

Cavell and Dialectic

EDITORIAL COMMENT

The ninth issue of *Conversations* responds to Cavell's thoughts against the backdrop of the history of philosophy in general, and phenomenology, especially Hegel and Heidegger; unfolding metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political, and aesthetic ramifications. It is against that backdrop, that the question arises about the nature and function of dialectic in wording the world, the other, or ourselves, as acknowledged by Paul Franks and Espen Hammer.¹ The idea of the issue arose with an essay (an "attempt") I was working on, about Cavell, Wittgenstein, and Hegel, at University of Leeds, while also reading *The Phenomenology of Spirit*² with the Hegel Reading Group at the University of Oxford (Michaelmas term, 2020), and, meeting with the Cavellian Reading Group (that began at the University of Cambridge, now an international group), upon sharing the idea of the essay with Amir Khan, this started a series of discussions, which eventually resulted in an invitation to guest edit this issue. That idea of dialectic, as I understand, is Cavell's claim that philosophy leads us to speaking "outside language-games," that therefore the human animal needs to be brought back into language and natural forms of life.³ The following provides an overview of the collection of critical essays herein.

The issue opens with an essay by Richard Eldridge which illuminates Cavell on selfhood by critical responses and rejoinders to remarks in Hegel's *Aesthetics*⁴ and *Phenomenology*. At once we are thrown back into a reflection of ourselves, the dialectic of the "I" or subject, between the self and non-self (so to say, the internal and the external), by surveying its conceptual development (in Hegelian and Freudian terms),

1. Paul Franks, according to Cavell, helped him appreciate the Fichtean problem of the other, and Espen Hammer, has suggested Cavell's philosophy is a sort of contemporary Hegelianism.

2. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. and trans. Terry Pinkard and Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

3. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 207.

4. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

in and from childhood to adulthood, and the impact of its interruptions of itself. The question for Cavell then is how crucial is the self's interruption of itself, the self getting in its own way, for the achievement of selfhood? In a description of the discontents of scepticism, Rupert Read's questions the human being's finitude, albeit an understanding of ourselves, i.e. our place somewhere between the finite and the infinite: that we are not only finite beings. In dialogue with Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Iain McGilchrist, we are invited to rethink our conceptions of timelessness and temporality, of being-in-the-world, namely, a non-supernaturalistic subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, and to reconsider our limits if our lives are finite, and, our freedoms if our lives are not finite. Then Sandra Laughier offers a reading of Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, proposing that set of writings as a study of the human voice. If Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*⁵ consider the subject as voice, then Cavell's writings register the voice as subjectivity; which return it to philosophy. Like Wittgenstein, Cavell is recounting our understanding others and ourselves. In our self-understanding and understanding of others, the "we" in "I" needs to be recounted. The key idea is that of acknowledgement (confession, or expressiveness opposed to inexpressiveness), apart from which we may remain, so to say, hidden, private, or unknown. But in the case of knowing ourselves—subjectivity and intersubjectivity—how crucial is the function of acknowledgment (or its refusal)?

Taking up a dialogue between Cavell and Hegel, Andrew Norris shows the extent to which the latter influenced the former. For this reason, the questions of meaning and sublation are investigated. The surprise is how dialectical method, or Hegel's *Aufhebung*, was explicitly employed by Cavell. The shock, however, is that there may be a Hegelian implicitness—as though, unconscious for Cavell's self-consciousness—which remains unacknowledged. Next, Martin Shuster reads some remarks by Cavell and Adorno, in order to reflect on the concepts of philosophy and redemption. If Adorno claims that society has lost philosophy, then does Cavell proclaim philosophy's return into society? Has it been superseded? The position of redemption, in which to view each other, registers the human condition of mortality, and then what is needed: learning to die. Finally, Byron Davies provides an aesthetic analysis, in Ca-

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, rev. 4th edn., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2009).

vell's *The World Viewed*,⁶ on color. In conversing about film, art, and criticism, the aim is to help us understand Cavell's "de-psychologizing or un-theatricalizing" of the subject, provided by his experience of "serious color films," but does it explain the "feel of futurity"? In closing, a sort of afterword, is provided to remark on the remarkable (or unremarkable), namely, the claim that dialectic is inherent in ordinary language, despite constraints or limits of what we say we say, in our human forms of life, what I call, to acknowledge the unacknowledged other.

The issue wishes to further along the conversation of humanity, through a deeper understanding of Cavell's work on philosophy, literature, film, and so on. This collection of readings, reflections, reevaluations, reveal that in recounting what we should ordinarily say, or do—Hegel's Owl of Minerva returns, what Wittgenstein called imagining a private language, and Cavell called, a division of "Materialism and Idealism," or, the "real" and the "ideal"—is merely our coping with the "anxiety of progressive *inexpressiveness*."⁷

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6. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

7. *Ibid.*, 472.