Cavell and Hume on Skepticism, Natural Doubt, and the Recovery of the Ordinary

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One curious aspect of Stanley Cavell's investigations into skepticism is his relative neglect of one of philosophy's most important skeptics, David Hume. Cavell's thinking about skepticism is located in relation to Wittgenstein, Kant, Emerson, Austin, and others. But while Hume is occasionally mentioned, those encounters are brief and generally dismissive. In "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," for example, Cavell remarks that while "Hume is always a respectable place to begin,"[1] Kant is "deeper and obscurer" (MWM, 88). The important Cavell scholar Timothy Gould follows Cavell in this, writing that: "Hume's tactic of playing billiards as a relief from the melancholy of reflection and skepticism is a relatively unsophisticated strategy, compared to some that I know of."[2]

Except, perhaps, for the idea that Kant is more obscure, I think this assessment of Hume to be a mistake on Cavell et al.'s part, as I think there are important and helpful resources to be culled from *le bon David* for those of us working through the constellation of topics Cavell has done so much to clarify and to confront. Cavell's, like Gould's, discounting Hume so quickly, and in my view thoughtlessly, is, I suspect, a casualty of the twentieth century's dominant readings of Hume either as a kind of proto-positivist, as a psychologizing naturalist, more recently as a realist, or, as we will see later, a "paltry" empiricist. In this essay, in conjunction with another I have produced, I hope to go some distance towards both remedying the neglect of Hume in Cavell studies and correcting those misleading readings of Hume.[3] In par-

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1. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002/1969), 86. Hereafter, "MWM."

2. Timothy Gould, *Hearing Things: Voice and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 11.

3. Peter S. Fosl, "Scepticism and Naturalism in Cavell and Hume," in *Stanley Cavell and Skepticism*, a special issue of the *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 5 (2015): 29-54;

ticular, I wish here to compare and contrast Hume and Cavell along two axes central to each of their thoughts about skepticism: (1) the naturalness (and unnaturalness) of skeptical doubt and (2) the recovery or attainment of the ordinary in the wake of skeptical doubt. One might regard these as, respectively, moments of loss and return. Let's begin with the loss, the naturalness of loss, one might say the loss of naturalism.

1. *Skeptical Doubt as Natural.* One of the dimensions of human life that Hume finds impresses itself on us in unbidden ways is skepticism. Michael Williams has argued that in the context of ordinary language skeptical doubts are "unnatural" and not compelling, without a means of getting off the ground, or as Cavell might put it, without a way to respond to a "reasonable" question.[4] But both Cavell and Hume — in what I think is a crucial similarity between them and one that aligns them against many of the critiques of skepticism that interpret it as mere confusion — regard the rise of skeptical doubts, as in a fashion, natural. Hume writes that "sceptical doubt arises naturally"[5] and that it, "both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cur'd" (T 1.4.2.57, SBN 218).

Now, indeed, those doubts arise, for Hume, only in the solitary context of "profound and intense reflection" (T 1.4.2.57, SBN 218), a context different, as Timothy Gould breezily observes, from the region of life where Hume says, "I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three of four hour's amusement I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther" (T 1.4.7.9, SBN 269) — an account, I think, fairly described as portraying the meaningless and not-compelling quality (if not exactly unintelligibility) of skeptical inquiry. Hume similarly also renders the scene of skeptical inquiry as of a different "sphere," other to what he terms "common life" (T 1.4.7.13, SBN 271).

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4. Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979; new edition 1999), 131. Hereafter, "CR."

5. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 2 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2007), 1.4.2.57 [Book 1, Part 4, Section 2, Paragraph 57], SBN [Selby-Bigge-Nidditch edition page] 218. Hereafter, "T"; originally published 1739 (Books 1 & 2) and 1740 (Book 3).

Hume, of course, declares that in opposition to extreme forms of skeptical doubt: "I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people" (T 1.4.7.10, SBN 269) in the contexts of common life. Though in a sense skeptical doubt is a malady that cannot be cured, Hume calls upon the traditionally therapeutic effects of "nature," which "suffices to that purpose [i.e., of dispelling doubt], and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium" (T 1.4.7.9, SBN 269). It is just this sense of nature as a therapeutic defeater of skeptical doubt, in the face of which skepticism is in Strawson's characterization "powerless" and unintelligible, that has led so many important interpreters to read Hume as anti-skeptical and a realist.[6]

But there is a countervailing demand of nature, not so commonly quoted, that Hume identifies in fact as the "origin" of his philosophy (T 1.4.7.12, SBN 271) — and, not irrelevantly, of his skeptical doubt. Hume writes that:

> At the time, therefore that I am tir'd with amusement and company, and have indulg'd a *reverie* in my chamber or a solitary walk by a river-side, I feel my mind all collected within itself, and am naturally *inclin'd* to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I met with so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation [...]. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition [...]. (T 1.4.7.12, SBN 270-71)

There is something, according to Hume, natural in the sense of being necessary as well as unbidden about this sort of reflection for him: "even suppose [...] curiosity and ambition shou'd not transport me into speculations without the sphere of common life, it wou'd necessarily happen...", since "'tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects which are the subject of daily conversation and action" (T 1.4.7.13, SBN 271). Moreover, as the trajectory of

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6. Norman Kemp Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume," *Mind* N.S. 14 (1905): 149-73; 335-47; Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941); Peter Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Routledge, 2008), use of "powerless," 13; John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a sense of the realist or "New Hume" interpretation, consult Rupert Read & Kenneth A. Richman, eds., *The New Hume Debate: Revised Edition* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Book 1 of the *Treatise* testifies and in what David Macarthur calls "Hume's insight," naturalistic epistemological investigations themselves lead to skepticism.[7]

Hume appreciates, as Cavell does, that there is nothing more human than the refusal or the wish to transcend or the impulse to speculate beyond the diurnal, the everyday, the ordinary and common; and indeed it stands prominently among Cavell's criticisms of recent philosophical critiques of skepticism that, unlike those of early modern philosophers, they do not take the naturalness of skepticism seriously. Cavell affirms the naturalness of the loss he wishes to redress, the denial he wishes to confront, the reasonableness of skeptical questions about our best cases, and the feeling of a kind separateness or alienation from others and the world:

> But when the experience created by such thought is there, it is something that presents itself to me as one, as I have wished to express it, of being sealed off from the world, enclosed within my own endless succession of experiences. It is an experience for which there must be a psychological explanation; but no such explanation would or should prove its epistemological insignificance. And I know of no philosophical criticism which proves it either. (CR 144)

> The moral [i.e. that "I can never know"] is a natural, inevitable extension of the conclusion drawn [i.e. that "in this best case I don't know"] [...]. The step from the conclusion about this object to the moral about knowledge as a whole is irresistible. It is no step at all. The world drops out. [...] What "best case" turns out to mean can be expressed in a major premiss: If I know anything, I know *this*. (CR 145-46)

The irresistible extension of skepticism has produced a sense of being sealed off and of being able only to look at the world from the outside (an idea implicit in philosophers sceptically speaking about an "external" world) that has "become [...] natural" to us. Cavell finds the modern mind exploring it in film, as if we have come to view the world on a cinematic screen in the perceptual theaters of our minds: "Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling un-

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7. David Macarthur, "Naturalism and Skepticism," in Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (eds.), *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2004), 108.

seen. We do no so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self."[8] Hume affirms just this sort of way of conceiving perception, if not exactly the self, when he writes, "The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations" (T 1.4.6.4, SBN 252-53).

Cavell does, however, qualify the naturalness of this sense of loss and distance to the world by writing about the basis for skeptical conclusions (e.g., that "we do not know the existence of objects"), if it makes sense to speak strictly about skeptical conclusions,[9] that:

> I want to show several things: that it [i.e. the basis of skeptical conclusions] is *not* fully natural, and that it is not *fully* unnatural […].

> It is not the philosopher's choice to produce this basis. Given his context and object and his question reasonably asked, *the basis is as determined by ordinary language* as the kind of basis we can offer about an Austinian object is. So the basis is not absurd. But it is not fully natural either […]. (CR 161)

The naturalness, and thence unchosen quality, of partially unnatural skeptical inquiries is rooted for Cavell, it turns out, in the ordinary itself. That skeptical conclusions emerge naturally from the ordinary is, indeed, one reason why Cavell finds the "actual" everyday (*älltaglichen*, *Umgangssprache*), and not (only) skeptical philosophy, to be as "pervasive a scene of illusion and trance and artificiality (of need) as Plato or

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8. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980; original edition 1971), 102. Cavell carries on in this passage discussing the depths to which cinema exhibits our skeptical despair (anticipating his 1981 *Pursuits of Happiness*): "It is our fantasies, now all but completely thwarted and out of hand, which are unseen and must be kept unseen. As if we could no longer hope that anyone might share them — at just the moment that they are pouring into the streets, less private than ever. So we are less than ever in a position to marry them to the world."

9. Of course, Cavell's example here, as well as others in the CR are only in qualified ways properly understood as skeptical propositions, since skepticism, understood in both the Pyrrhonian and Academic traditions, does not advance truth-claims, even negative truth claims. Without qualification, these conclusions are not skeptical but negative dogmatic assertions, or perhaps argumentative gambits meant to balance against contrary dogmatic claims (e.g., that "we do know the existence of objects"). That there may be possible modes of assertion consistent with skepticism (forms of assent, approval, yielding, living according to appearance, etc.) is a controversy Cavell elides here. And so we might understand his analysis to be limited to a specific understanding of skepticism — e.g. skepticism of the sort expressed in Descartes's "Meditation I."

Rousseau or Marx or Thoreau had found."[10] While for Hume skepticism results from a careful philosophical scrutiny of the general bases of human knowledge claims (i.e., reason and the senses), for Cavell the very conditions of the possibility of meaningful language — crucially, ordinary language as well as philosophical knowledge claims — bear within them skeptical potential such that they are also simultaneously and necessarily conditions for the possibility of the emergence of skeptical doubt. For Cavell this means that skepticism is not the product of a specific language game (call it the philosophers' or epistemologists' language game) but of language *überhaupt*, of humanness itself.

Those conditions for the possibility of meaningful human life generally that are also the source of the skeptical malady's incurable persistence are "criteria" *per se*. As Wittgenstein shows, meaningful human life depends upon shared criteria for talking, writing, thinking, and acting; but in Cavell's assessment, it is of the nature of criteria themselves to open the possibility of skeptical doubt. The most general criteria of human life by their very nature as criteria open "gaps" or yield to the opening of gaps between world, word, self, and others from which skeptical doubts emerge. This is so even for the criteria that no recognizably human being could "fail to know" (MWM, 96), that underwrite what Wittgenstein calls the "grammatical sentences" framing the essence of humanness and the essences of things in the human world, the criteria that make possible what have come to be called Wittgenstein's not-meaningfully-doubtable "hinge" propositions.[11] Cavell writes that:

> the skeptic's denial of our criteria is a denial to which criteria must be open. If the fact that we share, or have established, criteria is the condition under which we can think and communicate in language, then skepticism is a *natural* possibility of that condition, it reveals most perfectly the standing threat to

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10. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 46. Hereafter, "NYUA."

11. On "hinge" propositions see Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*: "the questions that we raise and our doubts depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. [...] That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted. But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just can't investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put"; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, edited and translated by G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1972), §§341-43, hereafter "OC." Curiously, Cavell says he had not read, had not forced himself to read, *On Certainty* by the time *The Claim of Reason* was written.

thought and communication, that they are only human, nothing more than natural to us.[12] One misses the drive of Wittgenstein if one is not [...] sufficiently open to the threat of skepticism (i.e., to the skeptic in oneself); or if one takes Wittgenstein [...] to deny the truth of skepticism. (CR 47)

Shared criteria make it possible for humans to agree. But criteria are necessarily "open" in the sense that the application or projection of criteria in new contexts in ways that sustain agreement is an ongoing affair for which we must assume responsibility, which cannot be justified by anything beyond ourselves, and which may always and already (I wish to say) stand vulnerable and open to disruption or misalignment.[13]

I may not follow you in future applications of words and in future deeds. You may not follow me. Our judgments may fall out of attunement, our lives may fall out of sync, and we may find ourselves at a loss in how to talk and act in the world. Hume's rowers may no longer find themselves able to row together (T 3.2.2.10, SBN 315). Instead of holding another's hand, I may find I can go no further and can do no better than to "turn my palms outward, as if to exhibit the kind of creature I am, and declare my ground occupied, only mine, ceding yours" (CR 115). In any case, "Join hands here as we may, one of the hands is mine, the other yours."[14]

Appeal to shared criteria can be disappointing, as it offers no "proof" of a scientific or deductive sort for the reality of, say, others' minds and their pain; and in

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12. The idea of "denial" here may be inconsistent with classical forms of Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism, too. I think other formulations, however, commonly accepted or, better, enlisted by skeptics remain consistent with Cavell's point — formulations, for example, such as "destabilizing" criteria, subjecting criteria to skeptical "*epochē*" or "suspension" or "doubt."

13. If writing in unqualified ways about skeptical conclusions distances Cavell from ancient skepticism, acknowledging the openness of criteria may be a way to align Cavell's thought with it, at least that of the ancient Pyrrhonians, who advocated adopting a posture of being "zetetic" or open. Zetetic openness is, according to Sextus Empiricus (fl. late 2nd century), one of the characteristic ways Pyrrhonian skeptics practice skepticism. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, in *Sextus Empiricus*, edited and translated by R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1.3.7 [Book 1, Chapter 3, line 7]: "The Sceptic School, then is also called 'Zetetic' from its activity in investigation and inquiry." Hereafter, "PH."

14. "If C. L. Barber is right [...] in finding that the point of comedy is to put society back in touch with nature, then this is one ground on which comedy and tragedy stand together [...]. The tragedy is that comedy has its limits. This is part of the sadness within comedy; the emptiness after a long laugh. Join hands here as we may, one of the hands is mine, the other yours"; from "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear," in Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; the 1987 edition was *Six Plays* ...), 110. Hereafter, "DK."

this disappointment there are "natural" reasons for finding the appeals OLP (ordinary language philosophy) makes empty and the universality of its voice a sham (CR 90). We may, in fact, wish it to be so. It is insufficient, therefore, and even dangerous on Cavell's account to demand a philosophical conclusion that will purge the scene of skepticism — under the false pretense that skeptical doubts are unnatural, that reason is always local, that the epistemologists' context is a false or "non-claim" context, that language includes indubitable "hinge" or "framework" propositions to settle our doubts, that we possess innate "clear and distinct" ideas certified by God or common sense or *nous*, that the transcendental conditions for the possibility of something preclude doubt, etc., etc., etc. Skeptical doubt and its avoidance of meaning for Cavell—its possibility at the very least — are rooted in the natural meaningfulness of human existence itself.

      2. *Nature and Recovering Ordinary, Common Life*.[15] Paul Grimstad points out, rightly I think, that Cavell's disappointment with empiricism and what he regards as its "paltry" understanding of experience is a disappointment with representationalism — in Kant's, Descartes's, Locke's, and others' portraying the objects of experience *merely* as perceptions — a criticism drawn long beforehand by Scottish common sense philosopher Thomas Reid (1710-96) and two hundred years later by Cavell's teacher, ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin (1911-60), against Hume and the positivists.[16] Once one adopts a representationalist position such as Des-

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      15. One might figure this recovery as Cavell's and Hume's therapeutic project. Wittgenstein, of course, is well known for advancing a model of philosophy as therapy; see, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Rush Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953; revised 2001), §133, hereafter "PI." Romanticism, with which Cavell also aligns himself, is also commonly understood to prescribe turning to the natural world in therapeutic ways. See James F. Peterman, *Philosophy as Therapy: An Interpretation and Defense of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophical Project* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992). The ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics, too, presented their practice as a kind of therapy, and so it is perhaps no accident that Sextus Empiricus's is associated with empiric medicine.

      16. Paul Grimstad, "Emerson Discomposed: Skepticism, Naturalism, and the Search for Criteria in 'Experience'," 163-76 in R. Eldridge and B. Rhie (eds.), *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: The Consequences of Skepticism* (New York: Continuum, 2011). See also Thomas Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) and J. L. Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962). Reid writes: "qualities must necessarily be in something that is figured, coloured, hard or soft, that moves or resists. It is not to these qualities, but to that which is the subject of them, that we give the name body. If any man should think fit to deny that these things are qualities, or that they require any subject, I leave him to enjoy his opinion as a man who denies first principles, and is not fit to be reasoned with"; Reid (1785), 18: Essay 1, Chapter 2, "Principles Taken For Granted." And Reid appeals to nature, too — but not, as Hume does, to the natural relations among ideas; rather for Reid, the appeal is to a natural relation between words and things: "That without a natural knowledge of the connection between these [natural] signs and the things signified by them, language could never have been

cartes's and Locke's "Way of Ideas," an approach to experience ultimately rooted in Gassendi and the atomist tradition,[17] skepticism is a natural, even logical, result: "for all the glory of transcendental idealism, it still requires that things in themselves drop out of the picture (to this gift from Kant Cavell has replied: 'thanks for nothing')."[18]

Early modern representationalism, according to this kind of OLP criticism, prejudges and distorts our relationship to the world and to others by establishing from the outset a metaphysical "gap," a "lack" that is purportedly always already present and can never be overcome. If one's starting point is that human beings perceive only perceptions, rather than external objects, one will never reach others and the external world — and Cavell wishes to reach others and the world, to restore ourselves to the world and to the community we have always already inhabited (where else could we be?). Cavell writes in "An Emerson Mood," seeming to balance or oscillate among individual, collective, and universal voices[19] — ordinary language philosophers', his, everyone's: "What the ordinary language philosopher is feeling — but I mean to speak just for myself in this — is that our relation to the world's existence is somehow closer than the ideas of believing and knowing are made to convey" — especially ideas of believing and "knowing" as they are defined by epistemologists and early modern philosophers working through the Way of Ideas.[20]

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invented and established among men; [...] which we may call the natural language of mankind"; Thomas Reid's 1764 *An Inquiry in to the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. D. R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 51, from Chapter 4, Section 3 ("Of Natural Signs"), paragraph 35. Cf. Reid on the same page (1764): "And if mankind had not these notions by nature, and natural signs to express them by, with all their wit and ingenuity they could never have invented language"; 51 (Section 2). For a similar, more contemporary view of the relation between language and the world compare Richard Fleming, *First Word Philosophy: Wittgenstein-Austin-Cavell, Writings on Ordinary Metaphysics* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004).

17. Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979; expanded edn. from *Savonarola to Bayle* in 2003), 99ff., 141ff.

18. Grimstad, "Emerson Discomposed," 165. Cavell's gratitude for Kant's exchanging things themselves for phenomena is expressed in his "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant (Terms and Conditions)," in Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 69. Hereafter "ETE"; cited at Grimstad, "Emerson Discomposed," 250n13.

19. The very politics of speaking for others is problematized by Linda Martín Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Culture Critique* 20 (1991-92): 5-32; and also by R. M. Berry, "'Is 'Us' Me?' Cultural Studies and the Universality of Aesthetic Judgments," 30-46 in R. Eldridge and B. Rhie (eds.), *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism* (New York: Continuum, 2011). Cf. n32 below.

20. "An Emerson Mood," ETE 22 (compare MWM 96). This passage also appears in "The Ordinary as the Uneventful," *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 192-93 (hereafter, "TOS"), the repetition apparently confirming Cavell's enduring satisfaction with he passage. In addition, at TOS 193, Cavell goes on in a passage shortened in ETE: "This sense of, let me say, my natural relation to existence is what Thoreau means by our being next to the laws of nature, by our neighboring the world, by our being beside ourselves. Emerson's idea of the

Cavell is fascinated by his/our "natural relation to nature" or "natural relation to existence," that "intimacy with existence, or intimacy lost" (ETE 23; TOS 193) among people and between people and the world that modern epistemology and modern skepticism deny. Across his career, especially through his naturalism, Cavell has explored that intimacy — its recovery as well as its loss — offering an account, or perhaps more accurately an accounting, that he thinks Wittgenstein and Austin, even in their "formidable attack on skepticism" (TOS 192), failed to provide (as well as an explanation in response to Hume's "failure" to explain the character of skeptical doubt, MWM 61). Cavell signals this project in remarks such as this from his 1989 *This New Yet Unapproachable America*: "Austin's and Wittgenstein's attacks on philosophy, and on skepticism in particular — in appealing to what they call the ordinary or everyday use of words — are counting on some intimacy between language and world that they were never able satisfactorily to give an account of."[21]

Hannah Arendt points out in "On Humanity in Dark Times" that in some contexts the very stating of something is meaningful only because what is named has been denied or is in question.[22] So, for example, in the U.S. Civil Rights movement, it was meaningful for African Americans to proclaim, "I am a man!" precisely because that standing had been denied or problematized. That Cavell names the "ordinary" and Hume "common life," similarly, is meaningful because both philosophers have found it to have become lost or threatened or refused and wish to recover it so as achieve what Cavell calls, in "The Uncanniness of the Everyday," a "resettlement" (QO 176). Cavell sets before himself, then, the labor not only of exploring, interrogating, but also in some fashion of restoring the intimacy between inquirers (the meaning of the Greek *skeptikoi*) and the world as well as each other, rectifying a kind of loss at the hands of epistemology he, like Hume, confronts — a special kind of alienation expressed in terms of modern skepticism. Cavell writes, as if in response to a commonly imagined Hume: "I understand ordinary language philosophy not as an effort to reinstate vulgar beliefs, or common sense, to a pre-scientific position of emi-

near is one of the inflections he gives to the common, the low, as in the passage from Nature beginning: 'I ask not for the great, the remotes, the romantic... I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds.'"

21. Quoted by Russell B. Goodman, *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 91; NYUA 81.

22. Hannah Arendt, "Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts on Lessing," 3-23 in *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1968); originally published 1959.

nence, but to reclaim the human self from its denial and neglect by modern philosophy [...]. My hopes are to suggest an answer in the arena of traditional philosophical skepticism, and to suggest that the Wittgensteinian view of language (together with an Austinian practice of it), and of philosophy, is an assault upon that denial" (CR 154).[23]

But Hume does not just aspire to reinstating "vulgar" pre-philosophical beliefs. In his 1779 *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* he writes (in the voice of Philo) that "if a man has accustomed himself to sceptical considerations on the uncertainty and narrow limits of reason, he will not entirely forget them when he turns his reflection on other subjects" — even though we may wish to forget skepticism's lessons.[24] It is central to Hume's thought that our response to loss of a skeptical kind may be well or poorly considered, perhaps we might say less or more forgetful.[25] Skepticism emerges naturally for Hume through philosophical reflection when people depart from the customs and habits of common life, underwritten by the press of natural propensities. Skepticism is lived, if not radically "cur'd," conversely, for Hume by a

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23. At TOS 192, Cavell similarly writes: "It was always being said, and I believe it is still felt, that Wittgenstein's and Austin's return to ordinary language constitutes an anti-intellectual or unscientific defense of ordinary beliefs. While this is a significantly wrong idea it is hard to say what is wrong with it." In his essay, "Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture," Cavell as if following this thought writes: "It would a little better express my sense of Wittgenstein's practice if we translate the idea of bringing words back as *leading* them back, shepherding them [back to their *Heimat*] [...]. But the translation is only a little better, because the behavior of words is not something separate from our lives, those of us who are native to them, in mastery of them. The lives themselves have to return"; section on "Everydayness as Home," Part I of NYUA, 34-35.

24. David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1947), I.8. 134; hereafter "D" (originally published 1779). That we may wish to forget, that we often flee skeptical philosophy's acknowledgment of finitude was called to my mind by an anonymous reviewers quoting the 1976 Preface to the Updated Edition of MWM: "If philosophy is esoteric , that is not because a few men guard its knowledge but because most men guard themselves against it" (xxvii).

25. Writing about the importance of not forgetting the lessons of skepticism while also acknowledging the inevitability of that "fault," Hume cautions his readers about his reluctant and occasional slipping into dogmatic forms of expression: "On such an occasion we are apt not only to forget our scepticism, but even our modesty too; and make use of such terms as these, 'tis evident, 'tis certain, 'tis undeniable; which a due deference to the public ought, perhaps, to prevent. I may have fallen into this fault after the example of others; but I here enter a caveat against any objections, which may be offer'd on that head; and declare that such expressions were extorted from me by the present view of the object, and imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become no body, and a sceptic still less than any other" (T 1.4.7.15, SBN 273-74). Might Hume have been alluding in this important reference to not forgetting at the closing of Book 1 of the Treatise to the way Sextus Empiricus describes skeptics' non-dogmatic use of language as a form skeptical "recollection" (*hypomnema*), the remembering only of appearances (e.g. PH 2.10.102). In this Sextus may be contrasting skepticism, perhaps in an ironic way, with Plato's description of dogmatic knowing as recollection (*anamnesis*). Plato himself, in a passage that fascinates Derrida, contrasts *anamnesis* unfavorably with mere *hypomnema*; see Plato, *Phaedrus* (275a), and Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," *Tel Quel* 32 & 33 (1968): 18-59.

reflective return to the natural and customary common life (nature and custom being the Pyrrhonian guide or "criterion" for skeptical practice).[26] Returning to common life for Hume, however, is not just surrender to what cannot be resisted; common life for Hume is to be "methodized and corrected"[27] in light of skepticism on the basis of reflectively generated standards (e.g., "general rules" of a "second influence"; T 1.3.13.12, SBN 149-50). Hume's "blind submission" (T 1.4.7.10, SBN 269), therefore, is less blind than his well known remark suggests and shelters within itself an acknowledgment (though not quite a transcendental argument) that the press of the natural in common life constitutes the very condition of the possibility of thinking, acting, and meaning. It underwrites the "legitimate ground of assent,"[28] the "title" for reason's authority (T 1.4.7.11, SBN 270), since reason cannot establish its own warrant, even the warrant or "authority" of skeptical arguments themselves (T 1.4.1.12, SBN 186-87).[29]

Strawson is struck, along just these lines, by Hume's recognition that "'tis vain to ask Whether there be body or not? That is a point we must take for granted in all our reasonings" (T 1.4.2.1, SBN 187), concluding from this that Hume understands natural beliefs to be basic to the "framework" of any possible epistemological investigation and therefore immune to skepticism.[30] Hume for Strawson is schizophrenic; the skeptical

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26. Sextus Empiricus, whom Hume will largely follow in this, describes the Pyrrhonian "fourfold" criterion for life this way: "Adhering, then, to appearances we live in accordance with the normal rules of life, undogmatically, seeing that we cannot remain wholly inactive. And it would seem that this regulation of life is fourfold, and that one part of it lies in the guidance of Nature, another in the constraint of the passions, another in the tradition of laws and customs, another in the instruction of the arts. Nature's guidance is that by which we are naturally capable of sensation and thought; constraint of the passions is that whereby hunger drives us to food and thirst to drink; tradition of customs and laws, that whereby we regard piety in the conduct of life as good, but impiety as evil; instruction of the arts, that whereby we are not inactive in such arts as we adopt. But we make all these statements undogmatically" (PH 1.11.23-24).

27. Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 12.25, SBN 61. Hereafter "E." Originally published in 1748.

28. A phrase Hume uses in his 10 March 1751 letter to Gilbert Elliot. For a discussion of how this important phrase plays out in debates about Hume's skepticism and realism, see John P. Wright, "Scepticism, Causal Science, and the 'Old Hume'," *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10.2 (2012): 123-42: "What is key in this response for our present discussion is the fact that Hume contrasts these weak tendencies with the strong and universal propensities of the imagination which make us believe in our senses and experience. These latter provide us with what, in his letter, Hume calls 'a legitimate Ground of Assent'" (129). For Hume's phrase see J. Y. T. Greig, *The Letters of David Hume: 1727-65* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 155, Letter #72.

29. Don Garrett has established an influential interpretation of Humean naturalism a long these lines through what he calls Hume's "title principle" for reason; Garrett *Cognition and Commitment*, 234-37.

30. Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism*, 11. Not considering the possibility of a naturalism that is also a skepticism (perhaps strangely given the title of his book), Strawson reads "an unresolved

Hume arguing independently from Hume the naturalist. In this interpretation, though, Strawson somehow ignores the first sentence of the paragraph he cites, where Hume affirms himself a skeptic at the same time he acknowledges the existence of body: "Thus the *sceptic* still continues to reason and believe, even tho' he cannot defend his reason by reason" (emph. mine). Contrary to Strawson's account, then, Hume's naturalism is a skeptical naturalism that implies "no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of" the epistemological powers of his "judgment" (T 1.4.7.15, SBN 274). We might say, therefore, that for Hume upon a skeptical acknowledgment of the natural pivots philosophy's education about what he calls "true philosophy," true skeptical philosophy.[31]

Skepticism arises naturally for Cavell with a loss of the alignment expressed in shared criteria and a related sense of gap, of being sealed off. The sense of gap can spring from a wish or a misconceived, even morally dubious, project: "this *sense* of gap originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a 'stranger' to, 'alienated' from) those shared forms of life, to give up responsibility of their maintenance" (CR 109). Suffering this alienation, people are realigned and re-attuned, for Cavell, by reminding them through examples of their agreement, by carefully reading their words and expressions, by resisting the natural disappointments of human epistemic life, and by acknowledging the agreement already presupposed by human forms of life, including by doubt: "the gap between mind and world is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the appreciation and acceptance of particular human forms of life, human 'convention'" (CR 109).[32]

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tension in Hume's position" that results in "two Humes: Hume the skeptic and Hume the naturalist; where Hume's naturalism [...] appears as something like a refuge from his skepticism" (12). For Strawson's Hume: "Our inescapable natural commitment is to a general frame of belief and to a general style (the inductive) of belief-formation" (14). Quassim Cassam quotes Strawson describing his account of Hume here in a later autobiographical essay thus: "In common with Hume and Wittgenstein (and even Heidegger) I [Strawson] argued that the attempt to combat such doubts by rational argument was misguided: for we are dealing here with the presuppositions, the framework, of all human thought and enquiry"; Peter F. Strawson, "Intellectual Autobiography of P. F. Strawson," in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson* (Chicago and Lasalle: Open Court, 2008), 17.

31. See Donald W. Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): see especially Chapter 2, "The Dialectic of True and False Philosophy"; and Chapter 7, "True Philosophy and the Skeptical Tradition." Wittgenstein, also distinguishes his practice from something akin to false philosophy, writing in *Philosophical Investigations* of breaking off [*abzubrechen*] from something like false philosophy (or at least from the relentless and futile self-questioning of philosophy) through a "real discovery" that "gives philosophy" something like Pyrrhonian *ataraxia* ("*die Philosophie zur Ruhe* [quietude or rest] *bringt*"), PI §133.

32. Cf. Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Consider also Wittgenstein's usage of general agreement (*die Menschen überein*)

> The idea of agreement here is not that of coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, of weighing scales or columns of figures. That a group of human beings *stimmen* in their language *überein* says, so to speak, that they are mutually *attuned* top to bottom. (CR 32)

This sort of harmony early modern naturalists and others are apt to conceive (or imagine) as a metaphysical fact (the flip-side of conceiving people to be metaphysically and totally alien or different from one another);[33] but for Cavell human alignment is not an enduring fact but a continuing "task," one that sustains an unsponsored and contingent achievement, and one that may be motivated by an aspiration to moral perfection: "One can think of romanticism as the discovery that the everyday is an exceptional achievement. Call it the achievement of the human" (CR 463).[34]

Paradoxically, for Cavell people can only achieve attunement and "return"[35] and (re)convene by acknowledging, among the various natural dimensions of human existence, "separateness" from each other, distance from the rest of the world — finitude. More paradoxically still, the very effort to overcome that separateness, distance, and finitude through argument and metaphysics deepens and rarefies them. In the recognition, then, of natural human finitude, including the natural dangers of skeptical loss, there lies the possibility for a kind of paradoxical gain, what Cavell calls "an intimacy of difference" (PoH 103); for, as it is with divorce and (re)marriage, "not

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as well as "form of life" (*Lebensform*) in the singular, perhaps indicating the human form of life shared universally: "'So you are saying that human agreement [*die Übereinstimmung der Menschen*] decides what is true and what is false?'—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use [*in der* Sprache *stimmen die Menschen überein*]. That is not agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] in opinions but in form of life [*der Lebensform*]," PI §241.

33. Richard Fleming, *First Word Philosophy*: "It is with the existence of criteria that ordinary metaphysical reminders can begin and with them that we find not madness but silence, the silent harmony that makes possible all that we do" (32), "A silent harmony of humans and the world stands firm amidst our talk and action" (33).

34. In the essay, "Makavejev on Bergman," Cavell illustrates his understanding of the role nature plays in the formation of meaning when he compares directors as if he were comparing (1) poorly educated realists and skeptics against (2) his own OLP way of discernment: "The former [1] seek to fix or to flout significance, perhaps to suggest that significance is necessarily private or public or arbitrary or infinite or nonexistent. The latter [2] propose significance as the intersection of nature and history, as a task of continuous and unfolding interpretations, each felt as complete and each making possible the next, until a human form of life fits together"; TOS 117.

35. Cavell, "Postscript to "The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself," 275-79 in Mario De Caro and D. Macarthur (eds.), *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 277.

till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves" (NYUA 36).[36] Call it the *Walden* paradox.[37]

> It is to those who accept this condition of human existence that the writer accords the title of traveler or stranger [...]. Here is another underlying perception, or paradox, of *Walden* as a whole — that what is most intimate is what is furthest away; the realization of "our infinite relations," our kinships, is an endless realization of our separateness [...]. (SW 54)

If the first step in what Cavell calls philosophy as "education for grownups" is to take inventory of our estrangement from ourselves, the "second step is to grasp the true necessity of human strangeness as such," and with it "the opportunity for outwardness" (SW 55). We are separate but not, however, for Cavell, as for Derrida, always and already totally "other" to one another (radically and metaphysically alien), lacking the capacity really to know, or understand, or really to commune with one another. We can already acknowledge our being separate but not totally "other" because worries about separation would not themselves be possible without human beings already sharing a meaningful language and human criteria. Separateness, therefore, does not entail absolute difference but rather the necessity of outward expression and the need to read it.

Cavell's appeal to shared criteria and natural agreement may seem analogous to Strawson's appeal to our epistemological background "framework," but the Cavellian gesture differs from Strawson's because it does not aspire to purge human life or inquiry of skeptical doubt. Fear of separateness and the confrontation with separateness to which philosophy brings us may account for the human wish to flee, but to

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36. Cavell here quoting from henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). The phrase "an intimacy of difference" appears in Cavell's essay, "Knowledge as Transgression," on Frank Capra's 1934 film, *It Happened One Night*; PoH 103.

37. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for the following thought along these lines: "The danger of reading Cavell on skepticism is the propensity for his views on what accounts for skepticism, what 'living it' entails, to be misconstrued. [...] Where it is often thought that we get into trouble by failing to accept our finitude, [...] accepting our finitude is not to put an end to skepticism — but to acknowledge it in a certain way, in a sense, to cohabitate with a fair amount of fear and trembling, and dread, for *life*." Why that is so stands for me still as a persistent question — why the difficulty of that acceptance, why we both wish for and flee exposure and intimacy, why they remain for us both among the grounds of our epistemological and moral demands as well as a cause for profound anxiety and dread. The answer is, as I am inclined to argue, just the terms of our natural separateness and finitude — the human fate skeptical philosophy acknowledges.

deny our separateness and the persistent possibility of skeptical loss through episte-
mological argument or metaphysical posits (or even through appeals to the everyday
or to nature in the way Strawson et al. conceive nature) transforms our skeptical hu-
man finitude into an epistemological problem and deepens the vulnerabilities it ex-
poses.

> Speaking together face to face can seem to deny that distance, to deny that fac-
> ing one another requires acknowledging the presence of the other, revealing
> our positions, betraying them if need be. But to deny such things is to deny our
> separateness. And that makes us fictions of one another. (SW 65)

Denying the separateness of our finitude deepens it and totalizes it in the same way
Derrida, despite his pretensions to the contrary, extends rather than subverts the ear-
ly modern metaphysical condition. As Cavell puts it: "The necessity of the task is the
choice of finitude, which for us (even after God) means the acknowledgment of the
existence of finite others, which is to say the choice of community, of autonomous
moral existence" (CR 464).[38]

Both Cavell and Hume then find skeptical doubt to be natural; and they both
appeal to what they find, what impresses itself, as natural dimensions of human ex-
istence in order to recover the ordinary (in Cavell) or common life (in Hume). Neither
philosopher, however, thinks that skepticism can be completely overcome or purged
or resolved, even by the natural. For Cavell, the potential for skeptical doubts is in-
trinsic to the very criteria that make human language, thought, and action possible.
That is, the very conditions for the possibility of meaning make meaning vulnerable
to skepticism. Sustaining meaning requires ongoing expression, re-reading, and re-
agreement. For Hume, the natural impulse to epistemological thinking and the natu-
ral trajectory of epistemological thinking are toward skepticism. Natural relations of
ideas provide the "cement of the universe," but those relations are unsponsored and
contingent, always subject to potential rupture. Since neither reason nor the senses
can refute skeptical doubt, human beings must accept an ongoing fragility and open-
ness to their inquiries as well as the potential for doubt. That Cavell and Hume reach

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38. I am grateful to Dr. Chiara Alfano for the helpful suggestions she has offered me on Cavell,
skepticism, naturalism, and separateness.

such similar conclusions through such different philosophical approaches not only enriches an understanding of the dynamics of skeptical thinking. It may also point to something of the "truth of skepticism."