjectivism. But what Cavell recovers from Austin is the importance of the first-person plural—the *we* rather than the *I*. The examples that Austin provides of “what we say” when our criteria are in dispute are authoritative because they are evidence of the agreements in forms of life that constitute our communities (be they linguistic, epistemic, aesthetic, or political). The ethical and political questions of who we are **and** what kinds of communities we are member of, are deeply connected to the epistemological and aesthetic questions of how **~~do~~** we know anything. Traditionally, philosophy has split these four kinds of knowledge claims (linguistic, epistemic, aesthetic, and political) into questions about knowledge in these respective spheres. Cavell’s point is that each of these searches for knowledge are vulnerable to challenges over the criteria that validate truth in those spheres. The possibility that criteria can be challenged is the always present possibility of skepticism. Cavell responds to the skeptical challenge by arguing that all four forms of knowledge claims must ultimately rest upon **~~the~~** criteria shared by members of the (linguistic, epistemic, aesthetic, and political) community. Discovering these implicit criteria requires judgment rather than knowledge. Practices of judgment prompt the individual to check **~~his or~~** her intuition about what counts as a valid criterion against the judgments of other members of the community. Such explorations of knowledge claims are necessarily explorations of the communities in and through which we make these judgments (BWA 21).

Cavell’s interpretation of the ordinary as uncanny and his discovery of the authoritativeness of the first**-**person plural are both central themes in his response to skepticism. While it is difficult to summarize Cavell’s numerous philosophical pursuits and innovations in a few simple sentences, his critical encounter with skepticism is one theme that runs throughout his work from his earliest writings until his final works. While at first glance this interest in skepticism is primarily an epistemological and metaphysical concern, Norris spends considerable time in chapter 2exploring how Cavell’s critique of skepticism informs his understanding of politics and community. While many commentators of Cavell describe him as either refuting skepticism or defending it, Norris underscores that Cavell sees skepticism as an impulse that is innate to the human condition and our tendency to be disappointed with knowledge. Philosophical skepticism is the claim that we can never know with certainty the existence of something (CR 37). Cavell, however, reinterprets skepticism as not merely a philosophical problem but as “any view which takes the existence of the world as a problem of knowledge” (CR 46). Philosophical skepticism has been a problem in philosophy since the Ancient Greeks. Cavell’s innovation is to see the problem not as an epistemological one, where the skeptic can be refuted through a superior account of human knowledge. Rather, Cavell critiques skepticism as an existential problem. For Cavell, skepticism is the name for the process of our self-imposed alienation from the ordinary. This self-imposedalienation from the ordinary develops out of our desire for certainty and our tendency to evade responsibility for our judgments and knowledge claims. As Norris puts it, “Cavell’s central claim is that the desire for certainty that is frustrated in this supposed failure is itself the expression of a discomfort with our need to *accept* and *acknowledge* the world and each other” (BWA 51). The skeptic assumes the stance of the disappointed spectator who avoids the responsibility of accepting the world and acknowledging others (CR 476–7). *Contra* this skeptical tendency, Cavell argues that only the existential stance of the engaged actor, who works through the challenges of skepticism by accepting and acknowledging the world and each other, will avoid the human tendency to be disappointed by knowledge.**[[26]](#footnote-27)**

In order to unpack this dense yet significant aspect of Cavell’s philosophy, Norris contextualizes Cavell’s interest in skepticism in the debates in the Berkeley Department ofthe late 1950s and early 1960s. Norris carefully reconstructs the influence of Thompson Clarke and Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* to explain Cavell’s critique of skepticism in *The Claim of Reason* and his later philosophy. From Clarke, Cavell took the insight that skeptical hypotheses emerge from a particular kind of thought experiment where the philosopher attempts “to *observe* whether his claims are met by the world or not” (BWA 59). In doing so, the philosopher must make three theoretical moves,according to Clarke:(1) Divorce concepts from their practices; (2) make the concepts refer to objects in an independent reality; and (3) test the fit of the concepts to their objects.**[[27]](#footnote-28)** Clarke’s argument, on Norris’ reconstruction, is that these three movements require the philosopher to “transcend the limitations of the contexts in which we ordinarily speak and act” (ibid.). While it is possible to ask in everyday discourse whether we can distinguish between waking life and a dream**,** when a philosopher (e.g., Descartes) asks such a question in the abstract, the question does not mean what the skeptical philosopher wants it to mean. A skeptical philosophical question such as, “Can we ever know if we are awake or dreaming?” creates a trap. If I respond affirmatively, then the skeptic will press me to concede that there might be instances where I will be unable to tell the difference between being awake and dreaming. Yet, if I concede *this*, the skeptic will press me to concede that I cannot, after all, tell the difference between waking and dreaming.These contradictory responses emerge, according to Clarke, because of the abstraction of the thought experiment from everyday practice.**[[28]](#footnote-29)** Cavell takes Clarke’s insight into the nature of the “skeptical recital” (CR xxv) and transforms it significantly. For Clarke, skeptical arguments show us how philosophical activity can posean existential challenge, not merely a philosophical one. Skepticism enacts an evasion of the human condition and our responsibilities toward the world by trapping us in conversations about abstract thought experiments that turn us away from engagement with the ordinary (BWA 62).

Norris’ careful reconstruction of Cavell’s work on skepticism, **to** which I cannot possibly do full justice in the space of a review, is the best commentary on this crucial yet difficult line of argument in Cavell’s thought. It also sets the stage for Norris’ examination in the last three chapters of the book of how these themes of skepticism and the ordinary shape Cavell’s political philosophy of liberal perfectionism. While Cavell’s explorations of skepticism and ordinary language philosophy seem far removed from the central concerns of political philosophy, Norris points out that even in *The Claim of Reason*, a book whose central themes are not obviously related to the central concerns of political theorists, it is only twenty pages into that text when Cavell links his ordinary language philosophy interests in examining **“**what we say when**”** with the citizen’s interest in “what *we* find right and wrong, wise and foolish” (BWA 96). At this stage in *The Claim of Reason*,Cavell links these two themes together in a frequentlycited passage on the social contract: “the philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community” (CR 20). The skeptic wants to question not just the validity of a particular criterion, but the validity of our shared agreements that make our criteria valid and enable them to function in our various kinds of judgments about meaning, knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, and politics. The uncanniness of the ordinary is that we implicitly know in most ordinary circumstances what our shared criteriaare, and by extension who we are as a community. What triggers the skeptical recitalis the disappointment we feel with the discovery that it is no more than these implicit agreements in our forms of life that are the basis of our “shared sense of what counts as a good reason, a sensible judgment, and a meaningful response” (BWA 97). This uncanny feelingwe experience when we recognize that our rationality rests on nothing more—but alsonothing less—than our shared agreement on our forms of life raises the issue of “how I could have been party to the establishing of criteria if I do not recognize that I have and do not know what they are” (CR 22). For Cavell, this puzzle is most significantly examined by the social contract theorists, especially Rousseau, because they use self-exploration as a way to access knowledge about the self’s society (CR 26).

Norris argues that, for Cavell, “the work of politics” consists “in understanding the nature of the struggle between differing perspectives out of which one’s own discourse emerges” (BWA 100). For Norris, this vision of politics runs counter **to** the vision that became hegemonic in American culture in the late twentieth century. For Norris, the dominant account of democracy in mid-twentieth century America is Schumpeterian. In this paradigm, democracy is the consent of the governed to a political elite whose primary concern is to use public policy to secure re-election after re-election. Missing from this account is an understanding of politics as public discourse over who we are or should be as a polity and the interpretation of politics as a community striving to identify its common good. The Schumpeterian conception of democracy fits well with the positivist turn in political science and its self-perception as a value-free discipline that rejects debate over notions of the common good as salient for the study of politics. Finally, these visions of democracy and social science fed into the rise of libertarian and neoliberal conceptions of freedom that see the market rather than the public sphere as the proper sphere for politics and the securing of negative rather than positive liberty as the proper end of politics. Norris reads Cavell’s engagement with Rousseau, Thoreau, and Emerson as a critique of these three trends in American political life. Perhaps one reason that Cavell has not received as much uptake in political theory as many of his more passionate readers feel he should is precisely because his understanding of freedom as autonomy runs counter to the conception of freedom as personal choice. Cavell’s concern is that the hegemonic account of democracy, freedom, and social science is deluded by “a false understanding of its *own* values” (BWA 100). The consequence of this delusion is that we distort who we are (as both individuals and a community). The atomistic understanding of politics means that

we are exercising our will not to the general but to the particular, to the partial, to the unequal, to the private benefit, to privacy. We obey the logic of conspiracy, though we believe this to be true only of *others*. (CR 26)

Cavell believes that responding to this conspiracy requires philosophical work that reveals “the structures of our language, and hence our world, including our ‘internal relations’ to one another” (BWA 138).[[29]](#footnote-30)

Emerson and Thoreau are not usually engaged with as philosophers, let alone as political philosophers. Cavell’s main purpose in turning to their writings is to show that their most significant contribution is a philosophy of perfectionism, one that he insists is relevant to moral and political life. Most contemporary thinkers follow Rawls in dismissing perfectionism as elitist and anti-democratic.[[30]](#footnote-31) Yet Cavell thinks that our modern neoliberal culture is a far greater threat to democracy and equality than perfectionism. From Thoreau, Cavell takes the insight that the great threats created bythe newly emerging capitalist and democratic society of nineteenth-century America (threats that only intensifyin the later part of the twentieth century) are individual self-estrangement and conformism. Thoreau famously diagnoses these ills as “lives of quiet desperation.”[[31]](#footnote-32) On Cavell’s reading, “Thoreau’s task in *Walden* is to teach us how to wake up; and to do that, he must first demonstrate to us that we are sleepwalkers, that the lives we lead are not yet our own” (BWA 156). For Thoreau, “sleep . . . is a form of abstraction from reality” (BWA 158), the abstraction that Cavell equates with flights from the ordinary and our impulse toward skepticism. Waking up, in Thoreau’s terms, means paying attention to the ordinary, noticing what we say when, and meaning every word we say (BWA 42). Norris points out the similarities between Thoreau’s call to awaken to the present day and other perfectionist philosophers such as Socrates and Heidegger. In Socrates’ dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living,[[32]](#footnote-33) only those who have scrutinized their own lives can wake up, and only those who are awake can then spur others to wake up, too.

More surprising, perhaps, is the link between Thoreau and Heidegger. Heidegger wrote little of politics, and his personal politics were anything but democratic. Yet his existentialist philosophy did embody a perfectionist ethic. In particular, Heidegger’s claim that our inauthentic tendency to be caught by the “average everydayness” of the They (*das Man*) can only be countered by an authentic attunement to the everyday[[33]](#footnote-34) shares Thoreau’s diagnosis that the ill of modern mass society is our self-alienation. And both Heidegger and Thoreau propose a similar cure (BWA 168). Thoreau, as Cavell notes, shares these “philosophical configurations [with] Heidegger, while reversing his political sensibilities.”[[34]](#footnote-35) The crucial differences are to whom the two texts *Being and Time* and *Walden* are addressed and how the two philosophers see their relation to their fellow citizens. Heidegger writes to a philosophical audience and in a manner that is notoriously alienating to all but the most advanced philosophical readers, whereas Thoreau writes to his fellow townspeople in a manner that is open to all. The fact that the more obtuse of the two philosophers is the anti-democratic one, and that the anti-democratic philosopher is the one taken more seriously today by professional philosophers, is not trivial. Heidegger seeks to awaken the philosopher and turn him away from and place himover “the They,” whereas Thoreau is trying to wake all of his fellow citizens. Hence, Heidegger’s perfectionist politics embodies the elitist, anti-democratic tendencies that concern critics of perfection like Rawls, whereas Thoreau shows Cavell, who in turn shows us, that the perfectionist impulse to awaken to our present day and present circumstances is a possibility open to everyone, regardless of their formal philosophical training and station in society. And the task of a democratic perfectionism is to awaken our citizens so that they can become who they are (become their unattained yet attainable selves), and collectively the political culture can become what it is, can achieve its common good.

Norris closes his book by considering Cavell’s engagement with Emerson—a thinker who Cavell had dismissed early in his career only to make him the central figure in his later engagement with skepticism. Cavell’s turn to Emerson is a surprising place to look for inspiration for a political philosophy. As Norris observes, “Emerson seems to hold politics at arm’s length” (BWA 178). Politics, according to Emerson, is a spontaneous expression of individual morality (BWA 182). Yet Norris argues that contemporary readers of Emerson miss his politics because they conflate individualism with individuality. Nineteenth-century liberals such as Mill, Tocqueville, and Emerson critiqued the newly emerging ideology of individualism as it turned individuals away from the public sphere and focused their attention on the narcissistic pursuit of private self-interest. Mill and Tocqueville both feared this new ideology of individualism would lead to a tyranny of the majority, a form of paternalism more despotic than the most absolutist of European monarchs.[[35]](#footnote-36) Individuality, or as Emerson terms it, self-reliance, resists the forced conformity of individualism.**[[36]](#footnote-37)**

Cavell recovers this Emersonian individuality and argues that it is aversive to democracy. The self-reliant individual stands against democratic individualism in order to provoke others out of their conformism, and in so doing saves democracy from itself. Cavell terms this the “Emersonian event” and notes that the most distinctive feature of Emerson—his vocation as a writer—is something that he “undertakes and suffers” (BWA 188). Freedom, for Cavell, is only possible if individuals undertake and suffer. There are crucial affinities between this understanding of freedom and the Kantian one of “freedom [as] obeying the law we give toourselves, which is to say: freedom is autonomy.”[[37]](#footnote-38) This is not the autonomy of a possessive individual seeking to dominate an external world. Rather,it is an autonomy achieved only through an acknowledgment of human finitude and a shift in our understanding of thinking from knowledge to reception: “Receptivity is the mark of our finitude, of the fact that, as beings that possess sensible rather than intellectual intuition, we are worldly creatures” (BWA 188).

Norris’ turn to receptivity links Cavell’s understanding of freedom as autonomy with his early work on acknowledgment. Individualist political philosophies embody individualism and skepticism. In an earlier piece on Cavell’s political philosophy, Norris more explicitly links Cavell’s rejection ofHobbesian individualism to his critique of skepticism.[[38]](#footnote-39) The political philosophy of Hobbes in many ways embodies this skepticism and atomism. Human beings in Hobbes’ state of nature find themselves unburdened with responsibilities toward one another, and they also find themselves inhabiting a world in which ethics, words, proofs of logic, and religious beliefs are all meaningless because there is no common agreement on the meanings of these things.**[[39]](#footnote-40)** Cavell proposes a social model of political subjectivity as opposed to the atomistic one developed by Hobbes. A central claim throughout Cavell’s writings is that one form of injustice arises when we fail to take responsibility for how we relate and respond to others, and part of his work is to counteractthis human tendency by cultivating a politics of acknowledgment.[[40]](#footnote-41) Norris suggests toward the end of his work that in such a politics of acknowledgment or receptivity there is always the risk of failing to live in a wakeful state, in not being receptive to others. There is a tension in democratic life between the disappointment that a polity is always at risk of experiencing when it fails to enact freedom as autonomy and the hope “brought forth by national exemplars” that can provoke a polity into becoming who we are. Such exemplars may be inspiration figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. but might also (perhaps more importantly) be ordinary citizens, who through their individuality provoke hope in one another. “Democracy,” Norris concludes, “does not accidentally and unfortunately fall into rigidity, thoughtlessness, and conformity; rather its essence is to convert these” (BWA 222). Emersonian perfectionism, with its emphasis on freedom as “worldly, receptive *autonomy*” (BWA 192), is a democratic practice that continuously strives to renew democracy by transforming individualism into individuality.

**4. Freedom, Democracy, and Perfectionism**

The three questions that I wish to raise about this book are the following:what kind(s) of freedom operate in Cavell’s political philosophy? What kind of democratic theorist is Cavell? And is perfectionism at risk of slipping from an ethos of individuality back into one of individualism?

The first question arises in response to Norris’ discussion of liberty. Norris argues (rightly) that according to Cavell, “American political culture is . . . characterized by a false understanding of its own values,” including the value of freedom (BWA 100). The value of freedom that has become hegemonic in the United States since the 1950s (following Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Isaiah Berlin) is the idea of negative freedom: freedom as doing what one likes. Norris argues that part of Cavell’s impetus for drawing upon Rousseau is to draw out the relevance of freedom as autonomy as an alternative, truer value for American political culture. On this reading of the social contract, “The recognition of consent is thus the recognition of one’s political identity, of one’s attempt to live in concert with others—to achieve one’s autonomy alongside them and with them” (BWA 98). This understanding of freedom is clearly at play in Cavell’s re-reading of the social contract, in his work on moral perfectionism, and in his turn to the transcendentalists for a vision of what American political culture might be. Furthermore, Norris is absolutely right that the reading of Rousseau as a proto-totalitarian by classical liberals such as Jacob Talmon and Berlin is a grave misrepresentation of what freedom as autonomy means. Yet Arendt raises a similar critique of Rousseau’s concept of freedom, namely that Rousseau’s emphasis on the will as the site of freedom is anti-political.**[[41]](#footnote-42)** In her critique, she points out that in Rousseau’s ideal state, the general will is generated *without* communication.**[[42]](#footnote-43)** In book 2, chapter 3 of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau writes that “if, when a sufficiently informed populace deliberates, *the citizens were to have no communication* . . . the deliberation would always be good.”[[43]](#footnote-44) Furthermore Rousseau thinks that “for the general will to be well articulated, it is therefore important that . . . each citizen make up his own mind.”[[44]](#footnote-45)

Arendt’s point is two-fold. First, Rousseau’s conception of freedom abstracts politics from the “elaborate framework of ties and bonds for the future,” and in so doing makes the will the only faculty that is relevant for politics.[[45]](#footnote-46) Democracy slips very quickly into decisionism. Second, by preventing communication between citizens, political action becomes impossible. There is something very un-Cavellian about a form of freedom that sees communication within a community as corrupting the body politic. So, my first question is: How can we reconcile this aspect of Rousseau’s concept of the general will (i.e., a general will that is generated through private deliberation and about whichpublic communication is to be discouraged) with Cavell’s emphasis that working out who I am and who we are requires a constant process of “responsive engagement with others as we attune ourselves to one another and the world around us”[[46]](#footnote-47)—a process that can only happen through conversation? Norris very briefly acknowledges this tension between Rousseau and Cavell (BWA 113), but if Arendt’s reading of Rousseau is correct, then Cavell’s conception of freedom must exceed Rousseau’s. In Cavell’s version of the social contract, there must be some kind of freedom as action in addition to freedom as autonomy. So, Norris needs to explainhow he thinks Cavell’s emphasis on conversation modifies Rousseau’s concept of freedom as autonomy.

My second question concerns the role of disagreement in Cavell’s account of politics. Norris mentions that one critique he encounters is “that Cavell’s vision of politics is one in which there’s almost no room for extended disputation or enduring conflict between differing views” (BWA 120). I can report that when I have presented Cavell’s work, on occasion I have had similar responses: “How is Cavell different from Habermas?” “Isn’t Cavell *just* a liberal?” “How is Cavell different from Rawls?” These typesof questions often leave me puzzled, because I’ve never read Cavell as a consensus theorist. Disagreement has been central to Cavell’s work since the beginning.**[[47]](#footnote-48)** The opening to “Must We Mean What We Say?” describes the dispute between analytic and ordinary language philosophy as “like friends who have quarreled, to be able neither to tolerate nor to ignore one another.”[[48]](#footnote-49) It strikes me that this description of disagreement captures how Cavell is neither a deliberative democrat seeking consensus as the τέλος of political argumentation nor an agonistic theorist that sees argumentation as fostering “relations of adversarial respect.”[[49]](#footnote-50) The crucial difference is that these two branches of democratic theory do not differentiate between different kinds of agreement, whereas Cavell, following Wittgenstein, distinguishes between agreement in opinions and agreement in “forms of life.”**[[50]](#footnote-51)** In one of the more famous passages from Cavell’s work, he writes that “human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less” than “all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life.’”[[51]](#footnote-52) He describes this vision as “terrifying” because disagreements in forms of life are possible (although unusual—perhaps out of the ordinary).**[[52]](#footnote-53)**

Assuming that my reading of this passage is correct (to my knowledge, Cavell never uses the phrase “disagreement in forms of life”), then political disputes could be of two kinds—disagreement over opinions and disagreements over forms of life. The former are the realm of mere policy disputes, but the latter are about “becoming who we are” and determining whether “we” can continue to function together as a community—the kinds of disputes that bring to the foreground the social contract or call into question Nora’s marriage to Torvald.[[53]](#footnote-54) The rebuttal to those who think Cavell leaves no room for extended disputation or enduring conflict is that in grounding his philosophy and his politics in forms of life, he leaves politics permanently open to disagreements over forms of life. Yet this raises a question about where such a politics is headed. Is the purpose of becoming who we are to reach a state where there are no more disagreements in our forms of life? I can think of some of the disagreements that Norris cites (e.g., Kid Rock’s defense of displaying the Confederate flag; Rick Santorum’s decision to bring his deceased premature babyhome to be shown to his young children; or the attitudes of the slave holder [BWA 131–5]) as forms of life that should go away. But other forms of life—e.g., those of indigenous communities, linguistic minorities such as the Québécois, LGBTQ communities—must remain in some form of disagreement with hegemonic forms of life if these communities are to survive and flourish. I think it is that tension between forms of life thatwe find deplorable and forms of life that we find laudatory that leads to the misreading of Cavell as leaving no room for dispute or conflict. Yet, how do we remain open to laudatory disagreements in forms of life while putting behind us the deplorable ones?

My third question is provoked by the useful distinction Norris makes in chapter 5 between individuality and individualism. The conformism and democratic despotism that concerned nineteenth-century liberals such as Mill, Tocqueville, and Emerson echoes a similar type of conformity that is equated with 1950s and 1960s America. Cavell’s turn to Emersonian perfectionism in the 1970s and 1980s could be contextualized as part of the post-1960s rejection of that individualist conformity. When Cavell turned his attention toward philosophers of individuality such as Emerson and Nietzsche, they were still marginal figures in American philosophy departments and were not seriously engaged with by political philosophers. In the forty years since the publication of *The Claim of Reason*, this idea of liberal perfectionism as a mode of ethics distinct from utilitarian and deontological accounts has certainly gained wider purchase in the academy. Nietzsche’s ideas, and to a lesser extent Emerson’s, have also achieved wide recognition in American popular culture. This renewed interest in philosophers of individuality echoes a tendency in popular culture to celebrate the cult of individuality. Consider Apple’s 1997 commercial “Here’s to the Crazy Ones” that included images of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohammed Ali, and Amelia Earhart (among others), celebrating their individuality as examples of people who challenged the status quo. The tagline to the ad was “Think Different,” and Steve Jobs, in describing the commercial said that “Life can be much broader once you discover one simple fact, and that is everything around you that you call life, was made up by people that were no smarter than you. And you can change it. You can influence it. You can build your own things that other people can use.”[[54]](#footnote-55) Or consider the rise of self-help culture in the later third of the twentieth century, a movement that in part took inspiration from Emerson’s essay “Compensation,” where he describes a person alienated from society due to his temper being “driven to entertain himself alone and acquire habits of self-help” in order to mend his character defect.[[55]](#footnote-56) The first example celebrates exemplars and the Emersonian idea of genius with the goal of selling computers. The second example converts the Emersonian event of undertaking and suffering one’s vocation into consumer products to be acquired to soothe one’s status anxiety.[[56]](#footnote-57) While Norris holds up Cavell’s variety of liberal perfectionism as an alternative to the libertarian ethos of individualism (or, as I prefer to think of it, the kind of freedom one equates with Texas), there is a danger that perfectionism is commodified into self-help books and courses, and exemplars are turned into product pitchmen. The ethos of individuality (or, as I prefer to think of it, the kind of freedom one equates with California) ends up being converted into something one buys rather than achieves through self-legislation. There is not much in Cavell’s work, or in Norris’ reading of Cavell, on how the economic relates to the political. I worry that, without thinking through how an economic system such as capitalism can capture and distort an ethic such as liberal perfectionism, individuality is always at risk of being transformed back into individualism.

**5. Conclusion**

The point of these questions is not to identify the flaws or limits of Cavell’s philosophy (or of Norris’ interpretation of it). The point is to show how the questions that Cavell has raised throughout his work do not ever provide easy answers, only provocations to confront new problems. To think about politics in perfectionist terms is not, as some might assume, to hopeof everarriving at a perfect end state where all our problems (either as individuals or as a community) are solved. It is rather to trigger a self-critique of our current state so as to provoke a transformation into an unattained yet attainable future state. Norris’ book provokes in this way, too. Norris identifies, through his reading of Cavell, the self-alienation at the center of contemporary American political culture and pointsout a path toward a different way of thinking and acting democratically. It also provokes in a different way, by challenging political theorists to consider Cavell as one of their own, and to take on his philosophical concerns as their philosophical concerns, showing how a different mode of political philosophy is possible.

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2. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 344–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 22–8; henceforth CR, followed by page number. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. For an examination of this aspect of Cavell’s thought, see Jonathan Havercroft and David Owen, “Soul-Blindness, Police Orders and Black Lives Matter: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Rancière,” *Political Theory* 44:6 (2016), pp. 739–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); henceforth BWA, followed by page number. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. SeeHanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). This book draws extensively upon Cavell’s PhD dissertation, which was not published at the time, but eventually became the basis for *The Claim of Reason*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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10. Tracy Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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26. **Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love,” p. 324.** [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
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47. See Norris, “Introduction,” p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Stanley Cavell, “Must We Mean What We Say?,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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56. Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 35. McGee traces how atthe turn of the twentieth century**,** the New Thought movement drew upon Emerson’s transcendentalism but emphasized wealth and success as signs of self-reliance**,** thus twisting Emerson’s original message. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)