

Receptivity, possibility, and democratic politics

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Abstract

In this paper I present a model of receptivity that is composed of ontological and normative dimensions, which I argue answer to the critical-diagnostic and to the possibility-disclosing needs of democratic politics. I distinguish between ‘pre-reflective receptivity,’ understood ontologically as a condition of intelligibility, and ‘reflective receptivity,’ understood normatively as a condition of disclosing new possibilities.

Keywords: *receptivity; change; possibility; critique; reflective disclosure*

BECOMING RECEPTIVE TO POSSIBILITY

Let us say that in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary human beings can and do change. Of what significance is this to democratic politics? Should democratic politics require work on ourselves? Should the aspiration to the kind of change that brings about a different understanding of who we are, a different understanding of the problems we face, and a different understanding of our shared world/s, be an internal and necessary part of democratic politics?¹ Or, should this aspiration, as Richard Rorty once suggested, be ‘privatized’—for the sake of democratic politics? If we do as Rorty and so many others advise, where does that leave democratic politics? Can there *be* a democratic politics without such an aspiration?

The oft-repeated platitude that politics is the art of the possible supposes that possibility is fixed, that the logical space of possibility is closed and that our task as political actors therefore is to work with already available possibilities for action, the best of which we must somehow successfully coordinate with, or attenuate to, one another. But possibility cannot be fixed, not even temporarily. Possibility is no ‘object’ out there; it is a function of the vocabulary in which it is expressed. A neo-liberal political vocabulary makes sense of some things, and, literally, makes nonsense of others; it makes room for some possibilities and altogether removes

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others from the realm of intelligibility. This is true of any sense-making vocabulary, and not just the ones that oppress and stifle us. Our vocabularies simultaneously disclose what is intelligible and what is possible. Some do so more openly and generously than others. Others do so in a way that makes the very possibility of other genuine (not merely notional) possibilities seem unintelligible. They are vocabularies whose successful adoption requires ‘masking’ their own contingent status as sense-making, possibility-disclosing vocabularies. It requires that they assume a stance of closure and finality: the limits of their language are the limits of our world, limits beyond which reasonable sense-making cannot go.

Possibility, then, is *disclosure-dependent*. While our possibilities cannot be fixed, we can become transfixed by a certain set of already disclosed possibilities. Until some new possibilities articulated in the appropriate vocabulary break the spell, the future is, so to speak, foreclosed. There are times, such as our own, when none of our currently available vocabularies can successfully re-open the future *and* make sense of the predicaments in which find ourselves, which is why our only hopeful course for action is to facilitate the emergence of new vocabularies that meet these two requirements. New vocabularies can disclose new possibilities only if they also render those possibilities intelligible. So to say that politics is the art of the possible is not just to beg the question; it is to depoliticize possibility. The question of what our possibilities are is itself a political question, which is why politics should be *the art of disclosing new possibilities*, not presupposing that already available possibilities are all the possibilities that there are. Of course, the realization of new possibilities would not leave the world as it is, nor us as we are.

If democratic politics were not capable of disclosing new possibilities, of raising new hopes where hopes had become exhausted, in what sense could we meaningfully speak about democratic politics? What kind of politics would we be talking about if democratic politics were not a politics of disclosing new possibilities? Pretty much what we have now, would be one answer, and what we have now is a politics that in all of its institutionalized forms is an exhausting form of politics, a politics that drains our energies, drains our hopes and confidence in democracy, and, worst of all, our very capacity for hope and confidence. At this point in the new century it has become abundantly clear and much remarked that the existential condition of contemporary democratic politics is one in which hope and confidence are not just hard to come by, they are ever harder to sustain.² ‘Change we can believe in’ has been turned into a mockery of change that answers to our needs, rendering ever more elusive the possibility of change that keeps the horizon of the future open to a different *kind* of future.³

So why do we find it so hard to affirm as internal and necessary to democratic politics the aspiration to such change as would bring about a different understanding of who we are, a different understanding of the problems we face, a different understanding of the world we share with others? Why is it that making such change normative for democratic politics is greeted with skepticism, with patronizing condescension, or with the worry that it would lead to illiberal consequences? I’ve given two answers to this question.⁴ The first has to do with the profound

disenchantment with, and deep skepticism towards, all utopian projects and their underlying impulses. Understandably, these have gotten a very bad name, having been associated with and exploited by the very worst kinds of politics. Does that mean we should give up utopian thinking altogether? Not give in to our impulse to imagine the future differently? Or does it mean we have to rethink the practice and the imaginative orientation to the future that goes with it? A primary error of all utopian projects that became dystopian nightmares is that they were directed at a fully *determinate* future, thus undermining the condition of possibility of utopian thinking. If we think of our actions as guided by and oriented to a *determinate* future, we have closed off the future, failed to keep it open to different openings in the future. For it is precisely the demand that the future conform to the determination of our will, that leads to nihilism and destructiveness. To imagine the future with complete determinacy is to deny the indeterminacy essential to the futurity of the future. So the task of utopian thinking is to keep the future open, to prevent its foreclosure, not make it conform to our will.

The second reason has to do with our complex, deeply ambivalent relation to the new, as such. This complex and ambivalent relation to the new is a mark of our modernity, something that attracts and repels us, that excites and threatens.⁵ Modern philosophical theory has not done a good job of making sense of the new, as though to do so were beneath the dignity of philosophy, and because of this lack of serious engagement the concept of the new has remained in a highly undifferentiated state. When it has received proper attention it has been fatally positioned in the role of the political or aesthetic vanguard, deprived of its own normativity, or preserved as some kind of cipher (for example in theorists of the new such as Rorty, Lyotard, and Deleuze).⁶ As a result we lack a normatively rich conception of the new, one that would allow us conceptually to distinguish the different ways in which the new emerges, the different ways it addresses us, and the different demands it makes on us.

An insight of Stanley Cavell's helps us to identify why it is that the new in its normatively protean form arouses our suspicion, arouses our anxiety and fear—namely, the form in which we are asked, in some indeterminate way, to go on differently, to initiate a change in our way of life, our patterns of belief and action, to that with which we are most familiar and with which we are most at 'home.' What we are being 'asked' to do in such cases, is 'to think anew . . . from a *new stance*, one essentially unfamiliar to us; or, say, from a further perspective that is uncontrollable by us.' Cavell's insight allows us to see that our reluctance to answer to the new, to *receive* it as a normative demand, lies not only in its *unfamiliarity*, but, more importantly, in its *uncontrollability*. Since the new in this sense is not something we can master, something whose effects we can predict and control, it arouses fear and anxiety. At the same time, what makes it uncontrollable also makes it a highly suspicious and dubious source of normativity.

Unfamiliarity and uncontrollability are thus placed in a normatively ambiguous position: they can become reasons for why we should mistrust the new or they can become the intellectual and affective conditions necessary for its emergence. If thinking from a new stance is essential to the democratic form of life, then we may

have to think of our agency less in terms of normative mastery and more in terms of normative receptivity, less in terms of the mastery of normative rules and more in terms of a receptivity to plural sources of normativity. Since we are unaccustomed to thinking of agency in terms other than mastery, we are uncomfortable with the thought that democratic politics might require a different kind of agency, rooted in *receptivity* rather than in mastery. To think anew from a new stance, as Cavell suggests, presupposes a stance of receptivity; one might go somewhat further and say that the ‘new stance’ to which Cavell refers *is* the stance of receptivity, insofar as we can describe receptivity as a stance. Thus, receptivity becomes the identifiable condition of making sense of things in a new way, and of disclosing new possibilities for going on with our democratic form of life.

I have been asking whether we can do without an aspiration to a certain kind of change, a change that involves a work on ourselves, which work involves becoming receptive and answering to the normative demand to think and act differently from how we have been thinking and acting. If not, obviously any talk of a ‘politics of receptivity’ will be idle. But without receptivity the very idea of democratic politics would be meaningless. That is not because of some peculiar or contingent connection between receptivity and democratic politics; it is because there is much more to receptivity—epistemically, ontologically, aesthetically, ethically and politically—than we have heretofore realized. It is not just democratic politics that cannot do without it.

More on that in a moment; for now, consider one currently influential model of democratic politics, deliberative democracy. If you are a deliberative democrat, you must presuppose that human beings are reason-responsive beings, that they are receptive to the normativity of reasons—receptive, that is, to the demands of and for reasons. Lacking such receptivity to reasons, the language game of democratic normative justification could never get going. This is not a matter of ‘logic’ but of normative responsiveness to the claims of others, to a pre-reflective understanding that one is moving not just in a logical space of reasons, but, more importantly, in a normative space of reasons constituted intersubjectively and historically. If you are a radical social critic, to give another example, you have to presuppose that human beings are receptive to change, receptive to the need for change. Receptivity to reasons is *a condition of the possibility of the practice of moral and political justification*; receptivity to change is *a condition of the possibility of critique*.

Before I say any more about what receptivity enables, and, in particular, the relation of receptivity to critique, I need to say a great deal more about receptivity. Too often misunderstood, and too often mistaken for mere passivity or generalized ‘openness,’ it is easy to miss all the work receptivity is already doing in the background. We have been oblivious to its importance for so long that we find it hard to see how essential it is to our attempts to foster and practice new forms of freedom, agency and critique, and, through them, to renew democratic politics. In part 2 of the paper, *We are always already receptive*, I present two arguments: an ontological argument that is Heidegger’s, and a conceptual argument that is more or less mine. I outline the ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political dimensions of receptivity, showing how receptivity is a necessary condition of possibility for *any*

human activity. But receptivity is more than ontological stance, an attitude of mind, or behavioral disposition that we cannot but assume if we are to engage in any of our practical or theoretical activities; it is also itself an activity, *a doing*, that comes with normative demands of its own. Part 3 of the paper, *Receptivity as a normative attitude and practical agency*, will be concerned with this agentic aspect of receptivity as a form of normative ‘answerability,’ which, in part 4, *Critique as a medium of democratic politics*, I will then connect to a different construal of the normativity of critique and the implications that follow for the practice of critique, understood as a medium of democratic politics.

WE ARE ALWAYS ALREADY RECEPTIVE

I begin, at some considerable remove from the typical concerns of political theory, with Heidegger’s ontological deconstruction of modern representationalist theories of knowledge. Heidegger argued that these subject-centered theories are unable to make sense of the epistemic relation between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ because they fail to see that any encounter between a ‘subject’ and an ‘object’ presupposes *antecedent conditions of intelligibility* without which no such meaningful encounter is possible. In *Being and Time* and in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger argued that prior to confronting the world as if it were some super object, as something ‘out there,’ we operate ‘always already’ with a pre-reflective, holistically structured, and linguistically shaped *understanding of the world*.

Heidegger displaced subject/object epistemology with an ontologically expanded and transformed concept of *world*, showing how this ontological ‘pre-understanding’ of the world is *disclosed* to us through everyday language and everyday practices. To make sense of anything we encounter *in* the world, we must rely on our background understanding of things that ‘always already’ discloses the things of the world onto which our sense-making energies are projected. This is why early Heidegger explored and illuminated the phenomenon of ‘world’ or the ‘worlding’ of the world—i.e. the phenomenon of *world disclosure*. This is why Heidegger also distinguished between discovery and disclosure: between the entities we discover *in* the world, on the one hand, and the disclosure of the world *in whose light* we discover and make sense of those entities, on the other. In his later work, Heidegger introduced the concept of *Lichtung*, literally, the ‘lighting,’ or, more commonly, the ‘clearing,’ to get across the same idea—that there are conditions of intelligibility, which we must presuppose and on which we must inescapably rely if anything is to meaningfully appear to us, be experienced and be known by us, in the first place.⁷ But we also play a part, and not only one, in this process of *world disclosure*, for it requires, in the first instance, a *pre-reflective* receptivity to what is disclosed. Indeed, human receptivity is an ontological condition of world disclosure. The world is first disclosed to us through our pre-reflective receptivity and attunement to everyday practices.

Everyday practices not only initiate us into a form of life, they provide the conditions of intelligibility for ‘what counts as an object, what counts as a human

being and what it makes sense to do.’⁸ It follows, then, that conditions of intelligibility are also conditions of possibility: they both disclose and limit what can count as an object or a human being; they both disclose and limit what it makes sense to do. Within the space of the ‘clearing’ we can speak and act either in conventional or in critical ways without being aware of our dependence on conditions of intelligibility that both disclose and limit our possibilities for either conventional or critical speech and action. It is constitutive of their status as background conditions that we become aware of them only when there is a breakdown or crisis of some kind, when our ‘absorption’ in our everyday language and practices is interrupted, and we are drawn away from rather than drawn into our pre-reflective, taken for granted understanding of things. It is then, and only then, that we become aware that our everyday practices, the source of our everyday understanding of things and how they hang together, function in highly complex, interconnected, and interdependent ways, enabling and limiting what we can think, say, and do in ways that cannot be made fully explicit. We cannot get behind conditions of intelligibility and turn them into objects of knowledge for they are that on whose antecedent basis we can make sense of things in the first place.

In order to get more clarity about the implications of Heideggerian ontology for theorizing politics,⁹ it may be helpful to contrast Heidegger’s discussion of conditions of intelligibility with a similar-sounding notion very much in vogue today: the *partition of the sensible*, the critical substance of Jacques Ranciere’s theory of democracy. Like Heidegger’s conditions of intelligibility, Ranciere’s partition of the sensible is meant to explain what appears as such. According to Ranciere, there is a ‘rule’ that governs what appears and how it appears, and that ‘rule’ presides over sensible appearance as the ‘law’ and the ‘police.’

The police is, essentially, the law . . . an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise . . . Policing is not so much the ‘disciplining’ of bodies as [it is] a *rule* governing their appearance.¹⁰

Attuning our ears carefully, we can hear the lingering presence of structuralist premises in the way that Ranciere conceives of the partition of the sensible. To conceive of it as ‘law,’ as a ‘rule’ governing the very appearance of things, bodies, and speech is to think of it in terms of an objectifiable structure that can be rendered more or less explicit, a structure that is clearly demarcated from what lies outside it, and whose partitions are also just as clearly demarcated from one another. By contrast, on a Heideggerian view like mine, there can be no law or rule in terms of which explicitly to capture conditions of intelligibility: the very idea of doing so ‘is incoherent in principle.’¹¹ There will always be something invisible, inaudible, unsayable as a *condition* of something else becoming visible, audible, sayable. The idea that we could discover the rule that governs appearance as such, and the lines of partition between the visible and invisible, the audible and inaudible, is really to remain in the grip of a metaphysical picture of rules as constitutive of reality and of a

representationalist epistemology that presumes the rules governing the very appearance of things can be made fully explicit and stable. To say of the partition of the sensible that 'policing' and 'law' function as a rule governing what appears is to misunderstand and mischaracterize the phenomenon that Heidegger was the first to point out: there can be no such rule. Furthermore, to think of the partition in terms of rules governing the appearance of things, bodies, statements, and discourses is also to think that one can uncover the rules by which our possibilities are given to us, and in this case, too, it must be said, there can be no such rules. The problems that arise with this way of thinking are internal to the very notion of 'partition,' which implies a line that is inscribed with such permanence (like permanent ink) that it can be a stable object of political critique, a clear demarcation of democratic politics from the 'law' and its 'police.' One can understand the powerful attraction of this way of neatly demarcating the desirable from undesirable parts of political reality, since it speaks temptingly to the theorist in us who seeks to master political reality, who desires to arrange it in a way that allows for its theoretical control.

If a multiplicity of everyday practices in the broadest sense is the sources of intelligibility, there can be no neat demarcations, clear partitions, between 'politics' and the 'police.' This means that they cannot stand over and against us: who we are, what we can say and do, is intimately interwoven with, both enabled and limited by, everyday practices. As our sources of intelligibility, we cannot place ourselves in simple opposition to them, as though we could, once and for all, be liberated from them. Because what they enable cannot be detached from what they limit, and because their enabling and constraining power can never be rendered fully explicit or formalized as rule or law, we must instead seek to become reflectively receptive to their presence, to the effects of the enabling/constraining work they do, ready to critically redisclose, again and again, 'the simple nearness of their unobtrusive governance.'¹² The point made by theorists like Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Cavell is that the everyday is not something from which we should want to escape or that we should want to transcend; rather it is something that we should want to rescue and refund. 'Since we are not returning to anything we have *known*, the task is really . . . one of turning.'¹³ It is a task that involves a turning to, rather than a turning away from the everyday, as if we were turning to it for the first time, a place in which we are able to acknowledge that we are pulled in different directions by different motivations, seeking either to do politics more freely, or seeking to be free of politics altogether.

So to think in terms of conditions of intelligibility is to think in terms of everyday practices in which we participate both pre-reflectively and reflectively, practices in which we can recognize ourselves, practices for which we can be held accountable, placing ourselves in a position to change them in ways that make them more responsive to our genuine needs (the articulation of which is, of course, up for grabs, contestable, revisable). To think in terms of a partition of the sensible is to think in terms of processes that stand over and against us, processes that are not near to us, processes in which it is hard to recognize ourselves as both active and passive participants, implicated and entangled in complex relations of resistance and complicity. After all,

who among us committed to some vision of democracy can identify himself or herself with the ‘police,’ or with the ‘law,’ with the very ‘rule’ governing appearance itself? It is much easier to assign this ‘part’ of the ‘whole’ to anonymous others or to something wholly Other than to see ourselves playing a part in it. Perhaps, the time has come to think of democratic politics not only as the activity that gives a part to those who are denied a part; but also as the activity that helps us to see the part we already play, for better and for worse, in the so-called distribution of parts—to see, in other words, that we are in some inescapable sense a party to our fate.¹⁴

Rancierian politics is unable to recognize the role already played by receptivity in the distribution and partition of the sensible—or of the intelligible, speaking in Heideggerese. It is only then that there can be answerability for the ways in which we are *always already* receptive to some things more than to others, making some things more visible, more audible, and more intelligible than others. If we are to change the conditions of intelligibility by which some things are more visible, more audible, more intelligible than others, we will need to become actively, *reflectively* receptive to the part we play in all this. In which case, we would not only become more receptive to that which remains invisible, inaudible, and unintelligible, but also to the complex, not to mention, ambiguous, ontological interdependence between these two domains. Otherwise, we’re going to go on reproducing the mistakes of the 20th century political avant-gardes, which thought they could permanently distinguish the ‘new’ from the ‘old,’ the ‘oppressed’ from the ‘oppressors,’ the part of the ‘police’ from the ‘part that has no part to play in the whole.’

Recognizing that receptivity is *a form of normative agency* should not, however, mislead us into thinking that it provides us with one more masterable form of action, which we can deploy as we wish. Reflective receptivity as the stance from which new possibilities can emerge, can also be judged by the quality of those possibilities. Their quality will vary to the degree that we are attuned to the complex interdependence of the domains of the visible and invisible, the audible and inaudible, the intelligible and unintelligible. That is, ‘what counts as an object, what counts as a human being and what it makes sense to do,’ will always be shaped by conditions of intelligibility over which we have no direct access or complete control. Such an acknowledgment of the limits of our agency would be humbling for any view of human agency, but especially for views in which human agency is identified with the will and with mastery. On the other hand, now put more positively, such acknowledgment brings into clear profile the agentic nature of receptivity, since it forms the very basis of our capacity to move between the visible and invisible, the audible and inaudible, the intelligible and unintelligible.

RECEPTIVITY AS A NORMATIVE ATTITUDE AND PRACTICAL AGENCY

I have thus far focused mostly on that feature of receptivity that is pre-reflective, a condition of our having a ‘world’ at all. In addition to the pre-reflective and reflective

form, which are my primary concern, there is an in-between form with which we most commonly associate receptivity. In the writings of Baudelaire and Benjamin, we can find many examples of this type of receptivity, personified, famously, by Baudelaire's 'flâneur.' It is a form of receptivity that is coupled with disengaged curiosity, an intense engagement with something or someone that leaves lots of room for disengagement. (Another good example is the aesthete who manifests this way of life in the first part of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*.) An easy way to convey this in-between form of receptivity to an academic audience is to imagine someone performing an academic version of John Cage's 4'33', and call it 20'00', more or less the standard length of a typical conference presentation. If we did not get infuriated and leave the room slamming the door behind us as we leave, we might find ourselves in the midst of a very interesting experiment. In the space of that very particular silence we might take notice of the assumptions, tensions, anxieties, and random musings that come to the fore as we sit, quietly noticing for the first time what goes on in the background of an academic conference presentation, allowing something to emerge about academic life that may have been previously inaudible, invisible, or unthought. While we may learn or not learn something from such an experience, it does not carry any normative baggage. Leaving the room cannot be held against us, say, as a failure to listen, to be answerable. The operative attitude of those that remain is that of curious but disengaged observers. Another example of an 'in-between' form of receptivity is mindfulness, an ensemble of exercises that aim to draw attention to and away from all the busyness in the background and foreground of our minds. The attitude in play here is that of a participant-observer, participating in a practice of attentiveness that also involves observing oneself attending to oneself. In this case, there is a rising level of normativity, since we are seeking a more aware, more balanced way to live, through the practice of mindfulness.¹⁵

In both cases, openness is playing a central role, but neither is a case of pure openness, or *just* openness. Certainly, openness is a necessary component of receptivity; but, on its own, openness (or open-mindedness) tells us very little about receptivity. Receptivity is by no means reducible to or exhausted by openness. Attempts to establish the normative and ontological significance of receptivity must overcome the habitual identification of receptivity with mere passivity or unminded openness, as though it were a kind of mindless submission to anything that comes along. The common conception of receptivity is one which makes it synonymous with indiscriminate openness, as though we are equally open to any all new possibilities; such a conception leads not only to untenable relativism, it also leads to impassivity. A mind that is equally open to all possibilities would be a mind unminded, a mind rendered incapable of judging anything, precisely because a mind to which everything mattered equally would be a mind to which nothing mattered. In short, nothing we could recognize as a human mind. If we take openness to capture the essential meaning of receptivity, distinguishing it from passivity becomes impossible, leading to conceptual and normative incoherence.¹⁶

By contrast, reflective receptivity involves a normative attitude and certain normative expectations, acting on which expresses a practical agency, a practical

“normative power.’ In this sense, receptivity entails a particular way of responding to normative challenges to our current self-understanding, to our current way of going on with things. We become aware of new normative demands, new claims laid upon us by something or someone, calling us to respond, not just with any kind of response, but, rather, with one that requires, manifests, a freer relation to ourselves.

The freedom I am referring to comes into play when we spontaneously and accountably make room for the call of an other, rendering intelligible what may have been previously unintelligible. Becoming receptive to such a call means facilitating its voicing, letting it *become* a voice that we did not allow ourselves to hear before, and responding to it in a way that demands something of us that we could not have recognized before. In responding freely to such a call, which means, becoming *answerable* to it, we allow ourselves to be unsettled, decentered, thereby making it possible to occupy a potentially self-critical and illuminating stance. From such a stance it may become necessary to confront the possibility that we cannot go on as before, that some change is demanded of us, a change we may envision only in an indeterminate and inchoate way, but to which we feel nonetheless obligated to be receptive, answerable. Why? Because it is here, in this gap between who we have been and who we might be, that we see our own freedom is at stake, and where we may ‘find’ it manifested. Becoming receptive to the normative demands of change, to the work of going on differently in relation to an other or to others, is to manifest this freer relation to ourselves, thereby making actual what was possible.

Receptivity is not merely a moral and political good, as in, it is good to listen to others, to give them a hearing; it is both a condition of making sense of things and others, and a normative demand we place both on ourselves and others. But it is more than that, too. If our pre-reflective stance of receptivity is an ontological condition of intelligibility in general, and if it is necessarily a *selective* stance, whereby—unjustly, unjustifiably—we are more receptive to some things, some persons, some concerns, more than to others, it is the task of our reflective stance of receptivity to attune ourselves to the selectivity of our reception, and to understand how this came to be so. This is not just a cognitive undertaking, for in becoming attuned to what and to whom we were unable to be receptive, we have also to acknowledge and take on, be answerable to, the normative demands that follow from such acknowledgement.

Of course, this kind of receptivity is one that we can resist and withhold. The work of reworking ourselves can feel overwhelming, threatening, and unnecessarily demanding. No one should have a right to demand such a change in us. But since no one lives in a world that is unencumbered by normative expectations that arise from sharing a life with diverse human and non-human others, such change demands for change will be unavoidable. So it is not matter of whether those demands are made but of how they are made and of how we respond to them. One sign of the persistence of those demands and of our resistance to them, whether it is in the private intimate sphere (a partner, a child, a parent) or in the political public sphere (minorities speaking to majorities, for instance), is the oft-repeated accusation that we are not listening. In cases such as this, we are not being reproached for an

acoustical failure; we are being reproached for failing to be receptive, or for remaining selectively receptive, which is to say failing to be *answerable*, answering to the other in a stance of reflective receptivity. The failure to be reflectively receptive renders voiceless someone with whom we claim to share a life, a common fate. Cavell's well-known interpretation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* offers a compelling and generalizable example of rendering voiceless those from whom we withhold receptivity, tuning them out instead of tuning them in.¹⁷

As Cavell points out, 'the issue of *A Doll's House* is precisely that of treating a grown woman, a wife and mother, as a child.'¹⁸ Torvald, her husband, treats her like a child at the same time as he demands that she behave like a grown up. By 'grown up' he means the capacity to speak and act in conformity with public standards of intelligibility, which, unsurprisingly, are gendered and paternalistic. He reminds Nora that a 'songbird needs a clear voice to sing with', which means that if she wants to remain a clear-singing 'songbird' she must not violate the conditions of her own intelligibility (and his). Of course, Torvald is unable to hear Nora's need to put her intelligibility (to herself and to others) at risk. It is a risk Nora must take if she hopes to speak in a voice of her own, for the voice in which she speaks now is compromised, able only to voice, unintelligibly to Torvald, the pain of her voicelessness, making her a victim of inexpressiveness.

Certainly, Torvald is in pain too; his world is crumbling, but Nora and Torvald understand the circumstances of their pain differently. Nora cannot go on as before; Torvald wants only to go on as before. He is even willing to forgive her indiscretions, as an offer of reconciliation. Like the early Rawls's ideally rational individual, Torvald does not think he has anything to reproach himself for. But Nora, on the other hand, most certainly does, not least for having given her consent to the conditions of her own oppression. As Nora tells Torvald in the concluding scene, 'Yes, I have changed,' and that change sets her on a path: 'I must find out who is right—the world or I.'

Understandably, the demand for change of this kind is easier to refuse than to allow, since it would require a change in who we are and in what matters to us, as well as a change in our relationships to one another. In addition to the normative relation between oneself and others, receptivity also involves a normative relation to oneself, between the self one now is, and a 'higher' self that calls one, that beckons one to become that self. This normative relation is also one of answerability, but in this case it is becoming answerable to a call to make *oneself* more intelligible to oneself. To this normative dimension of receptivity, Stanley Cavell has given the name 'moral perfectionism,' a form of moral concern that is concerned with one's self-intelligibility, 'as if the threat to one's moral coherence comes most insistently from that quarter, from one's sense of obscurity to oneself, as if we are subject to demands we cannot quite formulate, leaving us unjustified, as if our lives condemn themselves.'¹⁹

We are all Torvalds when faced with this kind of challenge, and so it is a matter of struggling to become free of a picture that has held us captive. The reason that Torvald's failure to render Nora's pain and captivity intelligible is given primacy in Cavell's reading and mine, is because Nora recognizes that she must take on that

struggle with herself, whereas Torvald does not. Yes, Nora deceived him, and yes, he is understandably hurt by her insensitivity; but he never relinquishes his image of Nora as a 'songbird', preferably caged and domesticated, his ideal wife. To think of her in this way is to fail to contest his pre-reflective understanding of people and things, and his stake in it, in the very circumstances in which the possibility of doing so arises.

A closer look at Torvald's reminder that 'a songbird needs a clear voice to sing with,' might illuminate how one can move between pre-reflective receptivity to reflective receptivity, and meet the latter's normative demands. A cockatoo is a beautiful bird; but it is no songbird, at least, not according to our current criteria for what counts as such. For something or someone to count as a songbird it must have a clear singing voice. Nora was once a caged songbird, singing beautifully without apparent anger or bitterness, without apparent pain or loss. For Torvald to hear the voice in which Nora now 'sings' as a 'singing' voice would require being able to hear her song as voicing the conditions of her voicelessness, the conditions of her oppression. By becoming reflectively receptive, Torvald would have been in a position also to disclose the presence of the pre-reflective stance of receptivity by which he had previously understood the woman that is his wife, and the relations of subordination in which her life was entangled. But Torvald does not receive Nora's 'song' that way; he cannot move from the pre-reflective stance to a new stance, the stance of reflective receptivity. He hears Nora's voice as a senseless screech, the screech of someone who has, as Torvald exclaims, lost her senses, lost the sense of what counts as a 'song' by the public standards of intelligibility (and propriety) that Torvald wants so desperately to uphold.

Ontologically speaking, public standards of intelligibility are an inescapable part of human forms of life. We may rightly be critical of past and present standards of public intelligibility but it would be meaningless to be critical of public standards (or conditions of) intelligibility as such. The conclusion to be drawn from Heideggerian ontology is that there can be no end to critical reflection on the selective ways in which these standards necessarily, inescapably, function. Since they have both an enabling and constraining structure, only reflective receptivity attunes us to the ways in which their taken-for-granted status actively constrains and oppresses us, ways we both actively and passively reproduce. As Heidegger, put it, 'Publicness ... determines every way in which the world and *Dasein* [human being] get interpreted ... Through publicness everything gets obscured, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone.'²⁰

The challenge Nora faces is how to make her inarticulate suffering *articulate* under conditions of inarticulacy. As Cavell points out, this is a circumstance in which 'right is not assertible'—i.e. the assertibility conditions under which Nora can articulate her suffering do not currently obtain. The claims to the injustice to which her life is subject cannot be made intelligibly. Since, 'right is not assertible ... something must be shown.'²¹ What is meant by 'something must be shown' here is that there is a need to articulate in speech and/or action what cannot otherwise be expressed in the available moral or political vocabularies. Obviously, this is no easy matter, since what

is involved is the articulation of a claim the contents of which are not possible to articulate prior to the articulation that first makes those contents expressible and intelligible. Successful articulation would not only make the claim possible and publicly assessable, it would also enlarge the conditions of assertibility and intelligibility. Hence what this involves is a semantic and not a just cognitive struggle over one's own voice, which struggle is also continuous with a political struggle over the conditions under which it can be voiced. *Prior* to successful articulation of this kind, we are unable to see why right was not assertible, why something had to be *shown*: as injustice, as unjustifiable suffering, as inaudible and invisible constraints on what could be said and done. The something that had to be shown would also have to be received as something for which we are in some sense answerable: the presence of conditions of voicelessness in our midst, the painful inarticulacy of those for whom right is not presently assertible.

A politics of receptivity would mean rethinking and revising the standard of publicity so dear to democratic political discourse. We can no longer presume that the practices of public claims making and contestation, the assertibility conditions of public discourse, are politically enabling only simply in virtue of publicity. If we begin from this presumption there cannot be a problem of *aphonia*, an issue of voice, and of how to voice what for now cannot be voiced intelligibly in the available media of public discourse. The struggle to find that voice, and the voicing that articulates what could not be articulated before, enlarges the horizon of moral and political significance. It also serves as a cautionary reminder that the light of publicity can be blinding as well as illuminating. We may fail to see some morally relevant feature of an issue or conflict *because* of the light publicity sheds—which is why we need continually to adjust the lighting by disclosing anew what the light of publicity itself obscures.

By becoming more receptive to claims that first sound unintelligible to our ears, we become more aware of how our languages and social practices establish conditions of intelligibility and possibility, and so more aware not just of what can be intelligibly said and done, but also of the ineliminable presence of something that *cannot* be intelligibly said or done. Acting freely, consistent with such reflective receptivity, requires making room for that which cannot be intelligibly said or done, making room for something that did not exist before, and being answerable to it, prepared to go on differently in light of what we have learned. But what will we have learned about what 'going on differently' involves? What really is involved in change, change that we ourselves initiate by our own insights, rather than change that is brutally imposed on us, which just happens to us?

To respond to this question, I want to return to the connection between agency and receptivity I first thematized in *Critique and Disclosure* in order to rethink the question of what it means to be agents of change. What does it take to be such an agent? Well, my Emersonian and Heideggerian reflections on this question suggested that perhaps the change at issue is not for the *taking*. From the following passages of Emerson's astonishing essay, 'Experience,' we can limn the basic intuition.

All I know is reception; I am and I have: but I do not get, and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not.

But I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought.

I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition.²²

These interconnected remarks, as Cavell has shown, reveal Emerson's philosophy of receptivity to be inversion of Kant's theory of knowledge.²³ In this proto-Heideggerian critique of clutching, grasping thought, Emerson challenges the assumptions of our conception of agency, our epistemic and practical agency, as involving the activities of taking, seizing, grasping, as involving activities of mastery. The cognitive activity Kant designated as 'apperception,' or the 'I think' that must accompany all my mental representations, necessarily involves consciously 'taking' some *x* of experience provided by sensibility (receptivity) and spontaneously subsuming it under an appropriate concept. Thus the consciousness of spontaneity underwrites the subject's cognitive accomplishments as accomplishments it can attribute to its own cognitive activity. Receptivity only provides the necessary stuff of experience; making sense of that stuff requires self-conscious epistemic spontaneity: the 'I think' is at the same time an 'I take,' and an 'I make.'²⁴ In the place of the 'I think' as a spontaneous 'taking as,' which reproduces the traditional notion of cognition, of thinking, as a seizing, grasping, clutching activity, Emerson substitutes the 'I think' as a spontaneous 'receiving as.' With this move Emerson is not just displacing the accent from activity to receptivity; he undercuts the distinction, making spontaneous and reflective what was considered passive and compliant.

To state unequivocally that 'all I know is reception' is not to revert to mindless empiricism, conceiving the mind as the passive filter through which impressions pass, raw data processed; rather, it is to think of mindedness as requiring exposure to human vulnerability—the vulnerability of a being that can be 'marked,' 'struck,' 'impressed' by experience, by whatever it encounters in the world. Placing receptivity at the center of mindedness, allows Emerson to evoke a picture of agency as the 'willingness' to risk self-dispossession, as a 'willing' self-surrender. I do not will my self-dispossession; it is not something I *do*, in the conventional sense of *do*, it is something I *let* happen, that I *allow*. Such a self-decentering, cognitive and moral learning process is one for which traditional concepts of agency are unsuitable, for there is no spontaneous act of cognitive or moral subsumption, no taking of an *x* as an *F*. There is simply no *x* to subsume. Whatever 'it' is, it isn't for the taking. 'It' can be given, but not taken; received, but not subsumed. Nonetheless, this still requires, and at the same expresses my agency. But the 'I' here is not the cause of what happens. The 'I' only facilitates, it does not directly control what it receives.

CRITIQUE AS A MEDIUM OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Let me now say something about why it is that critique presupposes receptivity. Consider the following questions. What do we expect of critique? What is supposed to happen, to the world, to us, when critique is exercised? Conversely, what does critique demand of us, not only as its addressees but also as its authors? In other words, in what does the normativity of critique consist? This question is quite distinct from, should not be confused with, or come after, the question of which normative principle/principles should serve as the ground of this or that model of critique. Critique has its own normativity, and we shall fail to understand in what its specific normativity consists if we think of critique as derived from, and in the service of, normative ideals or principles external to it.

I am speaking of normativity as though it were a clear and distinct object of philosophical knowledge, possessed of an uncontroversial and uncontestable meaning. Of course, that is by no means the case. For some, normativity is all about normative regulation within a legal-judicial framework. That view of normativity is (mis)informed by a conception of normativity as identical with rules. It is a view that gets normativity wrong, precisely because of its identification with rules. But I cannot go into that here. What I can say, in a much less polemical fashion, is that in the domain of ethics and politics, of practical reason, generally, there is at least some minimal agreement that what we are trying to invoke when we speak of normativity is something that implies an ‘ought’ of some kind, in relation to an other to whom we understand ourselves as answerable. Through our capacity to be answerable, which is to say, our capacity as beings capable of normative response, we deconstruct and reconstruct our normative reality.

The peculiarity of normativity construed in this way is that it is internally related to and dependent upon the articulation of some possibility, a possibility that may appear improbable, if not unintelligible, from within our current normative reality. Now if we think of normativity, as we typically do, as a phenomenon that is rule-like in character, we will be ill equipped to make sense of our own normative creativity. Although Kant laid the foundations for thinking of normativity as something rule-like in character, he also recognized, was perhaps the first to recognize, that normativity is internally related to possibility, and normative innovation to the disclosure of new possibilities. It is to this internal relation between normativity and the disclosure of possibility that Kant avers when he talks about actions that we come to regard as ‘necessary even though they have not taken place and, maybe, never will take place.’²⁵

If there is anything we can say we expect of critique, it is at least this: to disclose possibilities that make certain actions ‘necessary even though they have not taken place and, maybe, never will take place.’ Once disclosed those possibilities make demands on us—demands that we may or may not wish to meet. Nonetheless, that we can experience them as demands, even if they are only ‘possibilities,’ tells us something about the specific normativity of critique: what we expect of critique, and what critique demands of us, is to initiate some kind of change, in the world, in our

relations with one another, in ourselves, the possibility of which, critique first discloses or rediscloses in some new way. The case of Nora is an exemplar of all those cases in which what needs to be claimed and justified cannot precede an enlargement of the conditions of intelligibility and thereby possibility. No argument, no practice of justification can transcend the conditions of its own intelligibility. That is why critique must be more than a justificatory discourse guided by normative criteria external to it. Critique must be a possibility-disclosing practice, a practice of *reflective disclosure* that ‘manifests for the other another way.’²⁶

Reflective disclosure is the correlate of reflective receptivity, and the latter is the condition of the former. The practice of critique, in any form, cannot get going without a prior receptivity to critique. A democratic politics of receptivity would not only aim to enlarge the conditions of pre-reflective receptivity, it would practice critique receptively. Rather than aiming at a true description of things by ‘unmasking’ and ‘interrogating’ its objects, and placing itself in an epistemically privileged position in relation to its addressees, critique would be reconceived as an essential form of response to others and to the world we share with them. It would aim at manifesting another way to go on together, in full recognition and acknowledgment not only of human plurality but the growing intimacy among plural ways of being and understanding.

Given the growing interdependencies and interconnections among nations and cultures, it is no longer possible to think of the ‘other’ as separated from us geographically as well as culturally and historically. We live in a world of ‘strange multiplicity,’ to borrow James Tully’s apposite phrase, a world in which disparate and diverse cultural lifeworlds encounter one another unforeseeably and unpredictably in a time horizon of contemporaneous non-contemporaneity. In this world, formerly handy dualisms such as ‘distance and periphery,’ ‘us and them,’ no longer perform a useful function, no longer make sense. We are now equally distant from and equally near to each other in cultural space. ‘They’ are our neighbor; ‘their’ children go to school with ours. We have no choice but to get to know each other better, to enter into each other’s lives, into each other’s differences, into each other’s fears, into each other’s pain, even, into each other’s paranoia and hypocrisy. Our histories and cultures are fatefully intertwined. Detachment is no longer a real option; on the other hand, a great deal may be gained from taking a critical attitude that begins from rather than denies acknowledged connection and dependence.

What Gadamer said about interpretation can also be said about critique reconceived as a receptive practice of reflective disclosure, namely, that it establishes the possibility of a relationship with others—the possibility of a relationship of mutual learning and, sometimes, of mutual transformation.²⁷

NOTES

1. I am paraphrasing a favorite line from Cavell, here, changing the grammar from the second-person singular to the first-person plural. See Stanley Cavell, ‘The Aesthetic Problems of

- Modern Philosophy', *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 87.
2. See J. Habermas, *The New Obscurity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989): 48–77; Wendy Brown, *Politics out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 138–73; and, Nikolas Kompridis *Critique and Disclosure. Critical Theory between Past and Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006): 245–80. Recently, see, Sarah Amsler, 'Striving for the Politics of Possibility,' *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 8, no. 1 (2011).
 3. Not just any future, of course. We cannot determine the future, but we can relate to it differently, rendering it more receptive to us by being more receptive to it. Under 21st century conditions of potentially catastrophic climate change the future does look bleak indeed; but why not let the bleakness of the future register as a call to the present, urging us to live differently, together and with the earth?
 4. See *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006): 3–13.
 5. See my 'The Idea of New Beginning: A Romantic Source of Normativity and Freedom', Nikolas Kompridis (ed.), *Philosophical Romanticism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), especially: 40–47.
 6. See my 'The Priority of Receptivity to Creativity', *Critical Horizons*, 13, no. 3 (2012), and 'So we Need Something Else for Reason to Mean', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 26, no. 4 (2000).
 7. See Charles Taylor's 'Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein', *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995): 61–78.
 8. Hubert Dreyfus, 'Being and Power: Heidegger and Foucault', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 4, no. 1 (1996): 2.
 9. I am assuming most readers are aware that the critical insights and innovative methods we associate with the work of Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, Taylor, even Habermas, to mention some of the most significant instances, would not have been possible without the conceptual resources of Heideggerian ontology.
 10. Jacques Ranciere, *Disagreement*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 29, my emphasis.
 11. Charles Taylor, 'Lichtung and Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein', *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press): 69.
 12. Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', *Martin Heidegger. Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell, (New York: Harper and Row, 1977): 212.
 13. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989): 66, my emphasis.
 14. This line of argument merges the influence of both Hegel and Emerson on my thinking, the Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right* and the Emerson of the essay, 'Fate'.
 15. Jennifer Nedelky bases her account of receptivity on practices of mindfulness and meditation, which she discusses in illuminating ways. However, I am not persuaded that these practices are *normatively* compelling examples of receptivity. As Nedelsky notes, receptivity conceived in terms of mindfulness leaves 'mysterious and ineffable ... the ways that clear seeing, freed from preconception (including about who we think we are) yields not just a freedom, but a set of commitments (to the well being of others) that one might say amount to judgments'. In other words, what is left mysterious and ineffable is how receptivity as a form of mindfulness enables us to be answerable to others. If on the other hand, one thinks about receptivity in terms of answerability, as I do, (one is not acting receptively if one is not answerable to what one has become receptive), one does not have this problem, because receptivity is already 'built into' our normative relationships to (human and non-human) others.

16. I discuss the shortcomings of this way of construing receptivity in an exchange with Morton Schoolman, from which some of what follows is drawn. See Morton Schoolman, 'Situating Receptivity: From Critique to Reflective Disclosure', and my reply to Schoolman, 'On Critique and Disclosure: A Reply to Four Generous Critics', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37, no. 9, November, 2011, pp. 1033–142, 1063–1077. (I also reply to Amy Allen, Fred Rush, and Robert Sinnerbrink).
17. I have discussed in some detail the implications of Cavell's interpretation of *A Doll's House* for clarifying the meaning of receptivity in connection with Heidegger's receptivity-based notions of care and solicitude in *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future*: 199–222. For Cavell's own interpretation, see the chapter, 'The Conversation of Justice', *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 101–26.
18. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*: 114.
19. Ibid., xxxi–xxxii.
20. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962): 165.
21. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*: 112.
22. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays. First and Second Series* (New York: Vintage, 1990): 239–62.
23. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989).
24. The way that Nedelsky models the relationship between receptivity and judgment, it seems to me, still operates within the framework of the theory of knowledge in Kant's first Critique, analogously reproducing the relationship between intuition (receptivity) and concept (judgment).
25. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 541.
26. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*: 31.
27. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd Revised Edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Maarshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989).