



Stanley Cavell's democratic perfectionism: community, individuality, and post-truth politics

Jonathan Havercroft, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023, xi + 287pp., ISBN: 9781009322584

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How should democratic societies respond to post-truth politics and to skepticism among the populace incited by anti-democratic politicians like Donald Trump? Post-truth politics is characterized by a disregard for truth and facts and a pervasive distrust of established criteria and rules of democratic coexistence. In response, many liberals advocate an epistemic approach, focusing on bolstering fact-checking efforts, debunking false beliefs, and fostering trust in expertise.

It is Jonathan Havercroft's contention that this response is destined to fail. Rather than attempting to combat skepticism head-on, the book advocates a shift from epistemology to an ethical ideal of democratic life. Drawing on Cavell's writings, Havercroft argues that addressing the challenges posed by post-truth politics sustainably requires cultivating the practices of responsiveness and self-reliance. Enlisting Cavell to address post-truth politics, particularly in the context of figures like Trump, presents a formidable challenge. While not everyone may find Havercroft's response sufficiently robust, its argument is undeniably powerful.

Cavell's central insight is that modern culture is steeped in skepticism and haunted by an unattainable quest for certainty. If we adopt a constantly skeptical perspective towards the natural and social world, this creates a distance that we can never overcome. Instead, Cavell emphasizes the need to address the ethical and political implications of the distance that skepticism creates.

Responsiveness emerges as the central practical virtue essential to democratic societies. It entails a dual commitment: first, a keen attentiveness to the specific circumstances and qualities of both individuals and objects in our ordinary lives; and second, an effort to make ourselves intelligible to others and ourselves. Havercroft aligns Cavell's emphasis on responsiveness with his concept of democratic perfectionism. Democratic perfectionism rejects teleology and eschews positing a singular

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conception of the good life. Instead, it fosters an ethos of perpetual self-improvement, recognizing the inherent incompleteness and imperfection of both individual and societal existence. The essence of this perfectionism lies in seeking criteria for self-critique immanently, rather than in a transcendent or transcendental realm.

One of the book's significant strengths lies in its contextualization of Cavell's work within contemporary political theory (chapter 3). Havercroft situates Cavell between cognitivist and non-cognitivist approaches to the moral and political underpinnings of democratic action. Cavell thus offers responsiveness as an alternative, eschewing both consensus-seeking and pure contestation. In essence, Havercroft presents Cavell's democratic perfectionism as an idealized disposition that keeps our future radically open, remaining receptive to discovering new grounds for contestation and critique. This interpretation depicts him as a Wittgensteinian agonist, asserting that disagreements within forms of life hold normative significance, constituting a democratic struggle over the conditions of discursive engagement. In this view, the inability to reach agreement does not obstruct productive engagement with post-truth politics, since such an engagement is not premised on shared truths but on possible agreements in forms of life.

In the opening chapter, Havercroft elaborates on Cavell's exploration of the social contract, highlighting how adherence to judgment criteria mirrors adherence to community rules, with both reaching inevitable limits in justification. In both cases, consenting to criteria and rules is not an epistemic quandary but a practical one, rooted in communal forms of life. Following Cavell's educational approach to philosophy, he presents this practical problem as one of 'philosophical political education' (p. 42). Cavell's assertion that 'dissent is not the undoing of consent but a dispute about its contents' (Cavell, 1999, p. 27) challenges democrats to remain continually responsive to social injustices and to challenge the discursive and perceptual frames through which injustices are recognized or ignored.

Chapter 2 explores Cavell's interpretive methods, portraying him as an intertextualist who examines texts' educative impact on readers: how they might provoke in the reader a transformative experience and subsequent response. Chapter 4 discusses the political import of Cavell's readings of tragedy as instructive examples of how acknowledgment, rather than mere knowledge, constitutes an appropriate response to tragedy. Havercroft distinguishes Markell's and Tully's theories of recognition, which are influenced by Cavell, in terms of responsive practice from Charles Taylor's theory of recognition. The integration of more recent contributions to recognition theory would have been productive here (e.g. Ikäheimo et al., 2021).

The most interesting and most original chapter, chapter 5, applies the notion of democratic perfectionism to Trump's gaslighting of the American public. The term 'gaslighting' derives from the classic film 'Gaslight', which Havercroft interprets as a means to understand Trump's actions in inducing hyperbolic doubt among the American public. In the film, the husband Gregory manipulates his wife Paula, depriving her of her own voice to make her believe she is losing her mind. This manipulation takes various forms such as intimidation, social isolation, and threats of violence, all aimed at dominating and exploiting her. What stands out for Havercroft in Cavell's reading of the film is that Gregory inflicts a version of skepticism on Paula, and that she loses the 'capacity to know what is true' (p. 194). Havercroft



sees Trump's gaslighting as stripping individuals of their ability to discern truth; individuals are not only subjected to constant lies but are also wronged and dominated in an epistemic sense. Drawing on feminist social epistemology, he argues that gaslighting constitutes a form of epistemic (testimonial) injustice (Miranda Fricker) and epistemic entitlement (Kate Manne).

While Havercroft's analysis sheds light on Trump's epistemic entitlement and its parallels with Cavell's interpretation of 'Gaslight', it may overlook the broader implications of both Cavell's analysis and Trump's gaslighting. The issue for Paula and the American public extends beyond being unjustly oppressed as knowers by epistemically entitled individuals. Havercroft convincingly demonstrates Trump's epistemic entitlement throughout his presidency. However, for Cavell, Gregory's gaslighting not only injures Paula's epistemic standing but also induces a state of conformity characterized by voicelessness and existential silencing. As discussed by Havercroft, Cavell portrays this existential silencing as a situation where individuals cannot be self-reliant (Emerson) or true to themselves, perpetuating conformity and apathy. The problem is that Havercroft's use of the term 'true' sometimes appears equivocal, encompassing both an epistemic meaning and an Emersonian meaning. While epistemic truth pertains to discerning truth or falsity propositionally (and to our standing as knowers), the latter relates to self-reliance: the perfectionist attitude of always striving to create a better version of oneself and one's community. The latter meaning of being true to oneself is present, for example, in Cavell's notion of finding one's voice, which extends beyond making propositional claims to include actions that affirm one's new-found self.

At times, Havercroft appears to deviate from his own thesis when he characterizes the problem of post-truth politics as the lack of 'a shared epistemology that makes democratic life possible' (p. 251). This is at odds with his assertion that Cavell's political relevance resides with his suggestion to transition 'from epistemology ... to the cultivation of responsiveness' (p. 248). Addressing gaslighting and confronting compromised selves and communities must involve more than securing opportunities to voice one's 'knowledge claims' (p. 200), especially in the case of Trump, who uses skepticism as a tool to promote his xenophobic, misogynistic, fascist *Weltanschauung*.

The final chapter addresses the limitations of Cavell's democratic perfectionism, highlighting his lack of attention to economic justice and class politics. This oversight is particularly puzzling given that Cavell's philosophical influences like Emerson and Thoreau were sensitive to the threat posed by economic disparities to individual integrity and to our abilities to be responsive to injustices. Havercroft introduces a libertarian socialist account of perfectionism, emphasizing that democratic perfectionism hinges on economic conditions conducive to fostering a culture of self-reliance. This entails ensuring access to free time, a minimum income, material resources to meet basic needs, and the abolition of poverty.

I concur with the assessment that attending to the economic conditions necessary for sustaining a democratic perfectionist ethos and practice is crucial. That Cavell's 'perfectionism is for the middle class' (p. 246) is indeed a weakness in his work. But while Havercroft hints at the possibility that democratic perfectionism might inherently provide an argument for critiquing economic injustice, in that economic



inequality threatens the integrity of both the wealthy and the poor, he does not articulate this idea further. What else would the libertarian-socialist account of democratic perfectionism entail? Presumably it would include advocating equal access to education and curricula fostering a perfectionist ethos, addressing structural and institutional social injustices—such as those related to slavery and race, which Cavell largely ignores—and more.

This is an important book and should be read by anyone seeking to understand political skepticism and how best to respond to it. It showcases exemplary use of political theory, illuminating complex philosophical theories in the context of contemporary political events, and vice versa. By offering fresh interpretations of Cavell's work, the book serves as a valuable resource for understanding its relevance to contemporary political events while enriching scholarship on Cavell.

Data availability Not applicable.

References

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