Cavell on Skepticism and the Importance of Not-Knowing

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> In Wittgenstein's work, as in skepticism, the human disappointment with human knowledge seems to take over the whole subject.
>
> CAVELL, *The Claim of Reason*

> How do we learn that what we need is not more knowledge but the willingness to forgo knowing?
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> CAVELL, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

Prelude

In an early essay Cavell set his sights on trying to make Wittgenstein's philosophy available to Anglo-American philosophy in the first decade after the publication of *Philosophical Investigations* when it was hard to see what Wittgenstein was up to through the haze of logical positivism, linguistic conventionalism and American pragmatism.[1] In this paper I would like to make an analogous attempt to make Cavell's philosophy available to Anglo-American philosophy against a perception of it as being slighted, missed, or avoided in contemporary philosophical discussion. Part of the irony of this attempt is that misreadings of Wittgenstein that Cavell was most concerned to resist continue to stand in the way of the availability of Cavell's own philosophy. This family of misreadings points to the peculiar nature of the difficulty of hearing what Wittgenstein and Cavell are saying. And that itself points to the difficulty and delicacy of their attempt to overcome philosophy's insistent drive to over-generality and hyper-abstraction in order to put particular flesh and blood voices

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1. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 44-72.

back into philosophy whilst doggedly maintaining an interest in the conceptual — precisely what had driven philosophers to generality and abstraction — in what Wittgenstein calls "the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not […] some non-spatial and non-temporal phantasm" — precisely what drives philosophers away from the conceptual.[2]

I want to illuminate Cavell's thinking by reflecting on what is supposed to be most familiar, namely, his treatment of skepticism, leaving aside his detailed diagnostic work of drawing the similarities and differences between other minds and external world skepticism. The aim is to remove a widespread misreading of Cavell's general conception of the problem of skepticism, hence the kind of response that is appropriate to it. I cannot here explore the fascinating theme of Cavell's employment of skepticism as a lens through which to read the human. The theme of not-knowing, and its importance and import, will emerge gradually as we get Cavell's conception of skepticism into better focus.

Introduction

Let me begin then, with four salient features of Cavell's approach to skepticism that are, collectively, distinctive of it:

1. Skepticism, for Cavell, is not the name of a negative epistemological thesis — say that we cannot know, or know for certain, that the external world or other minds exist — but a pervasive threat to something he calls (after Wittgenstein) "the ordinary." What is at issue is nothing less than our capacity to apply words to the world at all.

2. The threat named by the term "skepticism" is further described as our tendency to repudiate "our" (Wittgensteinian) *criteria* for the use of the ordinary concepts of the language we share. This perverse tendency is a pervasive feature of the human, that is, of "creature[s] complicated or burdened enough to possess language at all."[3]

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2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations (1958),* 4th edn., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), §108.

3. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 140.

3. Cavell, following Wittgenstein (at least as Cavell reads him), is not in the business of refuting skepticism. Whatever else he is doing he is not trying to build an argument for a counter-assertion to the skeptical conclusion.

4. And, perhaps most famously, while skepticism about the external world is not straightforwardly true there is a "truth" in skepticism: "namely, that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing."[4] Elsewhere he further clarifies this: "our relation to the world as a whole, or to others in general, is not one of knowing, where knowing construes itself as being certain."[5]

How are we to understand this complex knot of thoughts? Michael Williams sums up the views of many in responding thus,

> Stanley Cavell […] thinks that the skeptic can be convicted of only seeming to make sense. Cavell argues that though the skeptic speaks in grammatically correct sentences, he uses them in a peculiar, indeed finally unintelligible, way. This results in a kind of illusion of sense. The skeptic deploys familiar words and phrases. But in a way that makes it impossible to see what *he* means by them. However, because we know what *they* mean, it seems that his pronouncements must mean something, even if we can't quite grasp what it is.
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> If all this is so, we have a refutation as definitive as we ever see in philosophy.[6]

Michael Williams's understanding of Cavell's interpretation and response to skepticism is sufficiently representative to warrant calling it *the standard interpretation* of it — an interpretation that can be found more or less intact in other notable commentators including Marie McGinn,[7] Stephen Mulhall[8] and Barry Stroud.[9] On this read-

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4. Cavell, *Claim*, 241.
5. Ibid., 45.
6. Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 16.
7. Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
8. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Admittedly Mulhall shows a greater awareness than others that this reading does not do full justice to Cavell's text even though he continually returns to formulations such as this: "the skeptical impulse […] [is] an impulse to repudiate or deny the framework within which alone human speech is possible" (104).

ing Cavell is seen as another (perhaps somewhat more subtle) incarnation of a familiar Wittgensteinian approach to skepticism which sees skeptical pronouncements not as false claims capable of refutation — where refutation is a matter of demonstrating the negation of the skeptical conclusion — but as senseless strings of words that the skeptic has not been able to render meaningful. The meaninglessness is not a matter of employing nonsense words like "yendys" — a new word I've just made up by reversing the letters of the name of the city, "Sydney." On the contrary, the skeptic transgresses the bounds of sense, on this story, by using familiar meaningful words outside the conditions that govern their intelligible employment. It is not the words as such that are meaningless — they have, let us say, their standard dictionary definitions and a history of past uses — it is the skeptic's distinctive employment of them that founders. What fails, on this line, is the skeptic's attempt to employ words with familiar public meanings to mean what he says under the extraordinary circumstances of what Hume calls his "intense reflection."[10]

This standard interpretation offers explanations of each of the four features of Cavell's account of skepticism we have articulated: 1) the skeptic does not have a thesis because he speaks nonsense, nothing either true or false; 2) speaking nonsense is a standing liability of human speech; 3) one cannot refute a nonsensical utterance; and 4) in the context in which the skeptic considers the existence of the external world it is not something that he can properly claim to know or not to know. As Cavell puts it, the context is "a non-claim context".[11]

Without further exploring the details of this reading let us ask why we should accept it? Well, for one thing, it certainly finds apparent confirmation in Cavell's texts. For example, in Part 2 of the *Claim of Reason*, Cavell talks of providing "a schema for a potential overthrowing or undercutting of skepticism" which he describes as follows:

> The "dilemma" the traditional investigation of knowledge is involved in may now be formulated this way: It must be the investigation of a concrete claim if

9. Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

10. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Mark C Rooks (Charlottesville: InteLex, 1995), bk. 1, pt. 4, sect. 2.

11. Cavell, *Claim*, 217. This aspect of Cavell's diagnosis is traced to key, often unnoticed, features of traditional epistemology: the solitariness of the skeptic's rehearsal; and the peculiarity of the "best case" of perceptually based knowledge that he chooses to raise doubts about.

its procedure is to be coherent; it cannot be the investigation of a concrete claim if its conclusion is to be general. Without that coherence it would not have the obviousness it has seemed to have; without that generality its conclusion would not be skeptical.[12]

Cavell here seems to be convicting the skeptic of incoherence on the ground that his reason for doubting a "best case" of perceptually based knowledge — say, that there is a piece of paper in my hands — wavers inconsistently between an incoherent general doubt required by global skepticism and a coherent concrete doubt whose very specificity raises no skeptical conundrums.

Furthermore, the standard interpretation of Cavell on skepticism fits with the familiar "nonsense policeman" reading of Wittgenstein (as we might call it) defended most ably by Peter Hacker. This reading puts considerable weight on the idea of the philosopher as an authority about the rules of language and the nonsense-producing philosophical transgressions of such rules.[13] Additionally, it can also seem to fit with the deeper "new Wittgenstein" reading of *Philosophical Investigations,* associated in particular with the writings of Cora Diamond, Jim Conant, Alice Crary, Rupert Read and the Hilary Putnam (at least in his writings in the last two decades of the twentieth century).[14] This interpretation builds on a Cavellian reading of Wittgenstein that contests the idea that Wittgenstein places great importance on the notion of a rule; or that he polices grammar as Hacker and his followers would have it. A key feature of the new Wittgenstein reading is the way it places methodological importance on an insubstantial notion of nonsense as mere *non*-sense, a failure to give words a sense in one's employment of them; and the therapeutic advance made possible through the imaginative self-realization that what one had previously taken for genuine under-

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12. Cavell, *Claim*, 220.

13. Cf. Peter Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986). For persuasive criticism of the dogmatism involved in this stance see Oskari Kuusela, *The Struggle Against Dogmatism: Wittgenstein and the Concept of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008).

14. I do not mean to suggest that any of the new Wittgensteinians would support the standard interpretation of Cavell on skepticism. The support it lends to this interpretation is, perhaps, *only* apparent. But it is interesting to note that Putnam, who once accepted the new Wittgenstein reading, renounced his allegiance to this aspect of Wittgenstein's thought precisely on the grounds that it trades in a highly problematic idea of grammatically-based nonsense. See Hilary Putnam, "Wittgenstein: Pro & Con", in *Philosophy in an Age of Science*, ed. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

standing had in fact been one's own imaginative capacity to hallucinate a sense. The new Wittgensteinians are more subtle about how we achieve grammatical insight than Hacker but, nonetheless, their (apparent) view of Cavell on skepticism can still seem to be a skepticism-defeating elaboration of Wittgenstein's teaching as one might imagine it expressed in this remark: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense."[15]

Is Cavell offering a Once-and-for-All Response?

But, despite the power of the standard interpretation of Cavell on skepticism and the considerable weight of scholarship that apparently supports it, the difficulties of this reading are, upon unprejudiced reflection, overwhelming. For a start, on this reading Cavell comes across as staggeringly unoriginal. The basic position was, in fact, sketched out by Strawson as long ago as 1959 in his book *Individuals*, where he remarks: "[The skeptic] quietly pretends to accept a conceptual scheme, but at the same time quietly rejects one of the conditions of its employment."[16] The connection between Strawson and the standard reading of Cavell is straightforward. Since *claiming* involves applying concepts in judgments so discerning *the conditions of claiming* can be equated with discerning the conditions of the rightful employment of the concepts (or the conceptual scheme) involved in such claiming. The two accounts are virtually equivalent.

But does the picture of Cavell as Strawson redux do justice to Cavell's conception of the role of skepticism in philosophy, one that must accommodate the claim that "skepticism cannot, or must not, be denied"[17]? We will return to consider this point in detail.

Furthermore, as Williams correctly sees, if the extent of Cavell's contribution is a variation on Strawson then "we have a refutation as definitive as we ever see in philosophy"[18] — thereby starkly contradicting one of Cavell's central tenets. And it won't

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15. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §464. See also §119.
16. Peter Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959), 24.
17. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism & Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 5.
18. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 16.

help to protect Cavell here by carping that the term "refutation" should be reserved for the business of *answering* the skeptic. Skepticism would indeed be refuted in a wider but perfectly intelligible sense if, assuming the Strawsonian diagnosis works, it is fully and completely *dissolved.* An unintelligible problem is no problem at all. There is nothing left that requires a response.

To make matters worse, Strawson's diagnosis leaves one wanting to hear a great deal more about what the legitimate conditions of employment of a conceptual scheme are. And so, too, with Cavell (on the standard interpretation) and the conditions for legitimate claiming. On this reading of Cavell it is possible to complain, as Williams and Stroud[19] before him have indeed complained: if *this* is what Cavell is up to then he owes us a theory of the conditions of intelligibility or of what it takes to make genuine claims that are assessable in the epistemic terms of true or false, justified or unjustified, known or unknown. And, of course, Cavell nowhere supplies such a theory of intelligibility or of genuine claiming.

Not-Knowing & Meaning

I take it that the problems with the standard interpretation are sufficiently numerous and damaging for us to look for another approach. I will argue that getting Cavell on skepticism properly into focus allows us to see the importance of aspects of our lives that are not well-viewed from an epistemological point of view, that is, as matters of epistemic assessment from the detached perspective that is particularly associated with the traditional concept of knowledge as founded on a fixed and impersonal structure of reasons. These overlooked aspects of our lives are what I will call matters of not-knowing.[20]

The most compelling reason to take issue with the standard interpretation is that it is in the business of refutation in the wide sense of providing *a once and for all dismissal of the problem*: if not an answer to the skeptical conclusion — negating what the skeptic affirms — then a dissolution of the skeptical argument or problem on the

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19. Stroud, *Significance*, 261.
20. What is to the fore, then, is not-knowing in the sense that philosophers have wished to know. In some areas (e.g., morality, aesthetics), the appreciation of not-knowing in that sense gives rise to a deeper appreciation that nothing counts as (ordinary) knowing either.

grounds of its ultimate unintelligibility. Countering this, Cavell is unfailingly clear and insistent that one of his main ambitions in his writing is "to attempt to keep philosophy open to the threat or temptation of skepticism."[21] In no way does Cavell want to answer, undermine, overcome, or close off access to skepticism or the skeptical impulse. Indeed a central feature of Cavell's method is *not* to take sides in philosophical disputes. In order to better understand this gnomic practice we need to attend to Cavell's appeal to certain procedures of ordinary language philosophy associated with Austin and Wittgenstein that have, in many philosopher's eyes, been thoroughly discredited and so are all but forgotten in contemporary philosophy.[22] Cavell's untimeliness is one of the main reasons that his philosophy falls on deaf ears and, as a consequence of that, that the standard interpretation has become, precisely, standard.

In philosophizing Cavell situates himself as one who responds to philosophical puzzlement by the method of recounting or recalling criteria, which, according to his Wittgenstein-inspired vision of language, "articulate the ordinary."[23] The theme of the ordinary — alongside skepticism, the most difficult and many-sided theme in Cavell's work[24] — can be initially approached by attending to the fact that criteria are "our" (actually or potentially or hopefully) shared criteria for the application of concepts that competent speakers are perfectly (routinely, uneventfully) familiar with: concepts of mind and its inner and outer workings, and of ordinary or everyday things, actions, objects and events. The concepts at issue are not specialized or esoteric but commonplace, familiar, workaday: the sort of concepts any competent speaker of the language knows how to use (or is expected to): such as being red, or what things counts as tables, or what gestures or actions count as an expression of pain, or as having had a dream, or what we call a tree as opposed to a bush or a shrub or a vine, what is rain as opposed to drizzle, what a cloud, a shadow, what sunshine and so on and so on. From this flows a point of great methodological importance in Cavell's thinking: *that the philosopher has no special authority in eliciting criteria.* Since the philosopher has no expert knowledge nor any special claim on our atten-

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21. Cavell, *Quest*, 35.
22. This is not to say that Cavell is an "ordinary language philosopher" as that is commonly understood. Cavell's notion of the *ordinary* is not a stable site for refuting the skeptic (as ordinary language philosophers tend to suppose, e.g., Austin, Strawson) but the unstable site of contrary incentives towards, and away from, skepticism.
23. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (La Salle: Open Court, 1990), 68.
24. Perhaps it would be better to speak of an extendable thematics of the ordinary (hence, of skepticism) in Cavell's writings.

tion — since what is at issue is the almost ubiquitous natural capacity to speak in one's native tongue — he or she is in the same boat as every other master of the language to accept or reject this elicitation. And that applies no less to the two sides of the confrontation between the philosopher of ordinary language and the skeptic.

To further elaborate this vision: linguistic communication depends upon what Cavell calls being "attuned" in our criteria, which is a matter of sharing criteria as well as following, or being prepared to adopt, each other's projections of criteria into new or future or just different contexts. Nothing explains or guarantees this attunement and the capacity to remain attuned through the slings and sorrows and contingencies of outrageous fortune: not meanings, not conventions, not rules, not basic terms, not foundational beliefs. As Cavell puts it, "nothing is deeper than the fact, or the extent, of agreement itself."[25] No philosophical explanation can explain this agreement; and no philosophical explanation is deeper than it.

Here is the first entry point for the theme of not-knowing. Cavell is saying that we do not know any theory of language or any theory of knowledge or any theory of mind capable of explaining why we are attuned when we are and why we fall out of attunement when we do. But far from this concession being regarded as a weakness Cavell turns it into a strength by making it a central plank of his method of philosophizing, remarking:

> The ordinary language critic [is] at the mercy of his opposition […] a test of his criticism must be whether those to whom it is directed accept its truth, since they are as authoritative as he in evaluating the data upon which it will be based.[26]

The attempt to build a reading of Cavell around the claim that the skeptic is inevitably unintelligible is here seen to crumble into rubble. There is no inevitability about a diagnosis of unintelligibility and it cannot be even provisionally established unless and until a thorough examination has been made of what the skeptic says and under what conditions: To whom? Under what circumstances? Given what stakes or assumptions or allegiances? And, one must add: *unless and until* the skeptic himself acknowledges

25. Cavell, *Claim*, 32.
26. Cavell, *Must*, 241.

that he has been speaking nonsensically. Only then can the diagnosis be definitively established. If the skeptic does not accept a diagnosis of meaningless attaching to his words then that counts against, and threatens to undermine, the diagnosis. We simply *do not know* that the skeptic is speaking nonsense without the skeptic's acknowledgement and say-so — which is not to say we cannot decide for practical purposes, or from exhaustion, or boredom, that his words are nonsense, meaning that we cannot here and now do anything with them or with the skeptic's explanations of them. The upshot is that the diagnosis of unintelligibility carries little weight, and no finality, without the skeptic's own acknowledgement.[27] Initially it is a stand-off. Whether it remains so becomes a highly personal matter of whether I am inclined to continue the conversation with the skeptic, to await a change of mind on his part, or mine. Perhaps I can make something of his words after all, say, tomorrow or the day after that; or perhaps I simply hope for a further illumination that will persuade the skeptic of his own incoherence.

Skepticism & the Ordinary

Another point of divergence from the standard interpretation can be approached by asking, "What is skepticism?" The common assumption of almost every interpreter of Cavell's, not to mention the vast majority of current writers on modern skepticism, is to suppose that the answer to this question immediately fragments into specific skepticisms concerning some region we want to engage with, say, the external world, or other minds, or the past; as well as some story about which epistemic state is being called into question, say, certain knowledge, or everyday knowledge, or justified belief. But Cavell thinks quite otherwise, remarking,

> I do not [...] confine the term ["skepticism"] to philosophers who wind up denying that we can ever know; I apply it to any view which takes the existence of

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27. That this is also Wittgenstein's attitude is strongly suggested by his repeated and dogged attempts in *On Certainty* to give sense to Moore's paradoxical and apparently pointless (hence *non-sensical*) pronouncement "I know that here is a hand". And in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein remarks, "When a sentence is called senseless [...] a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation" (§500). But such withdrawn words can, of course, return if one finds a way of employing them.

the world to be a problem of knowledge [...]. I hope it will not seem perverse that I lump views in such a way, taking the very raising of the question of knowledge in a certain form, or spirit, to constitute skepticism, regardless of whether a philosophy takes itself to have answered the question affirmatively or negatively.[28]

The most important thing to note here that that Cavell labels *both* traditional external world skepticism as well as constructive epistemology, that attempts to prove the existence of an external world, as forms of "skepticism." This will seem perverse or bizarre without a proper appreciation of the motivation for this way of thinking. Let me explain.

Cavell's approach to skepticism is everywhere coloured by the experience in his early days as a graduate student in philosophy of the confrontation between ordinary language philosophy and skepticism. On Cavell's understanding of this confrontation the way our criteria come to grief in modern skepticism represents how any ordinary concept, at any time, in any mouth, or text, can come to philosophical grief. So the term "skepticism" comes to name the violence we do to our everyday criteria for the applications of ordinary concepts whether by way of excessive doubt or constructive epistemological ambitions to quell such doubt. In so far as both traditional skepticism and constructive epistemology attack our ordinary criteria (of knowledge or justification or belief or...) in language they are *both* expressions of the skeptical impulse.

It is worth remarking that the basis of skepticism is here being understood fundamentally in semantic, not epistemic, terms. From this Cavellian perspective, skepticism not a matter of our failing to satisfy some demanding standard of justification or certainty; rather, it arises from a reflection on how the application of criteria comes to seem disappointing within a certain kind of philosophical reflection in so far as it fails to conclusively establish the reality of whatever the criteria are criteria of. And this shortcoming of criteria undermines our claims to know since "all our knowledge, everything we assert or question (or doubt or wonder about...) is governed not merely by what we understand as 'evidence' or 'truth conditions,' but by criteria."[29]

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28. Cavell, *Claim*, 46.
29. Ibid., 14.

To make this enlarged idea of skepticism clearer let us consider as an example Peter Unger's discussion of flatness. On Unger's view when we say that a table is flat that by common standards would be deemed flat (not warped or bent or broken etc.) we do not speak truly because if we look at the table surface more closely — say, with the aid of a powerful magnifying glass or microscope — we will discover that the surface is actually covered in tiny bumps and crevices that are undetectable to the naked eye. On the basis of this consideration he concludes that it's not *really* flat after all despite what we say in everyday speech. 'Flat', as Unger understands it, is an *absolute concept* for which the criterion of employment he proposes is this: *a surface is flat only in so far as there is no surface that is flatter*. Given this criterion Unger fairly soon acknowledges that "we should at least suspend judgment on the matter of whether there are any physical objects with flat surfaces".[30] That is, according to this view perhaps *nothing* is flat and we *never* speak truly when we say that a table or a bench or a plank of wood or a pancake (etc.) is flat. Everyday thought and talk is convicted of systematic and ineradicable error and various accommodations and qualifications have to be made to explain our practice of saying that things are flat when they are not.

Here Peter Unger is suffering from what we might call a small bout of skepticism in the Cavell's sense, since he is openly attacking the ordinary criteria for whether some ordinary object, like a table, is flat or not. And so, a new philosophical sub-discipline is borne... flatness skepticism!

To Accommodate or Not?

A qualification is necessary, however. Cavell does not simply equate skepticism with an attack on ordinary criteria, for example, our usual criteria for flatness. Although many of his pronouncements are misleading on this issue, Cavell's considered opinion is that *skepticism is an attack on (our attunement in) ordinary criteria that we refuse to accommodate ourselves to*.[31] For example, we might accommodate ourselves to Unger's criteria of flatness at least whilst in conversation with him — in which case it would not be a case of skepticism after all. We would not then feel our

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30. Peter Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1975), 67.
31. Cf. Cavell, "The Argument of the Ordinary", in *Conditions*.

access to the world or others (or just *this* other) teetering. But such an accommodation would have consequences of course. We would lose the ordinary contrasts between flat and bumpy or curved or irregular or uneven and so on. And what would become of such terms as "flatten" if nothing is flat? It looks as if we would need another word for everyday (non-absolute) flatness since that's something we needed our ordinary concept for. Perhaps we could handle these consequences in a way that has no parallel when it comes to an attack on a best case of perceptual knowledge.[32] But there is no sharp line dividing cases which we can and do accommodate to, from cases which we cannot or will not.

Now once this phenomenon of attacking the ordinary (understood in terms of what Wittgensteinian calls criteria) is in focus it is clear that the same thing happens in constructive epistemology too: think of Descartes' treatment of certainty where the (extraordinary!) criteria he deploys — namely, indubitability, the *impossibility* of doubt — effectively rules out there being anything certain, at least in extra-mental reality.[33] Indeed, pressing upon this criterion even threatens the supposed certainties of intra-mental reality, too, since we can always raise some minor doubt about whether we are applying concepts correctly to our "inner" goings-on.[34] Descartes's notorious metaphysicalization of doubt shows a similar distain for our ordinary criteria since we do not normally regard the statement "But perhaps you dreamt the whole thing?" as a legitimate doubt in ordinary circumstances where we are asked to testify to the facts in, say, tennis matches, courts of law, scientific laboratories, or senate committees. In all of these cases it is not at all obvious — is it even plausible? — to suppose that what Unger or Descartes' meditator is saying is nonsense, as the nonsense policeman reading of Wittgenstein would have us believe. Our notion of sense is not all-or-nothing but comes in degrees; and we seem to have to acknowledge that the skeptic makes at least *some* sense; or at least we must suppose his words may make a sense we do not currently comprehend in so far as a native speaker of the language who is not mad or psychotic or merely playing with words (etc.) takes himself to be speaking intelligibly, something that bears on our sense of what makes sense. Of

32. If such a best case fails then we can reason, "If we don't know *this* then we don't know *anything* (on the basis of the senses)."

33. René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Vols. I-III*, ed. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

34. John Austin, "Other Minds," *Philosophical Papers* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1961).

course, admitting that is consistent with accepting the way in which assaults upon our ordinary criteria, the more extreme they get, increasingly undermine the point of (or the value of, or our interest in) using the concept in question.

The fragility of our criteria, their liability to distortion, idealization and repudiation, typically shows up most pointedly or acutely in the areas of epistemology (traditional skepticism, foundationalism, etc.) and metaphysics (say, various invidious distinctions between "appearance" and "reality"). And in these disputes since the question of the elicitation of criteria is one that we are all equally authoritative about then we cannot appeal to any independent facts or rule-books or judges to establish who is right and who wrong in what we take to be criteria — say, for flatness, or a piece of paper, or a hand, or what counts as a chair, etc. etc. In every case it is a matter for *investigation* — what Wittgenstein would call a *grammatical* investigation. There is no initial claim that one's opponent speaks nonsensically. Rather, there is an initial experience of losing one's way with these words of another (perhaps another side of oneself), not finding them natural projections from past usage, not seeing their point or value or interest. That is to say, the matter of nonsense does not enter at the beginning of philosophical perplexity as some readings of Wittgenstein might have it but, if ever, only upon its resolution; and always, ultimately, for practical purposes. Contrary to the suggestion of some new Wittgensteinians, we need not decide to count the perplexing words as nonsense — we could suspend judgment and await further explanation.[35] And if we do make a judgment of nonsense this resolution remains open to being contested since it comes without any guarantee — indeed is based on nothing more than one's own sense of what makes sense. If words as spoken today lack sense then there is nothing to stop someone giving them a sense tomorrow. This casts the question "Who is the skeptic?" in a new and disturbing light since *any* projection of criteria might turn out to be an idiosyncratic projection that fails to be acknowledged by others. Of course, one can hold out for a future or eventual community that will acknowledge one's criteria where the actual community does not. But, once again, holding out has its costs and limits. For this reason Cavell says Wittgenstein's "is a vision [of language] as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying."[36]

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35. Cf. Cavell, "The Argument of the Ordinary," in *Conditions*.
36. Cavell, *Must*, 52.

Here it is worth recalling Cavell's memorable remark,

> The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason.[37]

This opens up another entry point to the theme of not-knowing that I have been pursuing: we *do not know* that our words make sense (or not) on any given occasion of use. Which is not to say that we know that they do not. Rather we *trust* that they do. We have nothing else to go on than "our sense that they [do] make sense," an unsupported intuition that is tested by the acknowledgement, or lack of acknowledgement, of others. By pursuing this thought we see the motive for the connection Cavell sees between skepticism and tragedy and madness, everything we say running the risk of emptiness, isolation, and self-defeat. Of course, by the same token, everything we say is no less open to the possibilities of contentfulness, community and self-becoming expressiveness.

Why, then, did Cavell speak — apparently quite misleadingly — of "a schema for the potential overthrowing or undercutting of skepticism"[38]? Here it is of particular importance to clearly distinguish, as perhaps Cavell does not, Cavell's *generic conception* of skepticism — the unaccommodated repudiation of our attunement in ordinary criteria — from *specific expressions* of skepticism, and realize that the schema refers specifically to *Cartesian* external world skepticism, not everything that might be called "external world skepticism." Nothing in Cavell's practice forbids an eventual diagnosis of one's having an illusion of meaning so long as one admits that it is fragile and inevitably conditional. Any such diagnosis is highly specific, a response to given words on a given occasion, and in no way overthrows or undercuts a skepti-

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37. Cavell, *Claim*, 20.
38. Ibid., 220.

cal problematic such as external world skepticism in all of its variety and certainly not skepticism in the enlarged sense that Cavell employs (i.e., the generic sense). Indeed even Cartesian external world skepticism is never dissolved once and for all; after therapeutic undermining and diagnosis it is perhaps set aside, felt to no longer create a skeptical crisis. But we can lose conviction in today's convictions; and lose faith in today's dissolutions.

The great distance between the standard reading of Cavell on skepticism and Cavell's actual stance can perhaps be best brought out by considering an example. Hans-Johann Glock elaborates his Strawsonian conception of the anti-skeptical philosopher as nonsense policeman writing,

> [D]oubt and justification are subject to grammatical rules. In drawing limits to the meaningful employment of words, these rules sets bounds to meaningful doubt, limits to what could possibly count as questioning or vindicating a claim of a particular kind. Doubt and justification make sense only relative to the rules guiding the use for the expressions involved [...] reasons must come to an end [...]. when, after going through the ordinary procedures for assessing a claim we are confronted with doubts which are not provided for by our rules, i.e. which do not count as legitimate moves in the language game. If I have justified a claim in the ways licensed by these rules, I can only react to further challenges by rejecting them.[39]

From a Cavellian perspective this way of thinking of skepticism — as "doubts not provided for by our rules," hence illegitimate and rejectable — almost entirely misses the power of skepticism in its confident suggestion that it is a simple matter to say what is or is not "provided for" or "licensed" by our "rules." *What* rules? *What* licences? *What* provisions? And what authority does the philosopher who says this claim to have? How does he come to be in a position to lay down or enforce the grammatical rules of the language? It is precisely Cavell's point in his remarks about the projection of (our criteria for) a concept that there are indefinitely many uses or directions of

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39. Hans-Johann Glock, "Stroud's Defence of Cartesian Scepticism — A Linguistic Response," *Philosophical Investigations* 13:1 (1990): 56-7.

projection that are "licensed" by whatever we may or may not be able to provide in the way of rules. Glock suggests that it is quite obvious what the rules (and projections of rules) of language are, as if they could be simply read off from our practice. But ordinarily we are not aware of appealing to rules in order to speak intelligibly. And even where we do so, rules are of no avail in the confrontation with skepticism for the skeptic is not concerned with what *normally* happens. His concern is with extraordinary possibilities for which no provision has been made. Even in those cases where there are explicit agreements about rules under normal circumstances, there are typically no rules for the extraordinary circumstances in which skepticism arises. And there is the familiar point that very often there are no rules for the application of rules and even if their were they would not exclude all possible disagreements and divergences and innovations in application.

Skepticism confronts us with the problem of how to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate "moves" in language, but that this is a *problem* is nowhere evident in the quoted passage. Since language has no ready-made and agreed-upon rule-book and rules do not form a surveyable structure to which we can appeal to settle skeptical doubts, skepticism cannot be simply "rejected" in this way. Indeed, in so far as there are rules of language — and many remarks of Wittgenstein are designed to question the extent and explanatory power of invoking rules to explain language[40] — they are part of what the skeptic is putting under strain. And, again, philosophers have no special authority in the matter.

Not-Knowing & Existence

A second entry point for the theme of not-knowing concerns what we might call the ground of our attunement in criteria. If, as Cavell suggests, criteria mediate the relation between concepts and the world like transcendental schemata in Kant's system, then we can ask: what is our relation to the existence of the world that is taken for granted in our capacity to apply concepts to the people and things of this world? The traditional project of epistemology attempted to *prove* that the external world exists,

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40. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §80−86.

something Descartes only achieves by invoking the guarantee of a well-intentioned God.[41] Kant called our lack of such a proof a scandal.[42] Hume called it a malady.[43] As we have seen, Cavell regards this attempt at constructive proof as itself an expression of skepticism, something that reveals what he enigmatically calls "the truth of skepticism", which he puts this way, "that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing."

The phrase "what we think of as knowing" refers to the philosophical idea of knowing with certainty, the goal of the traditional quest for certainty which dominated modern epistemology for centuries. Misled by this formulation McGinn and Williams read Cavell as supposing that there is a basic set of framework beliefs or presuppositions — a belief in the existence of the external world being a prime example — that are not matters of knowledge or justification. Williams then reasonably complains, "[i]f we say the propositions in question are factual how have we rebutted the skeptic, who claims that what we think of as knowledge rests on factual presuppositions that cannot be justified?"[44]

Since, as we have seen, Cavell is not attempting to refute the skeptic in any sense, let us focus on the more subtle misinterpretation evident here. McGinn and Williams both take Cavell's apparent focus on the concepts of knowledge and certainty in his initial statement of the truth of skepticism too literally. Cavell's actual point is more radical: that *traditional epistemology as a whole* fails to do justice to the ground of our attunement in language, our natural relation to the world and each other. The skeptic prosecutes his doubts as if it is obvious that we ordinarily have a *belief* in the external world, which the skeptic reveals as standing in need of justification. But, on Cavell's view, this is not at all an accurate description of our situation but more or less an invention of skepticism, one that plays straight into the skeptic's hands — a point that curiously tends to escape notice in philosophical discussion.

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41. Descartes, "Meditations."
42. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), xl.
43. Hume, *Treatise*, bk. 1, pt. 7, sect. 2.
44. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 159.

Inspired by Wittgenstein's remark, "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul,"[45] Cavell improvises, "Nor am I of the opinion that there is a world, nor that the future will be like the past, etc. If I say that such ideas are the ground upon which any particular beliefs I may have about the world, or the others in it, are founded, this does not mean that I cannot find this ground to crack".[46] Cavell speaks of our "natural relation" to the world, and of "this sense of intimacy with existence, or intimacy lost."[47] These sparse and gestural attempts to give words to an inchoate intuition are not to be understood as first attempts to state a thesis; they are, rather, voicings of what Cavell calls "a genuine, a fruitful, perplexity."[48] It seems irresistible to say that here we do not know what to say, which, as Wittgenstein tells us, is the sort of perplexity that incites philosophy. Put otherwise, we have a condition of not-knowing where that registers not a gap in our knowledge that must be filled up, not a failure of the human condition as such, but only a failure of epistemology in its pretension to once and for all put this perplexity to rest. The stance of not-knowing is internal to Cavell's attempt to keep the question open.

Why does Cavell describes this perplexity as *fruitful*, however? I understand this to say that a condition of not-knowing is not to be equated with a condition of not-saying or silence. It is possible to make advances in the understanding of a perplexity, and in providing an accurate portrayal of its phenomenology without resolving it or denying its continuing power. For Cavell, this is a point where literature and philosophy profitably cross paths since, for one thing, literary expressiveness may take over where philosophical expressiveness runs aground and may even lead the way.[49] As we know, Cavell goes on to explore the way the intimacy or the loss of intimacy with existence is taken up (and arguably better expressed) by literary art, perhaps especially in Shakespearean tragedy and Romantic literature, respectively. The entry of literary tropes into philosophy at this point makes available a way of writing philosophy that says no more than it knows or, in literary art itself, presents ideas in a

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45. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, pt. 2, 178.
46. Cavell, *Must*, 240.
47. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 23.
48. Ibid., 22.
49. On Cavell's view, something like this is true of Shakespeare's anticipating the modern hyperbolic skepticism philosophy finds in Descartes. Cf. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

realm of not-knowing (for surely literature is that) and so, in either case, becomes a way of keeping a question open against the almost irresistible urge to close it off. It is precisely by finding imaginative ways to voice a certain disappointment with epistemology — its unsatisfying descriptions and explanations, its relentless need to intellectualize and universalize — that Cavell finds a way "to preserve [skepticism], as though the philosophical profit of the argument would be to show not how it might end but why it must begin and why it must have no end."[50]

The Importance of Not-Knowledge

I have focused on the theme of not-knowing in two main areas: our capacity for sense-making; and what skepticism reveals of our relation to the world and others. But I find variations on the theme everywhere in Cavell. It also shows up, to briefly touch on two more examples, in his treatment of moral and aesthetic judgement. The rationality or "logic" of both kinds of judgment leaves room for the possibility of what Cavell calls "rational disagreement"[51] where the rationality of neither party to a dispute is impugned by their disagreement despite their being in full command of the relevant facts of the case. This is something that a candidate for knowledge apparently cannot tolerate.[52] So morality and aesthetics are not areas of knowledge but, let us say, subjective understanding — which is not to say that it is not worthwhile to explore the astounding extent to which our subjective understandings agree or overlap.[53] The search for impersonal subjective understanding is one way to characterize Kant's treatment of aesthetic judgment in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In Cavell's transformation this becomes the search for community, the search for others

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50. Cavell, *Quest*, 5.
51. Cavell, *Claim*, 254.
52. These discourses fail to satisfy the a priori constraint of knowability that Crispin Wright calls "cognitive command": "in any region of thought where our beliefs are the product of genuinely representational cognitive function... differences of opinion... have to involve some form of cognitive shortcoming." "Precis of 'Truth & Objectivity'," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56:4 (1996): 863-8, 866.
53. It is worth noting how this way of thinking undermines traditional distinctions in philosophy such as that between non-cognitivism and cognitivism. Moral and aesthetics judgments are not candidates of knowledge for Cavell, so count as non-cognitive; but since they are also judgments capable of truth and rational support, they are presumably also cognitive. Clearly the traditional distinction is unable to do justice to this region of Cavell's thought.

who share one's way of seeing things, looking for what Wittgenstein calls "agreement not in opinions" but "in *language*"[54] (something he elsewhere describes as "the possibilities of phenomena"[55]).

The moral of the theme of not-knowing in Cavell's work is that vitally important aspects of our lives are covered up, lost to us, by treating them in epistemological terms as items of objective knowledge, justification, belief and doubt. The traditional project of epistemology attempts to build a fortress against skepticism from an impersonal perspective — in modern philosophy, typically (and hopelessly!) from sensory materials.[56] On Cavell's view this project, far from ensuring our relation to the world, actually stands in the way of giving a realistic account of the depth or intimacy of our attachment to the world and others, even — something I have not touched on — the distinctiveness of our relation to ourselves. These are subjective matters of (the achievement or failure of) acknowledgement and responsibility rather than objective matters of knowledge and doubt.

Cavell's writes:

> What skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of others is not to be known, but acknowledged.[57]

And, apparently in tension with this:

> I do not propose the idea of acknowledgement as an alternative to knowing but rather as an interpretation of it... "For the point of forgoing knowledge is, of course, to know," as if what stands in the way of further knowledge is knowledge itself, as it stands, as it conceives of itself.[58]

In the first passage acknowledgement is opposed to knowledge; and in the second it is spoken of as another interpretation of knowledge. But this tension is merely appar-

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54. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §242.
55. Ibid., §90.
56. That this project is doomed to continually collapse into privacy and then solipsism does not, astoundingly, seem to undermine the endeavour.
57. Cavell, *Must*, 324.
58. Cavell, *Quest*, 8.

ent. In this region of thought we must forgo the demand for the impersonal (hence universal) "knowledge" of epistemology — with its foundationalist mythology of an impersonal 'order of reasons'[59] — to recover the sort of ordinary knowledge that is expressed in a subject's acknowledgement of another, or in one's admission or confession to another or oneself. Here I find it helpful to recall Wittgenstein's remark:

> Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.[60]

Our ordinary involvement in the world is a matter of actions and reactions that must be acknowledged (or accepted) as a condition of ordinary knowledge. Wittgenstein repeats this lesson: "Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement".[61] One can know the genuineness of another's expression of feeling on a certain occasion, for example, without being able to say how one knows as traditional epistemology demands.[62] Must uncovering this dependence of knowledge of another on one's own perhaps unaccountable sensibility and sensitivity impugn one's knowledge?[63]

Since acknowledgement and acceptance are things one *does* they are matters of personal responsibility. The theme of not-knowing thus opens up into the need to reawaken one's sense of the deeply personal nature of one's attachments (to the world, or others, or oneself) and one's own responsibility for maintaining or disowning them. The importance of this return of the human subject to itself in philosophy is its power to reawaken or enliven one's sense of oneself, one's attachments to others and one's world; and the importance of not-knowing in the liberation of one's creative (hence destructive) powers to remake oneself, recommit or renounce one's attachments to others, and to reconceive one's world.

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59. On the relation of a foundationalist 'order of reasons' to traditional epistemology see Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*.

60. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §204

61. Ibid., §378.

62. Wittgenstein speaks here of "imponderable evidence". *Investigations*, pt. 2, sect. xi, 358-60.

63. A fuller discussion of these issues would have to explore Cavell's far-reaching claim that "we live our skepticism" in our acquaintance with other minds. Here, too, the theme of not-knowing is to the fore: one formulation of what he intends speaks of "this ignorance of about our everyday position towards each other". *Claim*, 440.