



Algorithms and the Aesthetics of Wandering: Paradoxes of Perfectionism

Heewon Seo¹

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Abstract

This paper exposes how excessive reliance on either “efficiency-based algorithms,” which aim at rapid and accurate problem-solving, or highly addictive “randomized engagement-oriented algorithms,” which continuously distract individuals from being immersed in the present, induces a high level of conformity and thereby renders genuine wandering impossible, hindering human maturation. This paper names the current tendency that eliminates negativity—such as failure, pain, the capacity to resist uncertainty and stimulation—and enforces only positivity—such as achievement, pleasure, stability, and the immediate satisfaction of stimulation—as “achievement perfectionism.” On the basis of Byung-Chul Han’s critique, who diagnoses such a society as *The Palliative Society*, this paper reveals that wandering accompanied by negativity and resistance to conformity is indispensable for human maturation. As a counter-concept to The Palliative Society and “achievement perfectionism,” the paper turns to Stanley Cavell’s (*Cities of words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004) notion of “moral perfectionism,” which leads to “an unattained but attainable self” who can embrace negativity and explore the “rejected and undervalued” paths with conformity’s aversion and openness. Finally, this paper, on the basis of Jan Masschelein’s (2010) poor pedagogy, focuses on the “attentive wandering” in which “moral perfectionism” can be educationally realized. Furthermore, this paper proposes an “educating of the gaze” through which individuals in the digital age, as “digital flaneurs,” can internalize the practice of genuine wandering that pays attention—thinking about what to see and how to respond to it—not only through the experience of bodily wandering by walking, but also by breaking away from the “pseudo-wandering” within algorithms.

Keywords Algorithms · Achievement perfectionism · Moral perfectionism · Stanley Cavell · Wandering · Educating the gaze · Poor pedagogy · Digital flaneurs

✉ Heewon Seo
wwon1109@gmail.com

¹ Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK

Introduction

In *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari (2018) emphasizes that the liberal belief in individuals' ability to make free choices is a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging only in the last few centuries. For millennia, humanity delegated decision-making to divine beings or a select ruling elite vested with sacred authority. Harari expresses concern that the freedom and authority that humans have only recently acquired might soon be transferred to algorithms. According to Harari, this shift extends beyond merely recommending movies or music tailored to our preferences or providing shortcuts to destinations via Google Maps. As human reliance on algorithms increases, their use is likely to escalate to significant life decisions, such as what to study, which profession to pursue, whom to marry, and how to live one's life.

Algorithms, which collect real-time data on the content we choose and the duration of our engagement, assist individuals in making choices that seem optimal—or at least better than average—by minimizing the energy depletion and negative experience associated with deliberating over numerous options and making erroneous decisions. These algorithms enhance positive experience by reinforcing choices that align with individual preferences and improve one's mood. However, as Harari cautions, citing Henry Grabar's (2017) assertion that "the ability to navigate is like a muscle—use it or lose it," the capacity to navigate uncertainty and manage negativity is also like a muscle that will atrophy if not exercised (Harari 2018, p. 53).

In *The Palliative Society*, Byung-Chul Han describes today's world as an "algophobic" society, where the "fear of pain" has become pervasive (Han 2021, p. 2). When neoliberalism is defined as an ideology that economizes not only the economic realm but all aspects of life, where individuals function as entrepreneurs of themselves and bear sole responsibility for their successes and failures, Byung-Chul Han points out that the "logic of performance" and "the neoliberal ideology of resilience" shift the paradigm from a "negative psychology of suffering"—encompassing pain, failure, frustration, and unforeseen uncertainties—towards a "positive psychology" focused on well-being, happiness, optimism, and instant gratification, along with a sense of security (p. 2). In a society that emphasizes self-optimization, where positivity is paramount, failure is perceived as a "sign of weakness" (pp. 3, 12, 38). Consequently, individuals are compelled to pursue achievement and happiness while simultaneously avoiding pain, leading to the loss of both the capacity to endure suffering and the opportunity to be transformed by it. This societal phenomenon is closely tied to the development of algorithms, which promote algorithmic thinking that prioritizes the most convenient and preferable choices.

Certainly, the convenience of algorithms is valuable in minimizing unnecessary wandering and preventing the worst choices. We now receive sophisticated music recommendations from algorithms that are not only tailored to our tastes but also deepen and broaden them without the need for extensive searching. By providing the shortest route to our destination, algorithms enable us to secure more time to enjoy ourselves at our destination. The issue, however, does not lie in our use of algorithms to make optimal choices. From my perspective, the problem arises when we come to believe that these choices are the somehow perfect ones, thereby losing our curiosity and willingness to explore. Moreover, the pursuit of "achievement perfectionism," aimed at eliminating the negative experiences that inevitably occur in life, compounds this problem.

Marek Kowalkiewicz defines an algorithm as “a step-by-step procedure for solving a problem or performing a computation” (Kowalkiewicz 2024a, b, p. 1). According to him, algorithms exist to make human life easier through calculations and predictions, aiming to derive outputs that best meet users’ needs by predicting what they want before they are even aware of it (pp. 1–2, 80). However, recent algorithms have evolved not only from “efficiency-based algorithms” that simply aim to achieve the highest efficiency, guide users to their preferred destinations, or solve problems to make human life easier, but also into “Randomized Engagement-Oriented Algorithms.”¹ These algorithms are designed to randomly play videos based on the user’s preferences as they scroll, deliberately capturing their attention and encouraging them to spend more time on the platform, even without a clear purpose.

The launch of TikTok in 2017, with its short video format ranging from 3 to 60 s, followed by Instagram Reels (2020) and YouTube Shorts (2020), has exposed individuals simultaneously to both archival-focused platform, where they can showcase their achievements, and streaming-focused short-form platforms. John Jordan observes that, unlike Google Search, individuals are increasingly drawn into continuous streams of videos tailored to their interests, as well as randomly generated memes and dance clips. These are driven by algorithms specifically designed to maximize user engagement—keeping people on platforms like YouTube and TikTok to like, comment, and subscribe (Jordan 2024, pp. 1–9).

Of course, Anthony Cross focuses particularly on AI-generated art that creates images from text prompts, arguing that by exploring and interrogating the ways AI algorithms see, understand, and represent, we can learn “our own ways of seeing and representing,” thereby expanding the potential for cultivating creative artistic agency (Cross 2024, pp. 7–8, 15). However, in this paper, to clarify and sharpen the philosophical argument, I aim to exclude from discussion, first, AI algorithms that generate outputs based on prompts. Second, while I fully recognize with the positive aspects of algorithms—such as enabling individuals to secure mental space for creative thinking by delegating demanding and challenging tasks to “efficiency-based algorithms,” and providing opportunities for unexpected creative discoveries through “Randomized Engagement-Oriented Algorithms”—this paper focuses on the risks and issues associated with an “over-reliance” on algorithms. Specifically, I seek to highlight the negative aspects of addictive algorithm usage.

In *The Burnout Society*, Byung-Chul Han analyzes the modern disciplinary society through moralizing verbs such as “may not” and “should,” emphasizing its character as “the negativity of prohibition” (2015a, p. 8). In contrast, he explains today’s Achievement Society through the positive moral verb form of what he calls “Unlimited Can”: “Prohibition, commandments, and the law,” he writes, “are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation” (pp. 8–9). This paper, on the basis of the philosophy of Han, raises strong doubts about the phenomenon in which today’s individuals, living under the pressure of optimization within an Achievement Society that presses for voluntary achievement, come to fear negative experiences such as mistakes and wandering, failures, and negative emotions such as

¹ Milli, Smitha, et al. refer to algorithms that personalize content based on user preferences—determined by factors such as likes, comments, and the amount of time spent on a screen—and predict the user’s next engagement as “Engagement-Oriented Ranking Algorithms” (Milli et al 2023, p. 1). However, recent video-based randomized algorithms in social media not only provide highly relevant content based on the user’s interests but also incorporate a significant amount of random and unpredictable content to provoke curiosity. Therefore, to emphasize this element of randomness, I propose to refer to this type of algorithm in this paper as “Randomized Engagement-Oriented Algorithms.”

frustration, anxiety, and pain. To minimize and avoid them, individuals become dependent on “efficiency-based algorithms” that privilege the most efficient and preferable way suited to their purposes and preferences. In the performance society, individuals, under the pressure to be their own entrepreneurs and to ceaselessly develop themselves in order to pursue “achievement perfectionism,” come to engage in self-exploitation and at the same time fear failure and wandering. However, according to Han, this is not simply an individual problem. This phenomenon lies in the neoliberal system in which, unless one achieves a self optimized by oneself, the responsibility for falling behind and for failure must be borne entirely by the individual.

Moreover, short-form platforms such as TikTok, Reels, and Shorts, where videos play randomly, not only within the realm of achievement but also within the realm of rest, induce individuals to scroll addictively without any purpose, among meaningless memes and dance clips, thereby making it impossible to escape from the algorithm. Such “randomized engagement-oriented algorithms,” at first glance, appear to be a wandering-like experience in that they lack purpose, but here the individual loses autonomy and becomes passive in that they see only what the algorithm shows under its control; for this reason, we must clearly recognize this as a “wandering-like distraction.” Exhausted and depleted of energy from striving to achieve “achievement perfectionism,” individuals become addicted to algorithmic scrolling that provides light pleasures and stimuli without any purpose, pain, or effort, and they pour their resting time without resistance into this “wandering-like distraction,” conforming to “pseudo-wandering.”

Through this paper, I aim to present Stanley Cavell’s (2004) concept of “Emersonian moral perfectionism” as a contrast to the perfectionist phenomenon in today’s society, where it is difficult to escape the influence of algorithms in the realms of both achievement and rest. Acknowledging human imperfection and embracing the challenge of becoming morally better individuals by willingly enduring and experiencing negativity is a beautiful endeavor that opens our hearts to the inherently human experiences of failure, mistakes, and wandering, as well as the negative emotions of sadness, pain, fear, and frustration. This paper, by linking the concepts of “wander” and “moral perfectionism,” seeks to reflect on the aesthetics of genuine wandering, which intends to be fully present in the moment and to wholly experience and learn from the flows that come to me, in contrast to the addiction to algorithms that, through not only a focus on achievement but also continuous distraction, exhaust the energy of individuals.

Finally, this paper, on the basis of Jan Masschelein’s (2010) poor pedagogy, presents “educating the gaze” and “attentive wandering” through which “Emersonian moral perfectionism” can be educationally realized. Here, educating the gaze is not an education at the cognitive level of arriving at a critical perspective, but rather refers to liberating or displacing our vision through the very practice of “paying attention” in seeing (p. 44). In this case, attention, unlike the purposive attention directed toward achieving some accomplishment, is a mental state of opening oneself to the world so that the world can disclose itself to one, and through this, one can be transformed (p. 44). Free wandering walks without destination have no plan or end, but at the same time they lead individuals to recognize responsibility by raising the following questions: “what is there to see and to hear? And what to do with it? How to respond to it?” (p. 50). This paper does not take a reactionary position that we should entirely turn away from digital algorithms—from efficiency-based algorithms to randomized engagement-oriented algorithms—and return only to pure bodily walking and

wandering. Instead, it proposes an “educating of the gaze” through which individuals in the digital age, as “digital flaneurs,” can internalize the practice of genuine wandering that pays attention—thinking about what to see and how to respond to it—not only through the experience of bodily wandering by walking, but also by breaking away from the “pseudo-wandering” within algorithms.

The Flaw of Perfectionism

Get perfect love without suffering! (Han 2021; Badiou, 2012)

Byung-Chul Han, in *The Palliative Society* (2021), re-cites a quotation from a dating site that Alain Badiou had cited in his book *In Praise of Love*, and criticizes how even love is replaced by a “comfortable palliative zone,” dreaming of a perfect love without pain or flaw, in today’s Palliative Society. Han presents that The Palliative Society arises simultaneously with the performance society, and he criticizes that negativity such as pain is regarded as weakness or failure, and further, that traumatic experiences, in which such negativity is maximized, are also used, according to the neoliberal ideology of resilience, as catalysts of self-optimization that maximizes performance (pp. 7–8). Han also points out that The Palliative Society is also the society of the like, and he analyzes this as connected to the contentification of life as something likable and agreeable, which is expected to receive many views or Likes (p. 8). The pressure to be happy leads to the pressure that otherwise one is deficient or doing something wrong, and this in turn leads to the pressure to ceaselessly strive toward perfection as self-realization and to prove oneself by exhibiting it.

In this context, Rosalind Gill (2023) points out that the perfectionism fostered by social media is not only the “well-recognized cliché of Instagram perfection” of always appearing radiant and beautiful, filled with achievement and happiness, but at the same time requires that one’s own unique tastes be displayed, and that one simultaneously pursue the appearance of effortlessness—“coolness” and “being real.” In this process, the individual is implicitly compelled to become a perfectionist who, beyond the general neoliberal self-optimization oriented toward performance, realizes individuality to the utmost as attention-taking and eye-catching content. Accordingly, the individual, having become a perfectionist in the direction of realizing life itself in a unique way and exhibiting it as special, voluntarily engages in self-exploitation, and since even rest is pursued as a mode of self-realization, energy is ceaselessly consumed. Eventually, the individual whose energy is completely exhausted entrusts oneself to the algorithm that enables the easy satisfaction of pleasures within the phone while lying in bed. In order to avoid and evade the anxiety and fear concerning self-development and self-failure, the scrolling of the algorithm is accelerated and prolonged.

In *The Transparency Society*, Han argues that today’s social system demands transparency in all processes to enhance speed and efficiency, and this “transparency is a neoliberal dispositive” geared to production (Han 2015b, pp. 1–2). This push for acceleration is connected to the removal of negativity. Transparency occurs when all forms of negativity are eliminated, resulting in smooth, uniform entities that seamlessly integrate into the continuous flows of capital, communication, and information. Consequently, the society of trans-

parency is fundamentally a society of positivity. For Han, “The negativity of alterity and foreignness—in other words, the resistance of the Other”—disrupts and slows down smooth achievement and communication of the Same (p. 2). Thus, “in a society focused on positivity, negative emotions are not tolerated, leading to the loss of the ability to handle suffering and pain and to give them form” (p. 5).

Han, utilizing insights from Hegel and Nietzsche, emphasizes that only negativity empowers the soul (p. 5). Han reveals that Hegel’s dialectics, as presented in *the Phenomenology of Spirit*, are based on negativity. The soul does not ignore negativity but confronts and endures it, and through, “tarrying with it”, can cultivate a “magical power that converts it into being” (p. 5; Hegel 1977, p. 19). Those who have never stayed with and endured negativity are unable to learn the strength to be reborn into existence. Furthermore, as Nietzsche demonstrated, the human soul deepens through strength cultivated by spending time with negativity. He asserts paradoxically that “the human spirit is born from pain” and writes:

That tension of the soul in unhappiness which cultivates its strength, . . . its inventive-ness and courage in enduring, persevering, interpreting, and exploiting suffering, and whatever has been granted to it of profundity, secret, mask, spirit, cunning, greatness—was it not granted through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering? (Nietzsche 2000, p. 344)

From this perspective, the achievement-oriented perfectionism that contemporary individuals strive to implement in their lives drives them to seek the quickest and most convenient shortcuts, relying on algorithms to minimize their mistakes, failures, and deviations. The lack of productivity that results from wandering, failure, and mistakes obstructs personal optimization and impedes an individual from becoming the supposedly best version of themselves. This is seen as a waste of time and productivity, and as fostering a sense of falling behind others and becoming obsolete. However, the pursuit of a flawless perfectionism devoid of negativity actually deprives individuals of the suffering that comes from wandering, the wisdom gained from enduring it, and the opportunities for spontaneous love and travel brought by chance. Navigation that searches for the most efficient path to a destination makes it impossible to experience the patience learned from delays and the serendipitous encounters that arise from taking detours. This is the greatest flaw of achievement-oriented perfectionism.

Achievement-oriented perfectionism is emphasized even in the field of education, which should allow for the risk of attempting wandering, failure, and mistakes. Education that presupposes the ideal learner as one who makes the right choices by oneself, self-regulates, and achieves self-improvement, while at the same time emphasizing performance and achievement, naturally fosters learners into achievement-oriented perfectionists. Biesta (2013), in his book *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, criticizes evidence-based education, which emphasizes qualification—the domain of knowledge, skills, and dispositions—and socialization—the domain that positions us within existing orders—by primarily stressing the functioning of individuals and humans, and by emphasizing the process (input) and the educational outcomes (output) as evidence of achievement (pp. 146–147). Education that must leave behind good evidence tries to make education a safe and risk-free experience. He argues as follows: “To make education 100 percent safe, to make it 100 percent risk-free, thus means that education becomes fundamentally uneducational” (p. 146). Education that,

within a safe and risk-free educational vacuum, emphasizes the maximum self-development of the individual, produces a perfectionist and controlling self, but in doing so, makes the individual fear and avoid wandering, failure, and mistakes, and thus hinders genuine maturation—in this sense it is uneducational. As the title of his essay suggests, it is a case of “why what works won’t work” (2007).

The perfectionist and controlling self, by interpreting algorithmic thinking as a way of focusing only on the achievement of desired goals and of excluding failure, risk, uncertainty, and wandering from one’s life, in fact hinders genuine growth and maturation, infantilizes the individual, and imprisons oneself within the image of an achievement-oriented and flawless self that one has constructed. This can be deepened into a critique of contemporary individuals, and it reminds us of the claim made by John, who came from the Savage World, in Aldous Leonard Huxley’s dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932), about a world where everyone is happy and pain has been eliminated:

“But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.”

“In fact,” said Mustapha Mond, “you’re claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“All right then,” said the Savage defiantly, “I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.” (Huxley 1932: 163)

Freedom to be Distracted?

In English, the word “distract” comes from the Latin “*dis-*,” meaning “*apart*,” and “*trahere*,” meaning “to draw or drag.” Thus, “distract” means to draw attention or thought away from something. In other words, the word “distract” refers to something that pulls an individual’s focus or attention away, preventing them from concentrating on a particular task. This word is mostly negative in English (“I should write my paper, but I keep getting distracted by my phone”), but it also has a more positive connotation (“I have a demanding job, but I find that a game of chess can be a pleasant distraction”). When we talk about short-form videos like those on TikTok, Reels, or Shorts, we often say that they distract us. Unlike the “efficiency-based algorithms” that enable efficient and preferred problem-solving, the most representative feature of “Randomized Engagement-Oriented Algorithms” is that users do not have a specific goal they wish to achieve through short-form videos, and the randomness of the algorithm prevents users from predicting what video will appear next.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines what it is to “wander” as follows: “to walk around slowly in a relaxed way or without any clear purpose or direction.” As you continuously scroll through videos guided by the algorithm on short-form video platforms, you may stumble upon a variety of videos by chance, ranging from light-hearted memes and dance videos to content about food, travel, or interior design, and even motivational videos on overcoming loneliness and depression, beyond the topics you usually enjoy. The countless videos you encounter without any clear purpose or direction as you follow the algorithm’s suggestions can make the short-form video platform’s algorithm feel like a counterbal-

ance to the achievement-oriented perfectionism. Comfortably reclining on a sofa or bed, individuals use short-form video platforms as a means of relaxation, as a brief journey or wandering that can be embarked upon effortlessly through scrolling. However, the lack of a specific goal to achieve, combined with the unpredictability of what video will appear next due to the algorithm's randomness, heightens the addictive nature of these platforms, making it difficult to tear oneself away. It is common for people today, who find themselves scrolling through short-form videos for hours, to make a self-deprecating remark: "I am a slave to the algorithm."

As of late July 2024, a playful meme has spread on TikTok and Instagram Reels, humorously depicting people forgetting to call emergency services during a critical situation because they are too engrossed in watching TikTok and Reels videos. Although this meme is likely to lose attention within a few days, it starkly reflects the "distractive" nature of today's algorithms. Modern algorithms not only encourage individuals to make optimal choices for achieving their goals but also deliberately eliminate the goal itself through random exposure to videos based on user preferences, thereby preventing individuals from escaping the algorithm even during their downtime. While constantly engaging in self-production through YouTube or Instagram archiving to showcase their achievements and perfect lives, individuals, exhausted from the obsession with self-actualization and goal attainment, spend their rest time doing "pseudo-wandering" within short-form videos on Shorts, Reels, and TikTok, losing track of time and direction.

Cristian Voinea, Lavinia Marin, and Constantin Vica (2024), based on the similarity between social media algorithms and the mechanism of slot machines, analyze how algorithms "capture, direct and retain people's attention" and ultimately lead them into distraction (p. 686). They argue that social media platforms based on algorithms, through "a sophisticated system of intermittent rewards," strengthen the habit of scrolling and contribute to the addictive character of the platforms, just as gamblers continue to spin slot machines (pp. 688–689). Randomized engagement-oriented algorithms, as "pull-to-refresh mechanisms," attract users' attention by preventing them from predicting what will come next, leading them into infinite scrolling, and seek to maximize users' time spent online and their engagement (Voinea et al. 2024, p. 686; Burr et al. 2018, p. 757; Narayanan 2023; Mihailov et al. 2023; Voinea et al. 2020). Watzl (2023) presents that while individuals can intentionally direct their attention to certain stimuli, at the same time they can also be spontaneously and unintentionally captured by intense or unpredictable stimuli (p. 690). However, randomized engagement-oriented algorithms, without requiring individual intention or purpose, draw attention by providing unpredictable content that evokes various emotions through the simple act of scrolling, but this in the end distracts individuals by preventing them from concentrating their attention on what they should or want to attend to, and thus ultimately functions as a mechanism of distraction.

A brief distraction can help an individual relax, allowing rigid seriousness to be gently alleviated with a light laugh. Furthermore, the ease of creating short-form videos—through the convenient combination of video, music, and various AI effects—enables users to quickly and easily produce and expose content, thereby increasing access to the lives, thoughts, and even the artistic works of a diverse range of people. Individuals, as long as they can catch the attention of others, can freely share their work without needing approval from any higher institution or authority. The various contents within the algorithm also expand the scope of events that individuals may encounter beyond their everyday lives. For

example, if in the past, before the digital age, an individual's wandering in their physical life was limited to wandering in nature or in the city or within their everyday life, in the digital era, surpassing the search-oriented internet age, in the era of short-form social media dominated by algorithms, individuals can encounter content they had not anticipated in their daily lives and thought processes, thus expanding the events they may face.

However, when one becomes addicted to scrolling through random videos, spending most of their free time within the algorithm, and when the present in which they wish to fully concentrate is distracted, the problem is obvious. The uncritical and addictive consumption of algorithm-guided short-form videos drastically reduces the range of experiences individuals must encounter and learn from in real life, infringing upon their present. Like spinning a slot machine in a casino, habitually scrolling through algorithm-guided videos with your mouth agape, and then glancing out of a darkened window with a foggy mind, we must ask ourselves: Can wandering within an algorithm truly be called wandering? Can peeking into the compressed experiences of countless others, through algorithms that present them in less than a minute, be considered a genuine experience for the individual? How can we distinguish between "distraction" and true wandering?

The Wall Street Journal conducted an investigation titled "Inside TikTok's Algorithm: A WSJ Video Investigation," analyzing TikTok's algorithm. According to the investigation, the reason TikTok's algorithm is more addictive is not only because it collects data on how long people stay on a video and re-watch it to personalize the algorithm based on their preferences, but also because it mixes in high-view count videos from various genres intermittently to prevent users from getting bored with repetitive patterns. In other words, by inserting videos that most people find interesting—such as memes, dance videos, funny clips, or cute animal videos—into the user's preference-based algorithm, the platform ensures that users continue to feel intrigued and stay on the platform for extended periods. Furthermore, the investigation found that over 70% of YouTube's views come from its recommendation engine, while 90–95% of TikTok's views come from its recommendation engine. This clearly demonstrates why surfing within an algorithm may appear to be wandering, but in reality, can only be "pseudo-wandering" rather than genuine wandering.

Individuals who wander walk on their own—that is to say, they propel themselves. They do not know where the path ends or where the journey leads, but they continue to walk. While there is neither a specific purpose nor a clear direction in this walk, there is nonetheless the insistence of an individual who has chosen to walk on their own. The entire journey has a continuity, and within this continuity, I learn. However, although preference-based, randomly recommended video algorithms are not achievement-focused, they demonstrate extreme passivity except for the fact that individuals themselves are doing the scrolling. Users, in the position of passive receivers simply drawn by minor stimuli at particular frequencies, become even more domesticated than modern individuals who sit on sofas with vacant expressions while channel-surfing on television. Today's individuals, through more subtly personalized algorithms on smartphones in the palm of their hands, find themselves scrolling continuously, without regard to time or place, unable to focus even on videos lasting less than a minute. Short-form videos, ranging from 5 to 60 s, lose their organic connection and continuity, becoming fragmented as they pass arbitrarily in front of users. People who have become accustomed to such short-form videos and algorithms find their concentration span gradually shortening, and they lose the depth that can only be learned by staying within continuity and engaging in long, focused efforts.

Individuals who wander inevitably encounter various obstacles and discomforts along the way, leading them to experience negativity. Byung-Chul Han argues that only such negativity can create pauses and disruptions in the present, stating that it “puts the present as a whole into question” (Han 2015a, p. 22). The frustrations, anxieties and pains that one experiences while wandering provide opportunities for the individual to pause and question their entire life and, further, society as a whole. These questions bring about small but significant changes in one’s life, offering a chance to live a life slightly different from the one they have been living. However, we do not find such negativity in the short-form videos exposed by algorithms. While violent or provocative videos, or those that directly display negative emotions or situations, may capture users’ attention and keep them engaged for longer periods, they lack the depth to bring about meaningful change. These videos are easily forgotten as the scroll continues to the next one. They do not cause a pause, disruption, or questioning in an individual’s life.

Of course, short-form video platforms differ from traditional archiving-style social media, which tends to pressure users into competitively showcasing only their achievement-oriented perfection, thereby making them feel the burden of positivity and happiness. Short-form platforms allow individuals to show their honest and authentic selves, including their imperfect, even foolish, sides, as well as their negative emotions and aspects. This approach offers comfort to those who feel the compulsive freedom of pursuing perfect achievements in their lives, making distraction feel like a form of rest. When one is deeply immersed in a certain way of life and focused solely on it, a distraction can make them turn their head and take a breath, allowing them to see that there are other ways of living. In a positive sense, music can be a joyful distraction while studying.

However, the persistence and addiction to distraction prevent us from fully existing in the present. A life spent continuously scrolling within an algorithm disconnects individuals from the pauses, questioning, and changes that can only be learned through long-term experiences of negativity in a continuous life. This is why the addictive distraction caused by the short-form video algorithm cannot become true wandering. There, I am merely passively scrolling under the influence of the algorithm. But there, I do not exist as someone who walks with curiosity on their own. I do not exist as someone who questions their life and tries to make different choices than before. All that exists there is a high level of conformity to the algorithm. Then, how can we use such algorithms in a healthy way while simultaneously leading a life of experiential engagement? Paradoxically, I propose a new form of perfectionism that embraces alternative interpretations in this new way.

Moral Perfectionism

In the middle of the journey of our life

I found myself astray in a dark wood

where the straight road had been lost sight of. (Dante, as cited in Standish 2018, p. 18)

Paul Standish clarifies the concept that Stanley Cavell refers to as “Emersonian moral perfectionism”. Through a careful analysis of Emerson’s essay “Experience,” Standish explains that the word “experience” originates from the Latin *experior*, derived from *prior*, which is a deponent verb meaning “to try, attempt, or test, and also to undergo experience” (Standish 2018, p. 18). Essentially, to experience something begins with a readiness for experience, a readiness to let things happen. The attempt to walk willingly and enjoy the journey of life, even when one finds oneself lost in a deep forest where the straight road has vanished from sight, represents this kind of experience. As someone takes each step on a barely visible path, they encounter unexpected landscapes, and the unknown uncertainties confront them with a palpable sense of reality. With every step and each new experience, what was previously believed to be perfect is replaced by a new form of perfection. Standish describes this process of the redefinition of perfection as follows:

You complete a project, some further realization of yourself, and once it is completed you are already outside, in a position of having to adjust to what you have done, and hence no longer defined by it. You are ready to move on. Otherwise, you are caught in the after-image of a shape that no longer contains you. (2018, p. 18)

According to Standish, perfectionism of this kind can be distinct from *perfectibility*, which is the belief in a perfect society and the pursuit of it through “appropriate social engineering or coercion” (p. 18). In contrast to perfectibility, perfectionism embraces “the imperfect nature” of human beings and “takes the human condition to be forever open to criticism and to possibilities of betterment” (p. 18). This so-called “moral perfectionism” appears to be diametrically opposed to the achievement-oriented perfectionism identified by Han (2015a, b), which triggers self-exploitation, comparison, burnout, and depression in a society driven by accomplishment. In moral perfectionism, the attempt to advance towards betterment through criticism is a beautiful human endeavor that acknowledges imperfection, endures and stands firm against negativity, and seeks to embrace new experiences. It is based precisely on the idea that human beings and the institutions they create are not ultimately perfectible, but, as it were, always on the way. However, in a society driven by achievement-oriented perfectionism, criticism and negativity are merely seen as obstacles that slow down accomplishment and render individuals unproductive. In such a society, when criticism and negativity are ignored, individuals are more concerned with what they can gain from these experiences rather than contemplating what they can learn from them.

Stanley Cavell (2004) defines moral perfectionism in his book *Cities of Words* as follows: “Moral perfectionism challenges ideas of moral motivation, showing (against Kant’s law that counters inclination, and against utilitarianism’s calculation of benefits) the possibility of my access to experience which gives to my desire for the attaining of a self that is mine to become, the power to act on behalf of an attainable world I can actually desire” (2004, p. 33). The concept of “attain” in this context is connected with moral reasoning that seeks to leap “beyond my present repertory of inclination” towards “my unattained but attainable self.” This stands in contrast to the notion of “achieve” in a transparent society, where success is measured by obtaining socially recognized and visible achievements or by conforming more productively within the boundaries of positivity and stability. In moral perfectionism, “attaining” begins with a recognition of and engagement with negativity towards conformity.

Cavell, citing the phrase “Self-reliance is [conformity’s] aversion” from Emerson’s *Self-Reliance*, emphasizes that the condition for self-reliance, from which moral perfectionism can begin, lies in negativity toward conformity. This phrase gains deeper meaning when it is understood as self-reliance that breaks away from the compulsion to remain on the normal trajectory of life, listens to the inner self that has curiosity toward the risks and uncertainties of life, and walks step by step along a dark forest path where the way ahead cannot be seen. Such an interpretation allows us to understand that the aesthetics of life does not lie in achievement perfectionism, which rejects negativity and clings only to positivity, but in the pursuit of moral perfectionism, which acknowledges negativity and wandering and moves toward the “unattained but attainable self.” In this way, we can declare that learning begins upon the aesthetics of wandering.

Learning, the Aesthetics of Wandering

The term “aesthetics” has historically been associated with the appreciation of beauty and has often been confined to high art and the sublime, emphasizing harmony and perfection. According to Yuriko Saito (2007), such traditional understandings place aesthetics within a hierarchical framework, separating the “beautiful” from the mundane and elevating the extraordinary as the primary locus of aesthetic experience. However, in recent philosophical discourse, particularly through Saito’s works, aesthetics has been redefined to encompass the ordinary, the imperfect, and the transient (Saito 2007, 2017). This redefinition shifts the focus from detached contemplation to embodied, everyday engagement, recognizing that aesthetic experiences emerge not only in grand works of art but also in the imperfections and unpredictability of daily life.

Within this redefined framework, the aesthetics of wandering challenges conventional notions of deliberate navigation and achievement. As an aesthetic practice, wandering fosters openness to the unexpected and embraces uncertainty and imperfection as essential components of meaningful experience. Beyond perfectionism and goal-oriented paradigms, wandering becomes a mode of learning—a way of deeply engaging with the rhythms, textures, and chaos of the environment we inhabit. This duality, contrasting the static ideals of traditional aesthetics with the dynamic and participatory nature of everyday aesthetics, lays the foundation for reimagining wandering as a transformative and profound aesthetic act.

Naoko Saito describes the unique characteristics of Emersonian moral perfectionism as follows: “Perfection is an endless journey of self-overcoming and self-realization, whose central focus is on the here and now: this is a process of attaining a further, next self, not the highest self” (Saito 2012, p. 172). The focus of this self-overcoming and self-realization is not on some ideal state to be achieved in the future, but rather on the present moment, helping to facilitate the transition to the next self. According to Saito, Emersonian moral perfectionism, by embodying “goallessness,” rejects the concept of “final perfectibility” (p. 174). Standish and Saito both argue against fixed notions of perfection, emphasizing that moral perfectionism is not about reaching an ultimate state but about remaining open to transformation. However, Saito takes this further with the idea of goallessness, reinforcing that perfectionism is about continuous movement rather than a final destination.

A journey without a final destination or goal, devoted to the here and now, brings to mind the definition of “wandering.” This journey of wandering confronts individuals with

“the moment of turning, a point of departure from the existing circle of the self, not only in joy and hope but also with a strong sense of shame—shame at the self in its conformity,” enabling them to transform into their next self (2012, p. 174). This re-conception of perfectionism prompts us not only to question the algorithms designed to efficiently achieve goals and solve problems, but also to reflect on the short-form video algorithms that keep users on platforms for long periods through repeated, light, and purposeless distractions. It encourages us to question what we are conforming to and to feel a sense of shame about it.

However, what we should notice is that Cavell’s idea of perfectionism is unlike those of puritanical Christian (and other) attitudes that take the view that we are deeply flawed and should normally feel somewhat bad about ourselves, and can rarely acknowledge that something has gone well. There are little perfections—a moment when you have come to understand something you have been struggling with, a performance of music that sounds just right for the occasion, a sporting success or brilliant performance, moments in company or on a walk by yourself (through the country or the town) when you feel for a moment that everything is just right—these can amount to little perfections, steps on the way, perhaps wonderful in themselves, for the moment at that time, but steps from which you must move on. This suggests that not every wandering and journey must necessarily lead to questioning oneself, resisting conformity, or bringing about personal change, as the pressure to do so could give rise to another form of perfectionism. Questioning, resistance, and change naturally occur as an individual wanders and finds their own path, accumulating present moments that feel perfect because they are precious to them.

If Standish provides a broad framework of the notion of perfectionism, emphasizing the imperfection and openness of human nature, and Saito understands perfectionism with a focus on “self-overcoming,” René Arcilla sees Cavell’s perfectionism in terms of “learning as a quest for self-understanding” (Arcilla 2012, p. 165). He emphasizes that, in contrast to the common concept of perfectionism, which is defined as a “strict commitment to some ideal and a refusal of conventional compromises with imperfection,” Cavell shifts the focus of this concept to the process of “becoming intelligible to oneself” by discovering one’s own path (pp. 152–153; Cavell 1990a, b). In other words, it is not merely about wandering but about the process of encountering colorful wildflowers in a sunny field or getting lost in a dark forest, through which one learns what path suits them best, when they feel peaceful, when they feel fear, and how they deal with it. Thus, the entire process of discovering one’s path and understanding oneself during the journey of wandering is a process of moving towards one’s own perfection.

Perfectionism’s emphasis on culture or cultivation is, to my mind, to be understood in connection with this search for intelligibility, or say this search for direction in what seems a scene of moral chaos, the scene of a dark place in which one has lost one’s way. (2012, p. 152)

Unlike Saito, who explains perfectionism through constant self-overcoming, arguing that perfection is never a final state but a continuous transformation in the present moment, Arcilla, based on Cavell’s (1990a, b) explanation of perfectionism, describes the essence of perfectionism as the process of moving from “self-obscurity” to “self-intelligibility,” stating that “the insistence has a searching quality” (2012, pp. 152–153). To engage in wandering as a process of understanding oneself, it is essential to take steps on one’s own and to insist

on observing each moment with awareness. Additionally, it is necessary to understand what is obscure about oneself. Merely following the efficient paths suggested by algorithms or being swept away by the flood of random short-form videos driven by algorithms diminishes or distracts from this process of self-understanding. It leads individuals to accept excessive reliance on algorithms or continuous scrolling as a normal part of daily life rather than recognizing it as self-obscurity. Typically, self-obscurity occurs alongside “conventional compromises,” and Arcilla claims that “The perfectionist sensibility is exacting not because of its dogmatism but because its quest casts doubt on the usual, socially acceptable measures” (p. 153). The insistence on understanding oneself through wandering naturally leads to questioning the world’s conventions and the algorithm’s dogmatic assurance, which claims that this is the fastest path for you, or the path that suits you best, or the path that will be hardest for you to look away from. Questioning and resisting existing conformity naturally arise in this process.

However, what is crucial at this point is not to stop at feeling anxious and disgusted with oneself by focusing on one’s own imperfections while recognizing self-obscurity and continuing the journey of self-understanding. Instead, it is essential to perceive the experience of “fallenness” as part of the process of getting to understand oneself better and to engage with this experience (2012, p. 154). An individual who has not gone through experiences cannot truly know themselves. The “inability to know oneself” is connected to ignorance about which direction one wants to walk in and how one wants to live, which, in extreme cases, can lead to self-hatred, making one feel that being alive itself is a mistake (2012, p. 154). Of course, such self-loathing can also intertwine with a hatred of the “conventional compromises” one has been conforming to, becoming a driving force for questioning and resisting one’s life.

With regard to this moral perfectionism, Arcilla takes the view that it is important that connection is first made “not to the height of its ideal but to the depth of its hopelessness” (2012, pp. 154–155). The depth of negativity, such as frustration and despair, certainly enables a leap and transformation that differs from merely pursuing an ideal. Byung-Chul Han argues that the negative emotion of dread “grips and shakes the whole of existence,” and that rage can “make a new state begin” (Han 2015a, pp. 22–23). However, from my perspective, the important thing is not to dwell on negativity itself and let it engulf you, but to adopt a contemplative attitude that focuses on what one can learn about oneself through it. Emphasizing negativity does not mean deliberately creating experiences of falling, failure, and frustration to endure painful experiences. It is not a sadomasochistic command that only pain can bring learning. Rather, it is about understanding oneself better when faced with the inevitable challenges and obstacles that come with life, and when confronting one’s non-ideal, imperfect self and accepting one’s obscurity and imperfection. It is about questioning the paths that have been suggested to you as the norm, and thereby willingly walking toward the path that you consider more authentically your own. To achieve this learning, we must be ready to wander. The whole process is perfectly beautiful, even though it is imperfect.

Freedom to Wander: To be Attentive as a Digital Flaneur

Each self is drawn on a journey of ascent . . . to a further state of that self, where . . . the higher is determined not by natural talent but by seeking to know what you are made of and cultivating the thing you are meant to do; it is a transformation of the self which finds expression in . . . the imagination of a transformation of society into . . . where . . . what is best for society is a model for and is modeled on what is best for the individual soul. . . (Standish 2013, p. 60, Cavell 1990a, b, p. 7).

Standish, by citing Cavell's words that "moral perfectionism – a perfectionism without final perfectibility" (Standish 2013, p. 60), makes clear that Cavell's moral perfectionism is distinguished from "any crude individualism." That is, moral perfectionism, while refusing conformity and pursuing new possibilities in individual life, at the same time imagines the transformation of society, and thus connects to an educational journey that transforms both self and society. Standish sees "the engagement with scepticism" as the theme that runs through Cavell's philosophy as a whole (p. 52). He analyzes that Cavell criticized sceptic questions as arising only "where there is a suppression or repression or denial of the background," yet at the same time he notes Cavell's recognition of the existential truth contained in scepticism, namely, "the human condition: our compulsion to doubt; our inclination to demand a greater reassurance than the circumstances allow or a more robust verification than they could reasonably bear" (p. 53). However, Standish criticizes that such sceptical doubt—that invisible learning does not exist, that what cannot be seen transparently and measured is not what is real—leads to mistrust of the teacher's professional judgment or contextual learning, and makes teaching excessively programmed and mechanized (p. 53). He points out that within such philosophical scepticism or the obsession of contemporary performance orientation, education is incapacitated and our thinking is prevented from advancing (p. 56). Yet at the same time he notes that, while Wittgenstein speaks of finding peace by escaping from "the sceptic's persistent anxieties," the fact that scepticism repeatedly bites and clings reveals something essential to the human condition, namely, "our seeming compulsion to call into question the circumstances of our ordinary lives" (p. 56).

Standish, within today's educational research that is primarily concerned with happiness, well-being, and achievement, develops his discussion by questioning and challenging the ways in which these concerns are generally expressed (pp. 50, 63). He connects the shadows from Plato's myth of the cave in *The Republic* with the images of modern media, and asks about the role of education in relation to the world of shadows that are powerfully marketed and placed even in the hands of small children (p. 61). From this perspective, Cavell's "moral perfectionism" is far from a narcissistic individualism; rather, it becomes a "process of self-discovery" that prompts us to ask about a better society, and it becomes a conversation that "confronts us with our own shame . . . and challenges us continually to a next, best possibility of ourselves" (pp. 61–62). "Conversation of this kind, exposure to this ongoing education" (p. 62) leads us, within the social phenomenon in which individuals addicted to achievement perfectionism are exhausted and burned out in their pursuit of it, addicted to efficiency-based algorithms, and unable to escape from randomized engagement-oriented algorithms and "pseudo-wandering," to think seriously about how moral perfectionism that resists conformity can be educationally realized.

From this perspective, Jan Masschelein's (2010) "educating the gaze" can be developed, in today's world where algorithm-dependence has become widespread, into an educational realization of Cavell's moral perfectionism, in that it is not simply educating a sceptical or critical view but rather educates the gaze toward "becoming attentive and paying attention." Masschelein explains attention as follows: "Attention is the state of mind in which the subject and the object are brought into play. It is a state of mind which opens up to the world in such a way that the world can present itself to me (that I can 'come' to see) and I can be transformed" (p. 44). This "educating the gaze," which emphasizes the practice of paying attention, is connected with Benjamin's "walking" (1979), making possible an "experience ... not just as a passive undergoing (being commanded), but also as blazing a trail or path, a kind of cutting a road through" (p. 45). Such vivid experiences, obtained by making and walking one's own path, are distinguished from "pseudo-wandering," which, without critical distance, absorbs one into the content of algorithms, because they embody "critical distance, which is not at the achievement of a meta-standpoint, but ... a practice undertaken 'to risk one's very formation as a subject' (Butler 2001)" (p. 48).

Masschelein defines critical educational research as research that opens the eyes, takes critical distance from ourselves, and at the same time opens a space of possibility for change, and he argues that such educational research demands, instead of a particular methodology, a "poor pedagogy" (p. 49). Poor pedagogy is a generous pedagogy that has no destination, does not head anywhere, and does not follow particular rules, but instead provides "the time and space of experience and of thought" (p. 49). Such pedagogy provides individuals with the time and space to wander sufficiently, giving them opportunities to experience and to think for themselves, while maintaining a critical attitude, and thus presents the possibility of overcoming, at the level of experience, today's achievement perfectionism or the passive algorithmic scrolling of "pseudo-wandering." Masschelein explains poor pedagogy as a pedagogy that says the following: "'look, I won't let your attention become distracted, look! Instead of waiting for thrills and a denouement, for stories and explanations, look!'" (p. 50). "Poor pedagogy" is not passively being distracted by stimuli, but is a pedagogy that leads one to look at what one wants and needs to see by oneself, and to ask what is to be seen and heard, what is to be done with it, and how to respond to it. And through such educating of the gaze, the individual who experiences the liberation of vision learns to look not only from a private and personal perspective but also to see "us," and in this sense it connects with the pursuit of social justice in "moral perfectionism" (p. 51). Subjects who wander attentively learn to see not only the individual but also us, the world, and society. Thus self-discovery becomes discovery of the world, self-transformation becomes transformation of society, and without closure, in an endless opening, moral perfectionism is pursued.

This paper does not take a reactionary or nostalgic position that rejects the very use of algorithms on which today's individuals, under achievement perfectionism or burnout, come to depend, nor that regards only pre-technological bodily presence and walking as valuable. Instead, this paper argues that while openly accepting the useful convenience of efficiency-based algorithms and the diversification of digital experience expanded by "randomized engagement-oriented algorithms," it is indispensable to practice "attentiveness" by looking at such algorithms attentively, considering how to respond to them, and reflecting on what to do with them. Here, finally, this paper seeks to present the image that today's subjects ought to pursue, by adding Masschelein's attentiveness to the concept of "a digital flaneur" used by Kowalkiewicz (2024a, b). Kowalkiewicz defines the French word *flaneur*

as “a deliberately aimless pedestrian,” describing a person who, without any plan, merely explores the unknown and “puts questions before answers” (p. 117). Yet he expands the term *flâneur* beyond merely bodily walking to a digital *flâneur*, who explores algorithms with curiosity and an exploratory attitude. However, his concept of the digital *flâneur* describes the exploration of algorithms as an “unbiased mutation” that has no preference and allows any direction, while overlooking the fact that algorithms are designed to be addictive and stimulating by the platform’s intention to increase the user’s viewing time and activity, and ignoring the neoliberal mechanisms connected to this, such as advertising and inducement to purchase.

Therefore, in conclusion, this paper presents the attentive digital *flâneur* as the image that individuals, who have learned the practice of paying attention through educating the gaze and poor pedagogy, may be seen as being called to pursue. Achievement perfectionists, tormented by the compulsion to ceaselessly develop themselves and to exhibit that development, may be seen as being called to open the door and step outside, to walk aimlessly and without destination, entrusting themselves to the unknown, becoming *flâneurs*, and thereby freeing themselves from their own compulsions. By taking such critical distance from themselves, they are also enabled to take critical distance toward the world and society, engaging in the experience of bodily wandering where one chooses what to see and where to go. Furthermore, for individuals whose energy has been depleted and who, lying in bed, endlessly scroll in “pseudo-wandering” within algorithms, this paper suggests the possibility of an attentive digital *flânerie*, one that resists distraction by critically discerning what to attend to and what to see, and thus practices wandering attentively even within digital environments. Such attentiveness expands from the individual to the “we,” from the “we” to the world, to society, and continues endlessly as moral perfectionism, from our own transformation to attentiveness to society as a whole.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued then that the growing dependence on algorithms in both the realms of achievement and rest reinforces neoliberal achievement perfectionism, forcing individuals to conform to the system. Paradoxically, as resistance to this, I have proposed Cavell’s “moral perfectionism.” Based on the acknowledgment of human imperfection, a willingness to endure and experience negative experiences and emotions that naturally arise in life allows individuals to open themselves to failure, mistakes, and wandering, and to learn how to deal with negative emotions such as pain, fear, and anxiety on their own. Furthermore, the experience of negativity and learning from it, through a rejection of conformity, is sublimated into a journey of truly understanding oneself. This paper has pointed out that the phenomenon of individuals becoming addicted to algorithms in both the realms of achievement and rest, due to achievement perfectionism and continuous distraction, robs them of the opportunity to fully concentrate on the present and understand themselves.

This paper points out that the phenomenon in which individuals become addicted to algorithms—both in their pursuit of achievement and in their moments of rest—through achievement perfectionism and constant distraction deprives them of the opportunity to be fully present in the moment and to come to an understanding of themselves. As an educational direction for overcoming this condition, it proposes Jan Masschelein’s (2010) notions

of “educating the gaze” and “poor pedagogy,” emphasizing their importance in cultivating the figure of a digital flaneur who practices attentive wandering not only in physical walking but also within the world of digital algorithms, thereby underscoring the educational role of enabling individuals to grow into those who can attend not only to themselves but also to the “we” and to society as a whole. True maturity begins with the aesthetics of wandering, when one acknowledges one’s imperfection, willingly wanders, and opens oneself to negativity. Only then can individuals begin to question the system or patterns of thought to which they have conformed, and reflect on what kind of life they truly desire, taking the next step towards moral perfection, which can never be fully attained.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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