

Cynical Self-Doubt and the Grounds of Sympathy: A Response to Stanley Cavell's "Knowing and Acknowledging"

SAM CARDOEN

The Goals of "Knowing and Acknowledging"

The foundational essay of Stanley Cavell's oeuvre, "Knowing and Acknowledging," prepares the author's continued interest in sceptical doubt about the existence of other minds as well as his specific approach to this particular philosophical problem. One useful way of approaching "Knowing and Acknowledging" is to suggest that it addresses the other minds sceptic so as to excavate alongside him the underlying ground from which his doubt about the existence of other minds emerges. Cavell, in other words, appears to compose his argument in such a way as to lead the sceptic along a series of steps that demonstrate that his sceptical doubt does not simply exist as a self-contained or self-standing problem. In doing so, Cavell traces the emergence of sceptical doubt about other minds to a specific anxiety about our reliance on expressions of sympathy as a way of responding to the suffering of others. Cavell argues that the sceptic subsequently intellectualizes this anxiety into sceptical doubt. Cavell explicitly does not seek to refute the sceptic; he even accepts that the sceptic's intellectual doubt is, in its way, valid. For Cavell, to try to straightforwardly refute sceptical doubt is simply to accept the terms on which it presents itself, and thereby to extend the sceptic's view. Instead, Cavell tries to get the sceptic to a point where he will regard the nature, and the origins, of his doubt differently than he did before.

Cavell does not disparage the sceptic's position of doubt,¹ nor does he want to refute it. His angle of approach is to sympathetically inhabit the sceptical position,

1. See Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 239, 249.

even as he questions the role which it plays for the sceptic, which he does by suggesting that the sceptic's doubt is in fact an intellectualization. By taking this double position, in which he both sympathetically inhabits and inspects the sceptic's position, Cavell seeks to gain the sceptic's trust to alter his self-understanding. Still, Cavell's claim to insight into the origin of the sceptic's doubt is not meant as a presumptuous claim to intellectual superiority. Rather, Cavell recognizes a sense of limitation which the sceptic intellectualizes. It is the sceptic who claims a superior position by reinterpreting an unsettling awareness of his finitude—of his ineluctable separateness from others, which he regards as a form of powerlessness—into a doubt about the validity of our belief in the existence of other minds. He does so by reinterpreting ordinary language-games in such a way as to arrive at sceptical doubt.

For Cavell, it is an initial dissatisfaction with our reliance on expressions of sympathy as a way of responding to the suffering of others which specifically is to be understood as the underlying ground from which sceptical doubt will emerge. The central purpose of "Knowing and Acknowledging" is to restore the sceptic to the dimension of ordinary interaction which his sceptical doubt, and its underlying cause, have left unsettled. This goal also explains Cavell's sympathetic approach to the sceptic's position: by relying on the power of penetration of the sympathetic imagination, Cavell intends to demonstrate that it allows him to better understand the sceptic than the sceptic understands himself. This is meant to indicate to the sceptic that his specific anxiety about sympathy, which Cavell interprets as the underlying cause from which his doubt arose, is unfounded. He so enables the sceptic to return to the expression of sympathy as a way of responding to others who suffer.

This Paper: Its Goals

This paper constitutes a critical reply to the line of argument Cavell develops in "Knowing and Acknowledging." The above introduction, while rudimentary and all too brief, should nevertheless suffice for the purpose of listing the goals of this paper:

(1) The first goal of this paper is to argue that it is possible to articulate an alternate way of portraying the specific anxiety about sympathy which underlies the

emergence of sceptical doubt about other minds. I will repurpose an early essay of Cavell's on Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* to help render this alternate account. Cavell's strategy is to prove to the sceptic, as he conceives him, the *power*, or the *depth of penetration*, of the sympathetic imagination. The sceptic, as I conceive of him, requires something altogether different. He requires a demonstration of the *legitimacy* of our reliance on expressions of sympathy. He is haunted by a sense that, in relying on expressions of sympathy, we only truly serve ourselves, not others. This anxiety is the reason he believes our reliance on sympathy to be illegitimate, to be without grounds. The problem, as my sceptic sees it, is not that we cannot rely on sympathy to provide us with adequate insight into the other's experiences; it is instead that expressions of sympathy are unwittingly deceptive, self-serving ploys that do little to relieve the other's suffering: sympathy allows us to ignore the other's suffering. In my reading, this anxiety is what gives rise to the problem of other minds.

(2) As such, I uncover an internal connection between the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt. I should briefly explain, then, what I mean here by the notion of cynical self-doubt, the description of which I have borrowed from South African novelist J.M. Coetzee's critical writings.² For Coetzee, a person who is struck by cynical self-doubt is convinced that he is always inevitably self-interested, even when he seeks not to be self-interested. Nevertheless, he can only know in an abstract sense that he, and all of the common or established practices he is likely to follow, are ruled by self-interest. He cannot pinpoint the exact or final nature of his self-interest or the particular shape which it takes in particular instances. That is to say, any sincere attempt to give a truthful account of himself, his motives, of his actions or of his practices is itself inevitably biased; and any attempt to uncover the underlying bias so as to eliminate it must in turn be biased, so that he is compelled to submit his sense of self to an endless process of self-revision. While an

2. We can find Coetzee's description in his comments on the problem of truth in autobiography. In *Doubling the Point*, a collection of essays with accompanying interviews which was published in 1991, Coetzee discusses (391-392) his 1985 essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky." This essay was itself more or less coincided with a lecture which Coetzee gave at the University of Cape Town in 1984, with the title *Truth in Autobiography*, which helpfully summarizes Coetzee's sense of the problem. In short, in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee describes himself as one who is stuck, or who moves, between a position of cynicism and a position of grace; the cynic believes autobiography can only lead to a self-interested account of oneself, whereas the person who aspires to grace wishes to believe that we can, finally, see ourselves clearly. In his critical remarks from 1984 and 1985, Coetzee links this issue to a tradition of writers which most notably includes Fyodor Dostoevsky.

orthodox reading of “Knowing and Acknowledging” does not help clarify our sense of an internal link between the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt, Cavell’s essay on Beckett’s *Endgame* does lend itself to this approach. By portraying the anxiety underlying sceptical doubt about the existence of other minds in an alternate fashion, I uncover the link between the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt, and I use Cavell’s views of Beckett to take this step.

(3) I also devise a tailored way of defusing the specific form of anxiety about sympathy which, in my alternate account, underlies both the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt. In doing so, I try to follow in the footsteps of Cavell’s attempt to sympathetically imagine himself into the position of the other minds sceptic so as to alter his self-understanding. The most important goal of this paper is, much like Cavell’s goal, a return to sympathy as a proper response to the suffering of others. But I propose an alternate way in which we can secure this return to sympathy, since I conceive the anxiety that underlies its loss altogether differently.

(4) Finally, in relation to the critical study of Cavell’s works, I would briefly suggest that this paper, if only implicitly, presents a counterweight to the tendency to accept (Cavell’s essays on) Shakespeare as the main literary prism through which to approach his philosophical thought on the subject of sceptical doubt. Typically, this critical approach is one that, to my mind, all too comfortably accepts Cavell’s use of a conceptual dichotomy between avoidance and acknowledgment as a tool to interpret scepticism.³ Avoidance is the underlying condition from which scepticism as a failure to acknowledge arises. Cavell gleans this dichotomy from his reading of Shakespeare. I will present the cynical sceptic as one whose doubt begins in a desire to possess the

3. See, for instance, Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). For Mulhall, the discovery of the actual role of criteria in our lives goes alongside “the discovery of our own responsibility—our responsiveness—in the existence of others” (114). We must realise that “[t]he knowledge which such criteria [of pain] confer imposes a call on [us]—for comfort, succor, healing; [a call by the other] for a response which helps to assuage the pain or to acknowledge that the pain is unassuageable” (110). The sceptic is “right to suspect that there is more to knowing that someone is in pain than the mere satisfaction of criteria.” “But by concluding from this that we cannot reach the inner life of others, by thinking that a human’s behaviour leaves us uncertain of the nature and even the existence of her inner life, the sceptic himself refuses the responsibility for those criteria,” since he fails to depend on criteria of pain to inform and guide his discriminate responses to the other’s expressions of need and pain. Mullhall’s reading, which is faithful to Cavell and faithfully adopts his understanding of the sceptic’s failure to acknowledge or avoidance, clashes with the alternative line of thinking I propose in this paper, in which the sceptic, from the very start, wants to be absolutely responsive to the other so as to bring an absolute form of relief to the other. This reading implies that the sceptic, as I see him, is one who cannot accept the fact that another’s pain may be “unassuageable.”

other's suffering. The cynical sceptic, then, is not readily convinced by the idea that his sceptical position is initially one of avoidance; instead his desire to be *absolutely responsive* is what eventually leads him to a form of paralysis, and so into avoidance. In this approach to other minds scepticism, I conceive of avoidance as the end result of a wish to be absolutely responsive, but never simply as the starting point of doubt.

“Knowing and Acknowledging” on the Problem of Other Minds

In “Knowing and Acknowledging,” Cavell, following in the footsteps of Wittgenstein, relates the problem of other minds to the problem of suffering. The other minds sceptic suggests that we cannot know with certainty that there are in fact other minds, because we are confined to the other's expressions, in this case of suffering, in establishing that he is a sentient being. Since we cannot guarantee that his expressions of suffering are not in reality produced by a sophisticated robot or by an automaton, we cannot be sure that an actual other mind exhibits them, and, thus, that other minds do in fact exist. For us to know with certainty that there are in fact other minds, we would have to be able to experience the exact *instance* of suffering which the other experiences as *he* experiences it. That is, to show beyond any doubt that the other exists, we would need to have a direct and unmediated access to *his* perspective. This position itself can be restated as saying that we would need to be able to be the other to rebut sceptical doubt. The sceptic argues that, since we cannot be the other and experience those specific instances of experience he lives as a separate being, we cannot possibly establish beyond all doubt that the other exists.

Following Wittgenstein, Cavell tackles the sceptic's position by suggesting that the sceptic's problem crosses two distinct language-games. In a first language-game, we express sympathy as a form of acknowledgment of the other. If I say “I know how you feel” or “I know you are in pain,” I ordinarily mean to express sympathy, and in doing so, I show that your suffering affects me. In a second language-game, I rely on the phrase “I know” to claim certainty, or a privileged position that allows me to make a claim to knowledge. If we are in a museum and I claim that we are looking at an early Picasso, you may try to dispute my claim. You may try to argue that I am

wrong and that we are in fact looking at a late Picasso. If I go on to dispute your claim, you can try to end our argument by saying that you “know” that this is a late work of Picasso, since you wrote a dissertation on the evolution of style in Picasso’s oeuvre. Given your background in art history, you are in a privileged position to stake your claim and correct my error. I am likely to accept your claim, unless I happen to know that you are making up things and in reality know little about Picasso’s oeuvre. I also would have to supply an account of some the actual features of Picasso’s later works.

Cavell argues that the sceptic’s problem arises because he crosses these two different uses of “I know.”⁴ The sceptic is one who reinterprets our acknowledgment of the other’s pain, “I know you are in pain,” as a knowledge claim about the other’s inner state. In crossing the first and the second language-game, in which “I know” play different roles, he argues that the other is always in a privileged position with respect to himself, so that we can never be in a privileged position with respect to another.

Cavell’s sympathetic account of the sceptic’s position is one in which he does not aim to discard the sceptic’s crossing of language-games as a foolish error. Cavell’s approach to sceptical doubt is to be understood as an attempt to bring to light the form of disquietude that underlies the emergence of the problem of other minds. The sceptic, insofar that he is confronted with the other’s pain, finds that his confrontation with the other’s pain, and his recognition of the possibility that the other is able to suppress it, has made him singularly aware of the other’s status as a separate being. But he goes on to interpret this awareness as an intellectual problem.

There are, in Cavell’s account of this process, specific conditions in place that allow the sceptic to develop his doubt by crossing language games. There is, in other words, a ‘when’ that accompanies “what we say” if we are led to speak sceptically. Cavell investigates the sceptic’s interest in the occasion on which another person is led to remark: “I know I am in pain.” This remark Cavell reads as an expression of exasperation.⁵ It is used when the other does not want to reveal his suffering to us, for instance out of shame, even though we in fact have sought to acknowledge it: “I can tell something is wrong with you; you must be in a lot of distress.” The sceptic, how-

4. See Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” 254-257.

5. See *ibid.*, 256.

ever, interprets the significance of the remark “I know I am in pain” differently in light of a superficial similarity between the language-games of claiming knowledge and acknowledgment. That is to say, the simple fact that we can withhold the proper recognition or expression of our suffering, for Cavell, can lead the sceptic into doubt:

[T]he fact that another person may now be in pain yet not acknowledge that he is in pain, is the same as, or seems to entail, the fact that he now knows that he is in pain; and this turns into the (imagined?) fact—or is read as the (imagined) fact—that he is now certain that he is in pain. And from this point, the rest of the argument is forced upon us, seems undeniable: How does he know (what is his certainty based on)? Because he feels (has) it (the fact that he feels (has) it). But obviously I can’t feel it, I can’t have the same feeling he has, his feeling; so I can never be certain another person is in pain. Moreover, even if he tells me, he might only be feigning, etc., etc.⁶

In Cavell’s view, the idea that the other may suffer, but is able to suppress expressing it, causes the sceptic’s anguish, since it leads to a picture of the other as one who, through access to his inner states, now knows what we cannot know because it has not been outwardly expressed. The sceptic intellectualizes this anguish into sceptical doubt by crossing the language-game of acknowledging (one’s own or another’s) suffering and the language-game by which we make knowledge claims. Thus, the sceptic’s feeling of powerlessness, which he experiences when confronted with the separate other as one who suffers but fails to give proper expression to it, “presents itself as ignorance—a metaphysical finitude [presents itself] as an intellectual lack.”⁷ The crossing allows the sceptic to present the other as one who has what he cannot possess, or have access to, i.e., the other’s specific instance of the experience of pain.

In response, Cavell emphasizes that the other is one who “is *impaled* upon his knowledge”⁸ of his suffering. The sceptic’s doubt, by contrast, allows him to attribute to the other a sense of mastery in which he possesses access to his pain. The other, in the sceptic’s account, has access to his own experiences in a way that the

6. Ibid., 257.

7. Ibid., 263.

8. Ibid., 261.

sceptic does not. And by conceiving of the other's relation to his suffering in this way, the sceptic suppresses the powerlessness that he experiences in the face of the other's suffering. It is, for Cavell, rather unhelpful to think of the other as one who has access to a secret garden from which we are debarred by our ordinary finitude;⁹ or it is, at the very least, unhelpful to do so insofar that one does not wish to turn to the other into an intellectual problem, but rather relate to him as a person subject to suffering.

Similarly, the problem of solipsism can take hold if I, with respect to myself, reinterpret the "I know" in "I know I am in pain." When I reinterpret the expression, I find I can conceive of my relation to my suffering in such a way as to allow myself a sense of mastery, or of privileged access. This sense is disallowed by our ordinary subjection to suffering, which itself now goes unacknowledged as it becomes intellectualized. I appease the underlying feeling of shame or exposure that drives me to reply to an acknowledgment of my suffering with the answer, "I know I am in pain."

Still, Cavell not only indicates that the sceptical position allows us a sense of mastery that is disallowed by the ordinary experience of being subject to suffering. He also shows that we can understand and notice when another person suppresses his suffering and fails to give proper expression to it, just as we are able to recognize that someone's statement "I know I am in pain" constitutes an attempt to repress his suffering. And he applies this very fact to the sceptic's case itself. That is to say, Cavell appears to approach the sceptic's intellectualization of his anguish as a failure to give to it its proper expression. The sceptic is presented as one who suffers at the hands of other's possible suffering, but who fails to acknowledge as much, opting instead to intellectualize his anxiety into sceptical doubt. By taking this approach, Cavell has conceived of the sceptic's doubt itself as a target for sympathetic understanding, so as to undermine the anxiety that allows the doubt to emerge. He tries to prove, in other words, that it is misguided to think that we are never in a better position in respect to the other than the other is in respect to himself. And that we can in fact help the other, who suppresses his pain, by providing the right words to express it. For this is the actual goal of Cavell's approach, as opposed to an attempt to show

9. See *ibid.*, 261.

that he has outsmarted the sceptic. Cavell does not want to better understand the sceptic than the sceptic understands himself to outwit him, but to help him with his struggle.

Cavell intends to show the sceptic that the impossible desire to be the other, to undo one's separateness so as to gain complete intimacy with the other, is an unnecessary desire, since the power of the sympathetic imagination is such that we can rely on it to penetrate the other's thoughts in ways that the other may himself not even have expected or foreseen. This, Cavell indicates, is one of the sources of our gratitude to literature. Literature is capable of revealing aspects of our own experience of which we lost sight because we did not express properly, by which we failed to take possession of them. Cavell tries to write a philosophical essay that can play the same role for philosophical scepticism about the existence of other minds. Crucially, the depths Cavell's sympathetic imagination plumbs are not simply depths of intellectual discernment. Cavell wants the sceptic to recognize that he himself has struggled with a doubt which the sceptic still entertains in its original form. And he wants him to see that, in reading Cavell's essay, he too can work through that doubt.

This search for trust explains Cavell's indirect approach. His essay is written in such a way as both to require and allow its target to think along with the author as he leads him through a series of steps that culminate in a compelling affirmation of the power of expression and sympathetic understanding: "To know you are in pain is to acknowledge it, or to withhold the acknowledgment.—I know your pain the way you do."¹⁰ Cavell's strategy, then, involves gradually building a bond of trust with the sceptic, since, for the sceptic, there is the "problem of *making* [...] experiences known [...] because one hasn't the forms of words at one's command to release those feelings, and one hasn't anyone else whose interest in helping to find the words one trusts."¹¹ Cavell takes the role of looking for the words with which the sceptic can safely release the anxiety and shame underlying his doubt. And he is able to assume that particular role because his strategy of composition portrays him as working, or having worked at the very least, along the same path which the sceptic now follows. In sum, Cavell's strategy of gradual identification with the sceptic is

10. *Ibid.*, 266.

11. *Ibid.*, 265.

meant to defuse the feelings of shame and exposure which, in his account, will lead to the emergence of the problem of other minds, the problem of privacy and the problem of solipsism.

The Problem of Suffering Intellectualized

There seems to be a fundamental problem with Cavell's approach: it itself reads as the result of a process of intellectualization; to put it differently, Cavell's approach is at the very least marked by the process of intellectualization he tries to uncover.

Cavell's soothing of the sceptic's anxiety, in which he stresses that the other is one who is impaled upon his *knowledge* of his suffering rather than one who has supreme cognitive access to it, and to which idea he then responds by validating the penetrative power of sympathy, cuts off the path to an alternative understanding I would pursue instead. The same counts for Cavell's appreciation of the sceptic's initial noble intentions: "He begins with a full appreciation of the decisively significant fact" that "others may be suffering and I not know," which leads him to become "enmeshed [...] in questions of whether we can have the same suffering, one another's suffering."¹² The problem of the suffering is, in most cases, hardly captured by the insistence that it may be that others suffer while we are somehow unaware of it. The problem with the suffering of others is usually not that we are unaware of its occurrence, but rather that we are deeply aware of it, and that we are at the same time powerfully aware of our powerlessness to alleviate it. Similarly, in suffering we are not primarily impaled upon our knowledge of our suffering, but rather upon our suffering itself, even if we can grant that the emotion of shame can exacerbate our experiences of suffering. I would suggest, then, that his attempt to inhabit and work through the sceptic's intellectualized position has lead Cavell to retain certain aspects of the sceptic's general sense of the type of problem our separateness must lead to.

"I Feel Your Pain": Survivor's Guilt

12. Ibid., 247.

By beginning from the point of view that the problem of suffering is that we often are aware of it yet feel powerless to do much about it, we can begin to think differently about the emergence of sceptical doubt as a response to the suffering of others. The problem now becomes not whether the sympathetic imagination is able to penetrate deeply enough so as to provide an understanding of the other's motives. Instead, the issue shifts to the question as to whether our reliance on expressions of sympathy is legitimate. Cavell's "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*" can help us clarify why this is so, just as it can help us reconceptualise the emergence of the problem of other minds insofar as it is linked to the problem of cynical self-doubt.

Cavell's essay on Beckett portrays Hamm, *Endgame*'s protagonist, as one who suffers from survivor's guilt that drives him into self-denial, madness, and so tyranny. The goal of Hamm's tyranny is to see all life, including his own, extinguished. But, because he is both blind and wheelchair-bound, Hamm needs the help of Clov. As Hamm's servant, Clov has to check for signs of life on the horizon, peering out of the windows of the bunker in which they both live. That is to say, Clov has to verify for Hamm that all life has been extinguished. As such, it is obvious to the reader that Hamm can never be certain that what remains of life inside the bunker is all that remains of life in its entirety. And it is equally obvious that, as long as Hamm and Clov survive, their survival constitutes a negation of Hamm's primary goal. This basic set-up identifies *Endgame* as a literary attempt to reflect on the sources of an attitude of paralyzed melancholy, which the play then identifies as a symptom of survivor's guilt.

Endgame is a reply to the biblical story of Noah, in which God exterminates all human life on earth with the exception of Noah's family. In the biblical story, Ham is one of the sons of Noah and so survives the flood. He falls out of favour with his father, because he finds Noah naked in a drunken stupor. Noah is naked not only in a literal but also in a figurative sense. He is naked in a figurative sense because the reason God singled him out for survival was that he was supposedly a righteous and worthy man. Now, however, he has shown himself to be flawed not only because of his inebriation, but also because his shame at Ham's knowledge of his flaw drives him to the act of cursing his son and his progeny. Ham's encounter with Noah, then, is a subplot that speaks to the impossibility of human fruitfulness without the risk of

transgression and failure. Noah's cultivation of wine, in this story, symbolizes his fulfilment of the task of fruitfulness which God imposes under his renewed covenant with mankind. At the same time, Noah's abuse of drink is meant to draw our attention to the fact that he is still liable to weakness of will and a capacity for error. The basic tension which Beckett detects and expertly explores lies in the fact that Noah repeats the exact same tendencies that led to God's choice to destroy mankind.

In *Endgame*, two further survivors who also live inside the bunker are Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, whom Hamm keeps confined to trashcans with Clov's help. Nagg is Beckett's version of the biblical Noah. In Beckett's play, it is he who is subjected to punishment by Hamm, in what constitutes a reversal of the punishment Ham is subjected to in the original story. In response, Cavell reads Hamm as one who, having seen his father for what he truly is, believes God was wrong to spare him and his family.¹³ God ought not to have made an exception for Noah, since Hamm knows Noah simply to be an ordinary flawed man, just as those who were killed in the flood by God. Given his father's ordinary flaws, Nagg cannot justify the fact that he and his family were saved whereas others were left to die, since Noah was supposedly saved by God because he was a righteous man. By seeking to extinguish his own life and that of his family, Hamm reminds God he is no different from those who were killed. As such, his desire for self-denial is to be taken as a distorted expression of solidarity.

Hamm also wants to extinguish all other remaining life, because he has come to think of life *as such* as illegitimate. This spite against life can be explained in light of a traumatized awareness of the suffering of others. Hamm thinks we are largely unconcerned with the fact that there is no reason that we are spared, whereas others have to suffer. If life is blind self-perpetuation, nothing about life, including our own, can be redeemed. In Cavell's reading, Nagg's apparent lack of concern for the fact that he was saved for no particular reason is what leads Hamm to see us as inevitably and irredeemably self-interested. This lack explains why Hamm curses his father and considers his renewed task of fruitfulness or replenishment an entirely illegitimate

13. See Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 139-140.

one. For Hamm, the fulfilment of God's new covenant with man can only reproduce the same kind of flawed man God had wanted to eliminate to begin with.

Hamm believes the only justified way of responding to the suffering of others is to share in it. This desire to share in the suffering of others itself, however, reflects an impossible desire to take away the others' suffering by assuming it as one's own. He wants to assume their suffering to extinguish it for them. This, of course, cannot be done. And because it is impossible, he is only able to respond by deeming all of life, all our practices, all our pursuits of interests, and all forms of human expression illegitimate. In the face of the fact of suffering, then, we can be led to ask ourselves whether we are permitted to live our lives, whether life and its pursuits are not at heart illegitimate. If we are inclined to answer this question positively, we are led to hold a view of life in which the only proper way to live is to fix ourselves to despair and to melancholy. We find ourselves perpetually at odds with life. The melancholy person despairs of his own irrepressible participation in life, but, despite his intense wish for self-denial, finds himself unable to end life. Hamm, after all, continues to live. In melancholy, we are at best able to colour our inevitable attachment to life and the pursuit of our interests with a sense of reticence. In fact, Hamm cannot properly express his desire for self-denial. In doing so, Hamm would express a desire, which itself is an act that his worldview cannot condone. This is an alternate articulation of the frustrated logic of *Endgame*, since it explains why Hamm is alive but immobilized.

Cavell himself describes Hamm's self-mortification by stating that "[s]olitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence" are, contrary to what is by now a hackneyed interpretation of Beckett, "not the givens of Beckett's characters but their goal, their new heroic undertaking."¹⁴ In *Endgame*, Hamm specifically asks Clov: "We're not beginning to mean something?" Clov laughs: "Mean something! You and I, mean something!" Despite Clov's swift dismissal of Hamm's worry, the interchange is such that the spectator is led to infer that these characters mean to mean nothing.

Hamm's worldview is, of course, irreparably flawed. The unforgiving view that all of our pursuits or interests are inherently illegitimate allows us to avoid the difficulties we face in finding suitable and sufficiently subtle answers to the question as to how we ought to live our lives as moral beings. The rejection of any pursuit *qua pur-*

14. *Ibid.*, 156.

suit also reflects the disappointment which we are bound to experience with the limitations of any attempt to provide a satisfactory or comprehensive answer to that question. The melancholy of Hamm allows us to suppress the role of judgment in the process of separating expressions of interest that constitute a form of transgression from those we can legitimately retain. All in all, his worldview allows us to avoid the inevitable complexities of engaging in a serious and sustained attempt at living and contemplating an ethical life, even as it appears to allow us to lay claim to that ideal.

In response to the line of analysis Beckett's *Endgame* produces, I will now try to develop a philosophical articulation of, and response to, Hamm's survivor's guilt. Although Beckett achieves a powerful understanding of this convoluted and highly specific experience in *Endgame*, he does so by harnessing the tendency to hyperbole that defines it, since hyperbole is part of the skewed self-understanding survivor's guilt enforces. A philosophical account is one which, in order to defuse the specific anxiety Beckett's play embodies, must try to find a more even-tempered way of portraying survivor's guilt. To render such a plain account, I discuss the case in which I am faced with the other's suffering and express my sympathy by saying "I feel your pain." This account should clarify the way in which Cavell's essay on Beckett allows us to think of the emergence of other minds scepticism differently, and to clarify the link between the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt.

Ordinarily, our expressions of sympathy function as a recognition of the fact that we suffer at the hands of our ability to recognize that the other currently suffers the same specific *type* of suffering we are capable of experiencing. Still, we not only recognize the other's suffering, but are also affected by it. By expressing sympathy, we release ourselves from the grip the other's suffering has on us, and help him to be released from the way suffering singles him out. By expressing sympathy, however, we do not mean to say we feel the same *instance* of suffering as the one suffering.

Yet, as I understand him, the sceptic is one who believes that, in saying "I feel your pain," he catches himself in a lie. The helplessness he experiences in light of the other's suffering makes him reinterpret his words in such a way that they no longer mean what we ordinarily mean by them. His words now appear to indicate to the other that he *is* able to experience the instance of suffering which the other suffers, even if it is the case that he cannot, since he cannot be the other. At the same time,

however, he comes to believe that his words commit him to a different response to the other's suffering: they seem to have promised to the other that he *can* respond to the other's suffering by experiencing his suffering for him. This is how we arrive in the position of Hamm, who experiences a form of survivor's guilt, in which we feel we ought to be able to suffer in the other's stead. The sceptic's words make it seem to him as if absorbing the other's suffering is the only meaningful way of responding to it. Once the sceptic begins to think as much, he will develop a superhuman ideal of responsiveness which he, in turn, takes to be his responsibility towards the other. If he cannot absorb the other's suffering, he believes, he fails the other; we pass over the other's suffering if we respond to it in any other way than taking possession of it.

Having caught himself, or so he thinks, in an unforeseen lie, the sceptic will take issue with expressions of sympathy. First of all, he focuses on the fact that our expressions of sympathy, as expressions of anguish, have the effect of releasing us from the way in which we are gripped by the other's suffering. More precisely, he starts to think we only express our sympathy to rid ourselves of our concern for the other. Secondly, he starts to think that expressions of sympathy unnecessarily shift attention away from the other's suffering to our own suffering at the hands of the other's pain. The sceptic is inclined to say here: what does it matter that we suffer at the hands of the other's suffering; the other's suffering itself is what matters! The sceptic, in other words, is pained by a sense that we cannot get away from ourselves so as to stay more radically faithful to the other. Both of these elements contribute to, and give expression to, the sceptic's suspicion that he has been fundamentally self-interested in expressing his sympathy with others as they suffer. This self-interest he identifies as having a specific quality: he did not consciously pursue it. He believes he catches himself in a lie, even though he did not intend to lie. He believes he catches himself looking out only for himself, even though he never intended to do so.

Once we are struck by cynical self-doubt, then, we begin to think of ourselves as inescapably self-interested. We think that even when we try to go beyond being self-interested, we cannot escape self-interest. The specific nature of our self-interest is our blind spot. While we can try to excavate and analyse our obscured self-interest, every renewed attempt to analyse it is inevitably marked by a new obscured form of self-interest. This process of revision can potentially go on endlessly; the process, at

least, can never reach a truly satisfactory end. This, then, is another way of referring to the affliction that strikes Hamm, but only insofar that it constitutes an intellectual version of his tendency towards self-mortification. In this interpretation, cynical self-doubt is a problem, or attitude, that arises as an intellectualization of survivor's guilt.

Taking a wider perspective, we can argue that the origin of cynical self-doubt, which can specifically emerge as an intellectualization of survivor's guilt, lies in the (perceived) occurrence of moral weakness of will (akratic failure). Cynical self-doubt intellectualizes weakness of will: it appears that we would rather believe that we are inescapably self-interested than accept responsibility for the fact that we have failed to act in the way we believe we ought to have acted.¹⁵ In the specific case of the sceptic's survivor's guilt, the way he feels he ought to act requires him to outstrip the limits of what is humanly possible. His reinterpretation of the phrase "I feel your pain" leads him to want to act in accordance with a moral motive that imposes a demand that cannot be met. Crucially, it is the sceptic himself who *perceives* his failure to meet it as an akratic failure; the final part of this paper will question this perception.

At this point, the reader may wonder: how does this reading of the way in which our expression of sympathy "I feel your pain" can lead us to cynical self-doubt relate to the problem of other minds? The reasoning I observe here is as follows. The sceptic is one who will interpret our expression of sympathy "I feel your pain" by stating that it is impossible: "I cannot feel your pain; I cannot have or take it for you." This leads him into cynical self-doubt, because his words lead him to think we have caught ourselves in a lie. Still, there is a second path he can follow. The idea that he cannot have the other's pain, or absorb it for him by taking his place, can be intellectualized into a doubt about the existence of other minds: "If I cannot take the other's place, I cannot have his experiences, so that I cannot know if he even exists in the first place." This alternate reading of scepticism about other minds argues that the sceptic arrives at his doubt because of a proximity between the two expressions of sympathy "I feel your pain" and "I know your pain." This proximity allows us to reinterpret our original inability to feel in terms of an inability to know with certainty.

15. This is a view I also defend in my 2014 paper on J.M. Coetzee's autobiographical fiction, "The Grounds of Cynical Self-Doubt: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*." I do so, in part, on the basis of Coetzee's fiction itself.

This approach inverts the way other minds scepticism was originally conceived of, since the sceptic originally conceived of his inability to know as an inability to feel.

In sum, the sceptic's doubt about other minds takes hold because a specific set of circumstances lead him to believe that the proper way in which we ought to relate to the other's suffering is one in which we ought to be able to take the other's pain from him, to have or absorb it for him so as to extinguish it for him. The sceptic intellectualizes his inability to absorb the other's pain, to experience it for him by taking his place, into a philosophical problem in which his inability to access the other's experience makes him doubt the ground of his belief in the other's existence. The same set of conditions can also lead us to assume a position of cynical self-doubt.

It will seem, then, that the sceptic is faced with an unsettling scenario in which he falls prey at the same time to cynical self-doubt and to other minds scepticism, both of which nevertheless still serve to deflect the underlying problem that one has been weak-willed. The confluence of these two forms of scepticism, which, in brief, are related insofar that they are problems of knowledge or truth, can also lead us to propagate a specific ethic. This ethic of alterity advocates passiveness and abjection before an Other on whose otherness we can have no grip, and whose very otherness would at the same time be threatened by any attempt we might make to grasp it. This version of the ethics of alterity is a dead end.¹⁶ It can provide us with no guiding sense of how to take targeted action for others, nor can it provide us with a sense of the necessary limits of such action. Finding limits is of the utmost importance to the sceptic as I conceive of him, as an absence of proper limits leads him to paralysis. In suggesting that the confluence of cynical doubt and scepticism about the existence of other minds leads to this ethic, I assume that the sceptic's doubt about the existence of other minds entails the problem of privacy. For the sceptic, the fact that we may recognize the other's outward expressions as expressions of an inner state cannot guarantee that the content of those inner states matches ours, which itself has as its

16. I intend to argue in future writing (and this then is the dialogue which is beginning to develop in this paper) that J.M. Coetzee's early novels, in response to the fact of suffering, are shaped (but perhaps not entirely determined) by this type of unfruitful ethics of alterity to develop their ethical charge. Friday in *Foe*, the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Verceuil in *Age of Iron*: all of these could be read as characters that demonstrate Coetzee's sustained interest in an extreme ethic of alterity which is itself rooted in cynical self-doubt as it converges with the problem of other minds. One prospect, then, is that we might find more fruitful conceptions of alterity in Coetzee's later fiction, as the author begins to question the grounds of cynical self-doubt.

corollary that we cannot know that those outward expressions express any type of inner state. When the cynic combines his sense that we cannot trust the other's expressions as reliable indexes of inner states with his sense that we are inevitably self-interested, he will think his interpretation of the other's behaviour is inevitably biased and adopt a deferential stance in which any judgment of the other is withheld. This deferential stance helps to suppress the underlying problem of weakness of will, as no legitimate judgments remain on which the cynic could hope to base his actions.

Still, it can also be the case that only one form of doubt will take hold: in this case, other minds scepticism functions as an alternate intellectualization of our inability to absorb the other's pain, and so provide refuge from cynical self-doubt. Other minds scepticism is able to function as a refuge because it is, all in all, a more static, dispassionate, controlled, and controlling form of doubt. It provides a stronger form of negative mastery than cynical self-doubt does. Cavell presents other minds scepticism as a position that allows us to relieve the strain which our ordinary reliance upon the notion of another imposes, insofar that it abstracts from the responsibility, or responsiveness, which the other's expressions entail; it implies a loss of acknowledgment. In our everyday interactions with the other, we are not meant to take the other's expressions as elements that fail to establish the truth of his existence; they are not meant, in their ordinary role, to tell us "how it *is*" with the other, but rather "*how* it is" with him.¹⁷ Other minds scepticism is a form of doubt that enables us to lose sight of the actual role our notion of another is meant to play.

To Cavell's conception of the enabling aspects of scepticism I add another. Unlike other minds scepticism, cynical self-doubt is able to affect our inner life in profoundly disturbing ways. It can undermine our everyday ability to act as moral agents, and it also serves to deflect the need to take responsibility for weakness of will. It robs the reasons upon which we act of the legitimacy, and so of much of the force, which they are supposed to have for us. The problem of other minds, by contrast, allows us to avoid the endless self-questioning to which cynical self-doubt leads. The seductive picture of the self as an inner realm to which we have privileged and unimpeded access, but which at the same time leaves us locked out from others,

17. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 45.

leaves no space for the kind of frenzied self-questioning cynical self-doubt entails, especially so because the reality of the other as a source of shame loses its grip on us.

Nevertheless, the above remarks are not meant to imply that cynical self-doubt necessarily loses out to other minds scepticism. If we are inclined to cynical self-doubt, we are likely to suspect that sceptical doubt about the existence of other minds, as well as the problem of solipsism, serve an ulterior purpose that we should uncover. This I have done, or perhaps only in part. Yet the cynical view itself may be doubted. We can also try to establish what is at stake in cynical self-doubt so as to release ourselves from its grip. I have done so, at least in part, by arguing that cynical self-doubt intellectualizes weakness of will: rather than taking responsibility for our weakness of will, we prefer to believe that we are inevitably self-interested, and thereby can set into motion a potentially endless process of revision of our particular motives. Still, there is little chance we will in fact have successfully undone cynical self-doubt in the specific case I have discussed, unless we can show that the moral motive in which the sceptic believes is faulty. A more solid solution requires, then, that we demonstrate that the desire to absorb the other's suffering in order to extinguish its impact on him does not have the status of a judicious moral motive, so that a failure to live by it cannot be understood as an occurrence of weakness of will.

Steps to a Solution

As I have said, the sceptic is led astray in his assessment of the role of expressions of sympathy in our lives. If we demonstrate this to him, we take a step towards allowing him to recover the expression of sympathy as a way of responding to suffering.

We can reiterate that by using the expression "I feel your pain" we do not mean to express that we are capable of experiencing the other's pain for him. The words never meant this, so that the sceptic is wrong to think he catches himself in a lie. If we use expressions of sympathy, we mean to say that we are affected by the other's suffering exactly because we are able to recognize it as a certain *type* of suffering.

To this first point the sceptic will want to reply: even if that is not what the expression ordinarily means, this fact in itself does not imply that we ought not to be

able to respond to the pain of others by assuming it for them. In other words, if we stress the sheer impossibility of taking the other's pain, this point may not suffice to change the sceptic's perspective on the matter. In response, it helps to recall that the sceptic's inability to allow expressions of sympathy their rightful role in his response to the suffering of others paralyzes him. He holds himself to an absolute standard he can never achieve. He so condemns himself to radical impotence in the face of the other's suffering. As such, he ends up in the position of the one who lets the suffering of others pass him by. And this is what he accused us of in relying on expressions of sympathy; given his view that we ought to be able to respond to the other's pain by possessing it emerges in part due to the fact that he believes others' to be indifferent to the pain of the other, the sceptic is certain to be struck by this line of response.

The sceptic, however, is bound to take this second point as a painful blow; it will return him to the type of restless mood in which he began to suspect that expressions of sympathy are a form of self-deceit and expressions of a covert self-interest. Instead, he now suspects his suspicion of sympathy was itself an expression of a covert self-interest. Was his obsession with an absolute form of responsiveness to the other's suffering simply a ruse which he played on himself so as to allow him to ignore the other's pain, even if he did not realise this was the case? To disabuse the sceptic of this unhelpful cynical line of thought, we can remind him that he began to believe that he was duty-bound to absorb the other's suffering in response to an experience of powerlessness. In light of this reminder, it should become clear that his self-suspicion itself is unfounded: his cynical self-doubt intellectualizes an unsettling experience of powerlessness, which it deflects. The idea that we are inevitably but obscurely self-interested, even when we seek not to be, is an intellectualization of the everyday experience in which we fail to go beyond our self-concern, because we believe we are simply powerless to do so, or because we are too cowardly to do so.

Only now are we in a position, in relation to the sceptic's cynical self-doubt, to stress that expressions of sympathy are beneficial not only to those who provide them, but even more so to those who receive them. Those who receive them are comforted by the acknowledgment of their suffering. This point will tackle the sceptic's sense that expressing his feelings of sympathy is much like doing nothing at all. Still, expressions of sympathy are not just symbolical attempts to restore a sense of equal-

ity between the one who suffers and the one who sympathizes, which so pre-empt the sense of shame to which our suffering exposes us. If we give expression to our suffering at the hands of the other's suffering, we do not mean to draw attention away from the other, nor do we simply seek to release ourselves from our concern for him; we are truly affected by the other's suffering and wish to show our concern. Moreover, it is only once we are able to release ourselves from the paralysing grip the other's suffering has on us that we can go *beyond* the fact of simply recognizing it. That is to say, while the sceptic thinks of expressing sympathy as at best an empty act, and at worst as a cynical and self-interested one, we must see that expressing our sympathy can function as a part of a *larger process of responsiveness* by which we help the other. It releases us from the grip of the other's suffering so that we may *actively intervene to alter the circumstances that contribute to it*. It is only after we compose ourselves that we can start this more comprehensive process of alleviation.

Now, it is true that often we do not perceive how we can help someone who is suffering beyond the act of expressing our sympathy with him. There appears to be nothing or too little we can actively *do* to meaningfully alter his circumstances. This overwhelming feeling of powerlessness is frustrating. Yet it is also true that we tend either to overestimate how much is asked of us or to underestimate how much we are able to contribute. These are matters in which ethics' role is to help us gain a sense of measure and clarity. Moreover, it is in contexts in which we feel as if we are wholly powerless that we must remind ourselves that expressions of sympathy, which to the sceptic seem simply banal or empty, often have a greater capacity to comfort than any type of direct action that we might take to try to help others. To express sympathy is to undertake a form of action, however negligible we consider it.

This reminder does not mean the sceptic's suspicion of sympathy is entirely absurd. In fact, I cannot conclude without making a few reasonable concessions to the sceptic's point of view. To fail to do so may exacerbate an unwillingness to grant the role of sympathy in our life. Expressions of sympathy are often abused in the particular ways in which the sceptic exclusively, and thereby wrongly, presents them. We *do* sometimes express our sympathy only to draw attention to ourselves as magnanimous facilitators of care, or because we consider ourselves to be upstanding persons. We *do* sometimes abuse expressions of sympathy so as to relieve ourselves from a

painful awareness of the other's suffering. Or we employ it to force the other to stifle his expressions of suffering, so that we no longer have to be confronted with his distress. By contrast, we will sometimes rely on our ability to be affected by the other's suffering as an ability that allows us to wallow in it, to use it as our own personal sentimental masochistic indulgence. This attitude is what we might have accused Hamm of, if we had regarded him only from a sceptical perspective which considers him to be a narcissist who in fact does not experience a true bereavement.

The above tendencies can, to a lesser or to a greater extent, become parts of our character, should we fail to resist them and the escape they provide. Crucially, however, they abuse and distort our capacity for sympathy. The fact that our reliance on expressions of sympathy is open to abuse does not mean we must deny the role they have in our relations with others. If we accept that we experience suffering and sympathy, both of which we should properly express, we can avoid a cynical attitude in which we forego the effort which is required to contemplate, and live, a good life.