

## On the Education of the Heart: The Idea of Growth in Emerson and Cavell for Contemporary Education

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### INTRODUCTION: "THE EDUCATION OF THE HEART"

A phrase being used frequently in Japanese education today is "the education of the heart." It has become more popular since the atrocious incident of May 1997, when a junior high school boy killed an elementary school boy, cut off his head, and mounted it on the entrance gate of his school with the challenging letter: "This is my revenge upon compulsory education and the society that has made my existence transparent."<sup>1</sup> The authorities have judged the boy to be mentally ill. This incident has caused turmoil among educators in Japan. Most share the concern that this incident is but the tip of an iceberg that represents the malaise of modern Japanese society and exemplifies, in the extreme, the tendency among Japanese youth to have a selfish disregard for social norms and the value of human life.

Against this background, the Ministry of Education has initiated the movement called "the education of the heart" to meet the challenge. Their proposals include: (1) discipline, child care, and communication between parents and children at home; (2) field trips and volunteer activities in communities; and (3) moral education, counseling, and student guidance.<sup>2</sup> The concept of the education of the heart, however, is a slippery one. Part of its complexity lies in its relationship with moral education. It is reported that the Teacher's Union, which has opposed the moral education proposed by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party after World War II, expresses the concern that the education of the heart might be linked to a conservative movement toward national identity. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education had long refrained from active involvement in the issue of the heart as it relates to individual value systems, but the Ministry is now determined to involve itself in family education for this issue of the heart.<sup>3</sup> Within this historical context, the major goal of the education of the heart is to reinforce moral rules and ideals in order to deter immoral and asocial behavior by children.

These moral ideals include such general values as justice, care for others, self-responsibility, discipline, and courtesy. Some involve political implications associated with national identity and traditional cultural values, having roots in Confucianism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and the emperor system. These cultural values have been a cohesive force in Japanese society. Once being set up as fixed ends for the path of children's development, however, they work as if to restrain their hearts from the outside. Moreover, abstract and sloganistic moral language used in the debate, as well as in the classroom, does not touch the child's heart. This reality raises the problem: Can the human heart be nurtured by a morality composed of traditional virtues with political implications as fixed ends? Another complexity of the education of the heart is the concept of education itself. In contemporary Japanese society, education has often meant social training for a narrowly defined goal, such

as achieving economic success or entering into a prestigious university. This poses another question: Can the heart be another object of goal-oriented training?

Somewhere in Japanese society there should be a vision of the heart which will answer "No" to these questions. Today's youth need, in this spiritual crisis, some moral language that connects to their heart. It seems that many post-industrialized countries today share this crisis of the heart because we live in an age of uncertainties without metaphysical moorings or moral anchors for the heart. There is a pressing need for reconsidering the meanings of education and morality from this perspective of the heart.

Searching for answers to these questions, this essay examines Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Stanley Cavell's ideas on growth in circles, as opposed to the idea of a linear development towards a fixed goal. By speaking in a moral language that reaches and liberates our hearts, Emerson and Cavell present us with a vision of morality originating in the heart, not as something vague or irrational, but as the subject of philosophical examinations, in their visions of democracy. I conclude that Emerson and Cavell transform the traditional concept of the education of the heart from one that is goal-oriented to one dedicated to spiritual growth.

CAVELL'S IDEA OF EMERSONIAN MORAL PERFECTIONISM:  
TOWARD ANOTHER VISION OF MORALITY AND GROWTH

Cavell is a contemporary American philosopher who reexamines Emerson's thought with his idea of "Moral Perfectionism." For Cavell, Moral Perfectionism involves a dimension of moral life observed in the soul's journey toward its perfection, involving the question of how we live. This is a precondition of any moral theory, including Kantianism and utilitarianism. In Cavell's words, Moral Perfectionism originates "before questions of the good and the right come to occupy moral reasoning,"<sup>74</sup> and it is "open-ended thematics," rather than a theory "hedging a word with a definition."<sup>75</sup>

The highlight of Cavell's Emersonian Moral Perfectionism is Emerson's notion of the "unattained but attainable self," which is the process of self-overcoming. By "perfectionism" in the Emersonian sense, Cavell does not mean perfectibility as the final goal, as envisioned by Plato's image of climbing the ladder upward, but his focus is on the process of perfecting. He illustrates this by saying that it is "a process of moving to, and from, nexts," and that "each state of the self is final" (*Conditions*, 12). Cavell implies that the driving force for the self's journey towards its better possibilities (the "unattained" or "attainable" self) is not given by any prefigured moral ideal. Rather, it arises from self-criticism with a sense of shame for its state of conformity (the "attained" self). Cavell's rejection of a pre-fixed moral ideal constitutes his Emersonian antimoralism, namely, the "enforcement of morality, or moral code, by immoral means," or fixation on the "presence of ideals in one's culture" (*Conditions*, 12).

Cavell's idea of Emersonian Moral Perfectionism seems to provide us with another vision of morality and growth, one originating in the heart rather than in a morality infused with the notion of development toward a fixed goal. I will explore further its implications by examining Emerson's ideas on growth.

EMERSON'S IDEA OF GROWTH IN CIRCLES: AGAINST A LINEAR NOTION OF  
DEVELOPMENT TOWARD A FIXED END

GROWTH IN CIRCLES

The following passage illustrates Emerson's unique vision of growth:

The soul's advances are not made by gradation, such as can be represented by motion in a straight line, but rather by ascension of state, such as can be represented by metamorphosis, from the egg to the worm, from the worm to the fly. The growths of genius are of a certain total character.<sup>6</sup>

Emerson here suggests the image of growth as metamorphosis, which is obviously different from the partial (not "total") and linear image of development. Another of his images of growth in circles further illustrates his meaning. He says: "The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end."<sup>7</sup> This is an image of growth as a movement of circles expanding in all directions, and thus, in no fixed direction. This meaning is further enriched by the following words of Emerson: The movement of circles is "the total growths," the process of "building up our being," or "raising himself above himself, to work a pitch above his last height," and each moment reveals a "new hour" (*Circles*, 169-71). These phrases convey the image of growth as the transformation of one's whole being. Emerson says that the force of growth is born in this here-and-now moment of the *becoming* of the self, rather than being given by a prefixed goal. Borrowing Cavell's words, "power seems to be the result of rising, not the cause."<sup>8</sup> Why is this open-ended present moment crucial for one's growth?

A key to this question lies in the notion of unpredictability as the essence of growth in circles. Emerson, who calls himself, "an endless seeker," an "experimenter," says: "The last chamber, the last closet, he must feel was never opened; there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable." He paraphrases the "residuum unknown" as a "greater possibility" (*Circles*, 170-71). To live in unpredictability is to live in surprise, as he says: "Life is a series of surprises,"<sup>9</sup> and "life is rather a subject of wonder than of didactics."<sup>10</sup> In an antimoralistic tone, he also says that "the heart refuses to be imprisoned" (*Circles*, 170).

Emerson tells us that a didactic, moral teaching and a predictable goal have a danger of depriving us of the immediate sense of surprise here and now as a treasure and source of growth. However, the movement in circles does not mean mere contingency or unruliness.

THE "GLEAM OF LIGHT" AS THE CENTER OF CIRCLES:  
COURAGE TO BE WHAT YOU ARE."

Circles grow with a strong inner concentration by seeking to obtain the security of their center. Emerson calls this center "stability in the soul" which "contains all its circles" (*Circles*, 176). This image of center is captured by his metaphor of "light." In his essay, "Self-Reliance," Emerson says: "[a] man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within."<sup>11</sup> "The gleam of light" is not necessarily mystical, as might be interpreted in the conventional understanding of Emerson as an esoteric transcendentalist.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it is the

metaphor for the inner sense of one's being, or in Emerson's words, "one depth, one interior, and that is — his purpose."<sup>13</sup> This is the gist of Emersonian self-reliance.

Cavell's interpretation of Emerson's notion of "Whim" illuminates the moral nature of this gleam of light. He says that "Whim" is the "call of Genius" and "[my] inner impulses from below" which "constitutes my fate"; to obey my Whim is to obey my heart.<sup>14</sup> Cavell speaks of the passage of growth from within the heart, and the idea of Whim seems to correspond to that of the gleam of light. Cavell's unique idea of "one's voice" gives a hint at the moral nature of Whim, whose meaning differs from the conventional sense. He suggests that finding one's voice is finding "your language, your own names, for what strikes you as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome," and he associates it with Emerson's phrase, "the courage to be what you are."<sup>15</sup> Having the courage to be yourself, being true to your heart, is the essence of morality for Cavell and Emerson. They open the path to finding and obeying your gleam of light, your voice in the heart, the path to a secure center of your life, namely, "the courage to be what you are." This is the moral condition of growth in circles.

CONNECTIONS WITH THE WORLD: "FROM THE INMOST TO THE OUTMOST"

However, watching one's gleam of light does not imply mere inward-looking selfishness. Circles are expanding outward as if to seek connections with the world and others. Emerson's words, "[t]he inmost in due time becomes the outmost," capture circular this image.<sup>16</sup> The following passage hints at his vision of the "outmost":

The world, — this shadow of the soul, or *other* me, — lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself...I grasp the hands of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work.<sup>17</sup>

This passage seems permeated by the need individuals have for the world and others for self-knowledge in the joy of communion and mutual recognition. This is a social Emerson, not an Emerson of introverted individualism.

Attaining this "outmost" state, however, is not an easy path. Cavell, who represents Emerson as a social figure rather than as an individualist, elitist, or merely a literary figure, illustrates this point. The Emersonian self is engaged in criticism of the present state of democracy by examining his heart with the sense of shame and despair over his state of conformity, namely, the loss of his voice. This process is what Cavell calls "criticism of democracy from within" (*Conditions*, 3) and "aversive thinking," which he says is open to anyone and in each one of us. He says, "my voice may be raised in assessing the present state of society against a further or next state of society" (*Conditions*, 27).

In short, Cavell means that social transformation and self transformation require each other. In this sense, he calls Emersonian Perfectionism the "prize" of democracy (*Conditions*, 28). In the passage of growth in circles "from the inmost to the outmost," the self is becoming a critical participant for the construction of a genuine democratic society by raising "my voice" rather than relying on any pre-existing common ends.

ANOTHER DIMENSION OF TIME: AN IMPLICATION OF GROWTH  
WITHOUT A FIXED END

One implication of Emerson's notion of growth in circles is the idea that there is a dimension to time other than a linear motion that is universally applied to everyone's biological development:

[W]hen these waves of God flow into me I no longer reckon lost time. I no longer poorly compute my possible achievement by what remains to me of the months or the year; for these moments confer a sort of omnipresence and omnipotence which asks nothing of duration, but sees that the energy of the mind is commensurate with the work to be done, without time. (*Circles*, 176)

Here, Emerson's self experiences a certain depth and intensity of the moment. When Emerson as a teacher sees a child, he will not ask how much time she has lived and will live, or her stage of temporal development. Rather, with the sense of surprise, he will ask whether she lives each moment as a new hour by discovering her own gleam of light in her passage from the attained toward the unattained self. Emerson with Cavell seems to suggest that this new hour is a point of converting of despair and shame of past failures into the hope for a better future, which then becomes the moment of the metamorphosis of the self.

In this unique concept of time, Emerson proposes the idea of "growing young." As people grow, "their wrinkles smoothed, they are perfumed again with hope and power." Emerson suggests that growth is the process of "unsettlement" rather than settling down as we get old. He criticizes adults who "talk down to the young" (*Circles*, 177) to make them settle on a fixed path. This is Emerson's anti-authoritarianism and antimoralism. His idea of time revolutionizes the notion of equality and opens up a dialogue between hearts, beyond the boundaries of age.

EXISTENTIAL LIGHT: EMERSON'S SENSE OF SKEPTICISM AND GRIEF

Finally, though Emerson's idea of growth in circles gives the image of an ever intensifying light filling the world, he is not merely a naive optimist. Cornel West criticizes the optimism of Emerson's "minimal resistance to evil."<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Stephen Whicher points out that, by the end of 1843, a skeptical mood had crept in; although he thinks that Emerson never embraced it thoroughly.<sup>19</sup> Emerson's touch of skepticism sheds a new light to the image of growth in circles. In fact, the joyful passage, "I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty" (*Experience*, 276), is preceded by his skeptical descriptions of life: "Life itself is a bubble and a skepticism, and a sleep within a sleep" (*Experience*, 264).

Cavell's interpretation of Emerson's essay, "Experience," helps in our understanding of Emerson's sense of skepticism. Unlike other interpretations, Cavell claims that Emerson by 1844 recognizes, with "respect," the concept of skepticism as "unsolvability."<sup>20</sup> In Cavell's interpretation, skepticism for Emerson is not an issue of doubt in one's knowledge about the world. Rather, it is an essential condition of our ordinary life, in which the world around us loses its attraction and shrinks away from us. For Cavell, skepticism in this sense is inseparable from the loss of our power over language, in his words, "as if language has difficulty in *reaching* phenomena." Cavell illustrates this peculiar state of skepticism as a state of "forgetting or denying the rightful draw of our attraction, our capacity to receive the

world, but instead sealing off the return of the world" (*America*, 88). He claims that what threatens Emerson is not "tragedy" but "nihilism" and "despair."<sup>21</sup> These expressions of Cavell conjure up the image of the Emersonian skeptical state of "a sleep within a sleep" as a colorless world rather than a world of darkness symbolizing sin and tragedy: the image of one's being at a loss for words in the desperate separation from oneself as well as from the world.<sup>22</sup>

The nature of Emersonian skepticism can be further illuminated from his idiosyncratic sense of "grief." Emerson says: "The life of truth is cold and so far mournful; but it is not the slave of tears, contritions and perturbation" (*Experience*, 271). On the death of his son, he says, "I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature" (*Experience*, 256). Cavell points out that this passage shows that Emerson's grief is a grief over the illusion that grief gives us established knowledge of the world (*America*, 106) — a grief unlike that of the ancient Greek tragedians. When Emerson utters, "I grieve that," he is beginning to metamorphosize his initial grief in tears into another, deeper state of grief. He is diving into the investigation of his heart in his second grief over the illusion of his initial grief, now being aware of the real threat of the loss of words.<sup>23</sup>

It is through undergoing this second state of grief that the moment of awakening arises from the state of sleeping skepticism. Emerson expresses this moment by saying, "there is a door which is never closed through which the creator passes" (*Experience*, 259). Cavell expresses it by saying, "grief and grievance are the gates of ecstasy" (*America*, 84). The images of "a door" and "gates" suggest that the process of going through one's second grief is a passage to the finding and articulating of one's gleam of light, a step into the attainable next self and its reconnection with the world.

Being permeated with the senses of skepticism, grief, and joy, the landscape of growth that Emerson draws is not a colorful painting bathed in light, but a stark image against a colorless background. This is the image of Emersonian existential light. Unlike the conventional interpretation, Emerson is not a mere optimist, but a proponent of the compensatory relationship between joy and grief, colorful and colorless light.<sup>24</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: TOWARD EDUCATION IN SERVICE OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

What does Emerson's idea of growth in circles offer to contemporary educators as they search for a way to educate the heart? First and foremost, as an alternative to the concept of moral education infused with the idea of linear development toward fixed ends, Emerson's and Cavell's ideas of growth in circles show us another possibility for morality originating in the heart, namely, the cultivation of the "courage to be what you are" by looking inwardly and articulating your gleam of light. As antimoralists who resist the imprisonment of the heart, they reestablish the place of the heart in our moral life. Emersonian morality, illuminated by Cavell, presents us with a powerful vision of democracy that centers on the heart in an age of lost moral anchors. This may well be something that contemporary youth and adults need. Without feeling the weight of our own lives by concentrating on our own hearts, we will be unable to recover the sense of the preciousness of the lives of others.

Second, in presenting us with a radical vision of growth in circles with no fixed end, Emerson invites us to be surprised at the unexpected turns in human growth. Additionally, his idea of growth in circles within a non-linear notion of time allows us room for degeneration and retrogression as well as regeneration and progress. Emerson calls these processes “self-recoveries” (*Experience*, 271). These diverse trajectories in growth suggest the importance of tolerating deviancy. This flexible and dynamic view of growth is something which educators today have often forgotten in their goal-oriented training, but something they may need to help the young recover from the danger of cynicism and self-destruction. They have been too busy orienting students and themselves toward “settlement” rather than “unsettlement.” Now, the time arises for us to regain the courage to be unsettled by listening to Emerson’s and Cavell’s invitations to find the meaning of growth here and now, as we transform ourselves from the attained toward the attainable next self.

Third, Emerson’s notion of existential light combined with a touch of skepticism, grief, and what Cavell calls “mourning” identified as “grieving with morning as dawning,” presents the colorless picture of the heart of contemporary youth, who, as introverted individuals, carry a sense of dissociation from the world and others, as well as from themselves (*America*, 84). Emersonian light can reach their hearts, perhaps even the young Japanese killer who perceives himself as transparent. The young do not need a dramatic story of tragedy tainted with the image of sinful darkness and tears of resignation, but a reborn and reconnected joy from within grief. When Cavell expresses the Emersonian path as one “from the ineffable innerness to the sharable as bread” (*America*, 87), Emerson is no longer the selfish individualist or secluded hermit. Rather he is one who reminds us, by the metaphor of growth in circles expanding outward, of the joy of sharing (*America*, 84). By saying, “in going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds,” Emerson hints that through skepticism we will encounter our own gleam of light and be reconnected with ourselves.<sup>25</sup> He suggests that by articulating our own light in our own words, we will eventually acquire the universal power of language and reach the hearts of others, shocking them out of their colorless world with the sparkling morning light. This is the process of Emersonian thinking and Cavell’s “aversive thinking.” They make their idea of the heart the subject of philosophical examination and not merely an irrational topic, and set the conditions for creating a genuine vision of democracy. Further, by proposing a dynamic process of growth in circles in a compensatory relationship between a positive heart-anchoring introspection and a sound reconnection with the world, they remind us of the importance of liberating, not imprisoning, this dynamic movement of the heart.

In this essay, we have seen that the heart, reconsidered from the ideas of Emerson and Cavell on growth in circles, is a better point of departure than “the education of the heart” in Japan to rejuvenate the spirit of today’s youth. In this radical shift of focus from goal-oriented education to growth, what is the role of the educator? Emerson himself responds to this question. Though (and precisely because) he speaks from within the private heart, his words always suggest the presence of the other as the educator of one’s growth. Cavell calls Emerson “this other for his reader” (*Conditions*, 32), and says that “this other of myself” is someone



whose presence makes myself aware of my imprisonment by social conformity.<sup>26</sup> Emerson, as our other, speaking words from within his heart to our heart in a tapestry of interwoven despair and hope, empowers us to raise ourselves from the colorless world of skepticism toward the joy of awakening. He does not actively try to teach or impose something, but exists beside us receptively and tolerantly, as a friend in our growth in circles. With Emerson and Cavell, the traditional concept of the education of the heart is transformed from one that is goal-oriented to one dedicated to spiritual growth.

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1. Takashi Kosugi, *In Search of the Lost "Education of the Heart": Educational Reform for the 21st Century* [in Japanese] (Tokyo: Diamond Co., 1997), 37.
  2. Toshio Hiei, "What is 'the Education of the Heart?'" editorial [in Japanese], *The Yomiuri Newspaper* (5 October 1997).
  3. Ibid.
  4. Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 143.
  5. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1988), 4 and 6. This book will be cited as *Conditions* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.
  6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Penguin Books, 1946), 214.
  7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), 169. This article will be cited as *Circles* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.
  8. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 136.
  9. Emerson, "Experience," in Whicher, *Selections*, 265. This article will be cited as *Experience* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.
  10. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Consideration by the Way," in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Conduct of Life, and Society and Solitude* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1883), 199.
  11. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Whicher, *Selections*, 147.
  12. Cavell suggested this interpretation to me (February 1997).
  13. Emerson, "Consideration by the Way," 218.
  14. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 154, 159.
  15. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 35.
  16. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 147.
  17. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in Whicher, *Selections*, 70.
  18. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 24.
  19. Stephen E. Whicher, "A Prelude to Emerson's 'Experience,'" in Whicher, *Selections*, 253.
  20. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, N.M.: Living Batch Press, 1989), 88, 79. This book will be cited as *America* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.
  21. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 133.



22. The word, "color," is borrowed from Cavell's interpretation of Emerson's "epistemology of moods" in which moods have the role of "coloring the world," Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 125.
23. The word "words" here is crucially related to Cavell's claim of ordinary language, discussed in Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
24. For example, Masayuki Sakamoto, a Japanese scholar of Emerson, explains that the "Common Origin" residing within each individual guarantees Oneness in Emerson's optimism (Masayuki Sakamoto, "The Structure of Emerson's Thought," in *Collected Essays of Emerson* [in Japanese], trans. Sakamoto (Tokyo: Iwanami Publishing, 1981).
25. Emerson, "The American Scholar," 74.
26. Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Oxford U.K.: Blackwell, 1995), 27.