Book review:
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Jonathan Havercroft: *Stanley Cavell's Democratic Perfectionism: Community, Individuality, and Post-Truth Politics*. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xi, 274)

In the conclusion to this insightful book, Havercroft says a colleague responded to an early draft as reading 'very 2020' (247). The concern with post-truth politics that is the central pivot of the text seemed a reflection on democratic politics in a Trumpian context. Yet, I am writing this review in the shadow of violent race riots in the UK fuelled by xenophobic misinformation spreading online. In the US, and so many other places across the world, we see a return to racist, anti-immigrant fake news and lies. Havercroft's text, then, is both timely and urgent. A critical response to an elemental crisis facing democratic politics. Havercroft's core claim is that in turning to the work of Stanley Cavell, democratic theory can locate resources that enable us to respond to post-truth politics and its risks. Recasting post-truth politics as a problem of – in Cavellian terms – scepticism does not provide an antidote to post-truth politics, but can help us navigate the sceptical traps laid out before us. Havercroft's point is to shift the ground of discussion in contemporary democratic theory, from the liberal-democratic search for (universal) reasons, facts and consensus, to a perfectionist ground of responsiveness. The book's argument resonates not only with other Cavellian approaches (Norval, for instance), but also with the broader ethical turn in radical democratic theory (through Tully, Connolly, and Mouffe among others). Yet, what is distinctive here is precisely the focus on post-truth politics as a variety of scepticism. Throughout the six chapters, Havercroft returns over and over to this core problem animating Cavell's (democratic) perfectionism.

The first chapter begins from Cavell's brief discussion of the social contract in *The Claim of Reason*. Cavell's argument there, Havercroft tells us, is that the social contract misunderstands "our ordinary relationship to our society as citizens" (29). Conventional social contract theory preoccupies itself with the question of knowledge – of knowing when one has consented, or what one's obligations are – when the more important question is one of community – of being or

claiming membership of a common. In this sense, the social contract is less an epistemic problem than one of responsiveness. The second chapter clarifies how Cavell's method enables such shifts. Havercroft's reconstruction does well to draw out this point, providing a systematic account of a Cavellian 'method' in contrast to Wolin, Skinner, Strauss and Derrida. Cavell's method of reading, Havercroft points out, is "constitutive of his political practice" (58), going on to identify the key features of a Cavellian practice of 'creative reading' – juxtaposing disparate concepts in place of formal argument, close attention to textuality and writing's conditions of possibility, a sensitivity towards exemplarity, and reading as a redemptive practice. Placing this practice alongside Cavell's Austinian commitment to ordinary language philosophy leads Havercroft to conclude that at the heart of Cavell's method is an attempt to restore "the human voice to philosophy" (92), to make writing a practice of invitation (or provocation), to make thought a practice of making oneself vulnerable.

When put in contrast with extant democratic theory, the contours of Cavell's distinct perfectionist contribution – rooted in his method – slowly begin to become clearer. Distanced from Habermas at one end, and Rancière, Honig and Connolly at the other, Havercroft suggests how Cavell's work reimagines conventional faultlines in democratic theory between consensual and dissensual approaches. In place of a concern with the telos of democratic politics (or, indeed, its absent telos) Cavell draws us to "focus on other modes of responsiveness, such as acknowledgement and acceptance" (131). While discussion is intended to situate Cavell within contemporary democratic theory, one gets the sense that crucial differences have been elided in this heuristic. The discussion on Rancière, for instance, ignores how the very condition of politics for him is precisely the fact that there is some sort of agreement in forms of life (the absolute equality of speaking beings, as he calls it) – suggesting more similarity between Cavell and Rancière than presented here.

It is in the final three chapters of the book, however, that we begin to see a democratic perfectionist politics take shape. It is also here that Havercroft's focus turns from Cavell's comments on political

philosophy to his most explicitly aesthetic works. Across chapters four and five, Havercroft reconstructs Cavellian readings of Shakespearan tragedy and Hollywood cinema – both familiar to readers of Cavell – to draw out themes of acknowledgement and acceptance that are central to democratic perfectionism. Tragedy and cinema pose a set of sceptical problems, ones that Cavell links to the other minds and external world problems of philosophy. But both also make it possible to navigate these problems through cultivating responsiveness in terms of acknowledgement and acceptance that interrupts the impulse to deny the other "limits our alienation" from our world (151). Havercroft's discussion here is insightful and engaging as he works through the exemplary moments that Cavell discusses in his works: Ibsen's Doll House, King Lear, Gaslight, the remarriage comedy genre. But, even as they help demonstrate Cavell's point, Havercroft has little to say on how these practices of acknowledgement and acceptance – of soul-dawning – are set underway. This is a vital political question: the kind of perfectionist politics Havercroft argues for is attractive and powerful, but how can that perfectionist comportment be cultivated. To offer a contrast that might help elucidate my point, in both Connolly and Tully for example, we see the turn (in very different ways, of course) to a Foucauldian aesthetics of existence that makes possible the cultivation and sustenance of a certain ethical orientation.

This is important not least because drawing out what these practices of acknowledgement and acceptance are (and how they are performed) helps us reflect on the limits of a democratic perfectionist account. In the final chapter, Havercroft provides a fascinating account of the limits of Cavellian perfectionism, suggesting that it ignores questions of wealth and economic disparity. Elaborating on what practices of soul-dawning look like and are, however, can also help us locate the other limits to such a perfectionist account. What does the politics of responsiveness look like, for instance, in a world marked by antiblack violence. What does responsiveness mean for those of us that cannot be heard. Indeed, what is or can be the claiming of community when we stand not just excluded from *a* community (or in an unacceptable compromise within it) but from the

common, from that sharing that is its condition of possibility. My suggestion is not that Havercroft's account ignores these questions, nor that it cannot adequately respond to them. I am after how this work sets the ground for interrogating democratic perfectionism; towards a reckoning or transgression of its limits that can only be known in/at those sites where a perfectionist politics is being enacted. To me, this is the richness of Havercroft's work. On the one hand, it presents a fascinating and compelling vision of democratic politics. On the other, it makes clear in its analyses the challenges of extending a perfectionist account beyond the narrow confines of 'the position of the relatively advantaged' that Cavell had in mind.

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