4. Hegel and Cavell on Meaning and Sublation

ANDREW NORRIS

> Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es *bekannt* ist, nicht *erkannt*.
>
> HEGEL, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*

Hegel is not an author who plays a starring role in Cavell's work like that of Austin, Wittgenstein, or Emerson. Cavell mentions him rarely, and almost always in passing. This is hardly surprising. Given that Cavell draws as heavily as he does upon Kant, whom Hegel regularly attacks, and Kierkegaard, who regularly attacks Hegel, one might expect that Hegel's more important claims and ideas would be uncongenial to Cavell, and incompatible with the main lines of his work.[1] Moreover, Cavell's early and lasting embrace of Romanticism would seem to preclude the embrace of an author who lambasts the leading Jena Romantic Friedrich von Schlegel as the purveyor of a corrosive amoral subjectivism.[2] Appearances, however, can be deceiving, and in the essay that follows I demonstrate that there are good reasons to believe that Hegel has influenced Cavell considerably more than one might suppose.

As I have noted elsewhere, at least some of Cavell's references to Hegel indicate significant influence.[3] In 1965's "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," Cavell

---

1. The presence of Kant is pervasive in Cavell's work, both early and late. Though less obvious, Kierkegaard's contribution to the genesis of Cavell's central ideas is also crucially important. For discussion of each, see, respectively, Paul Franks, "Cavell, Fichte, and Skepticism," in *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Andrew Norris, "On the First Person: Kierkegaard/Cavell," in *Understanding Cavell, Understanding Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2021).
2. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §140, 140A, and 140Z; cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 64. In my citations from Hegel's lecture material, I follow the common practice of labeling the remarks (*Anmerkerungen*) *A* and the additions (*Zusätze*) *Z*, following these distinctions as they are made in the Suhrkamp *Werke*.
3. I expand here upon suggestions initially made in Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 70 and 246-7.

writes that he can find no better term than *Aufhebung* for Wittgenstein's mode of philosophical criticism, his "most original contribution [to] philosophy."[4] In 1983's "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant (Terms as Conditions)," Cavell proposes that when Emerson writes in "Fate," "Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free," Emerson's *annul* "alludes to the Hegelian term for upending antitheses (*aufheben*)": far from denying the reality of fate in our lives, Emerson claims it as the matter of thought, the matter that thought must transform (sublate) if the thinker is to achieve autonomy.[5] Most striking of all, in a much later piece Cavell writes that the source for his own signature phrase "the truth of skepticism" is "Hegel's use of 'the truth of x' where x is a concept he has just sublated, denied at one level but preserved at another."[6] Given, on the one hand, the central roles that negation and sublation (*Aufhebung*) play in Hegel's work and, on the other, the fundamental importance for Cavell of Wittgenstein's mode of philosophical criticism, Emerson's perfectionism, and the idea of the truth of skepticism, these are hardly insignificant admissions.

Moreover, there are points at which the continuities between the two extend into the details of their respective arguments. Cavell's account of the generic object in particular recalls defining moments of the initial "Sense-Certainty" chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—a book Cavell includes in the list of perfectionist texts he

---

4. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 85.

5. Cavell, "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant (Terms as Conditions)" in *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 40. As Cavell notes, "the idea of limitation [...] is a principal expression of an intuition Emerson finds knotted in the concept of Fate" (Ibid., 38). Emerson, who later in "Fate" refers to Hegel by name, writes of limitation, "But Fate has its lord; limitation its limit." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," in *Nature and Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 373, 384. For Hegel on this thought, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 51: "Whatever is confined within the limits of a natural life by its own efforts go beyond its immediate existence; but it is driven to it by something else, and this uprooting entails its death. Consciousness, however, is [...] something that goes beyond limits, and since those limits are its own, it is something that goes beyond itself." Cavell's own version of this is to interpret the Kantian *a priori* boundary or *Grenze* between the phenomenal and the world "in-itself" as the expression of our self-repression—an interpretation that almost announces itself to be an interpretation or modification of Hegel's claim: we can repress our ability to set a limit to limitation only because we are in essence beings that go beyond limits. Cavell, "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant," 47. I return to this issue at the close of this essay.

6. Cavell, "Reply to Four Chapters," in *Wittgenstein and Skepticism*, ed. D. McManus (New York: Routledge, 2004), 289. Cavell may well be thinking of Hegel's definition of the universal in the "Sense-Certainty" chapter as translated by Baillie: "The Universal is therefore in point of fact the truth of sense-certainty, the true content of sense-experience." G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 152. (Miller has only, "it is in fact the universal that is the true [content] of sense-certainty." G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 60. This is particularly noteworthy as it is precisely here that Hegel discusses the failure of natural consciousness to say what it thinks it *means*. I discuss both the question of meaning and that of the choice of translation below.

supplies in lieu of a definition of Emersonian Perfectionism in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*.[7] Cavell argues that the traditional modern skeptic or epistemologist requires a particular kind of example for one of his central arguments to work. Descartes is exemplary here. "Let us," he writes in the Second Meditation, "begin by considering the most common things, those which we believe we understand most distinctly, namely, the bodies we touch and see. I am not speaking of bodies in general, for these general notions are usually more confused, but of one body in particular. Let us take, for example, this piece of wax."[8] The particularity of the ball of wax is necessary if the argument is to consider, distinctly and without confusion, the possibility of our knowledge of the objective world. But this body must not be distinguished in any essential way from other "bodies in particular" if the argument is to generalize to "bodies in general." It must be *generic*. As Cavell puts it,

> When those objects present themselves to the epistemologist, he is not taking one as opposed to another, interested in its features as peculiar to it and nothing else. He would rather, so to speak, have an unrecognizable *something* there if he could, an anything, a thatness. What comes to him is an island, a body surrounded by air, a tiny earth. What is at stake for him in the object is materiality as such, externality altogether.[9]

But no body in particular is "thatness" or "externality altogether" (in Kantian terms, externality *überhaupt*). Indeed, the essential feature of "thatness" and "externality altogether" is that they are not bodies in particular. The skeptic writes of a ball of wax, or of a tomato, or of a block of cheese, but he *means* something quite different. The concrete claim about the actual object serves as a cover that allows for the unstated introduction of a quite different claim—or so the skeptic hopes. But, in the words of the title of Cavell's first book, the skeptic too must mean what he says—with the result that he cannot say (or really mean) what he thinks he means.

---

7. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 5.
8. René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and the Meditations,* trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (New York: Penguin, 1968), 108.
9. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 53.

> The combination of the fact that in the epistemologist's context a concrete claim cannot be under scrutiny, together with the fact that one must be imagined as being under scrutiny, ought to explain why he imagines himself to be saying something when he is not, to have discovered something when he has not. Someone in these particular straits may be described as hallucinating what he or she means, or as having the illusion of meaning something.[10]

To appreciate the parallel between this argument and the first chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, we should recall, first, that for Cavell skepticism is not a position that denies the possibility of objective knowledge, but "any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge";[11] and, second, that the truth of skepticism of which he writes is not the truth of the claims advanced by a skeptic such as Sextus or Hume. It is the fact that "our primary relation to the world is not one of knowing (understood as achieving certainty of it based upon the senses)," but rather one of acceptance and acknowledgment (or their refusal).[12] As its title announces, precisely such certainty is at stake in "Sense-Certainty: Or, the 'This' and 'Meaning.'" Here Hegel begins his study of the genesis of *das Erkennen* with an echo of Parmenides' oracular pronouncement on Being, "What can be thought is only the thought that it is."[13]

---

10. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 221. This is only a sketch of Cavell's argument, which addresses only a particular kind of skeptical analysis and which rests upon an Austinian account of the conditions of intelligible utterance that space does not allow me to defend here. For further discussion, see Edward Witherspoon, "Houses, Flowers, and Frameworks: Cavell and Mulhall on the Moral of Skepticism," in *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002): 196-208 and the second chapter of Norris, *Becoming Who We Are*, 2017. Note the close similarity between the last sentence in this quote and Cavell's account of Rousseau's diagnosis of our sick politics: "we hallucinate the meaning of others to us (e.g., as equals) or have the illusion of meaning something to one another (e.g., as free fellow citizens)." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 26. For Cavell, illusions of meaning in metaphysical discourse are echoed in our politics, the practical difficulties of which in turn sustain the metaphysical difficulties of the skeptic. Cf. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 90. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel makes a similar point, though in a rather different register, when he presents ancient skepticism as "the realization of that of which Stoicism is only the Notion, and is the actual experience of what freedom of thought is." Stoicism is the attempt to achieve a freedom in thought that in an imperial age is denied to the isolated political subject, the *person*. "Self-will is the freedom which [...] is still in bondage, while Stoicism is the freedom which always comes directly out of bondage. [...] As a universal form of the World-Spirit, Stoicism could only appear in a time of universal bondage and fear." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Miller, 123 and 121; G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke, Theorie-Werkausgabe*, 20 vols., ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), 157; cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 316. As in Cavell, skepticism here arises in and *expresses* social alienation.
11. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 46.
12. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden, An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 106-7.
13. G. S. Kirk, and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 277. I take Hegel's point here to be that, as different as

> The knowledge or knowing which is at the start or is immediately our object [*Gegenstand*] cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a knowledge of the immediate or of what simply *is*. Our approach to the object must also be *immediate* or *receptive* [*aufnehmend*]; we must alter nothing in the object as it presents itself.[14]

If natural consciousness, which understands itself to be immediate knowledge of what is immediately present, is to give voice to such knowledge, it must eschew the use of mediating categories and predicates that rest upon comparison between objects. But, it finds, this is not possible. Just as Cavell's skeptic means to speak of *thatness* when he speaks of the ball of wax, so the natural consciousness means to speak only of what is *this*, *here*. And, like Cavell's skeptic, the natural consciousness cannot say what it thinks it means when it says that it is certain that this particular thing *is* here and now. For every attempt to refer to exclusively to the particularity of the *this* that is *here* and *now* uses general or universal terms ("here," "now") that, as such, can refer to other particulars, and hence fail on their own to pick out this one that is here now. In Hegel's example, "now" can be night or day, and hence cannot be reduced to either. Consciousness' certainty of the *now* is always already mediated by the distinction between what now is (e.g., day) and what it is not (night). "Now" as a universal term includes this "dialectic" within itself.[15] As Hegel puts it, "A simple thing of

---

Parmenides is from the modern philosophers Hegel also has in view (e.g., the British empiricists), he shares with them a commitment to the foundational role of the immediate or unmediated—be that role ontological or epistemological. On Hegel's account, rigid binary or dualistic oppositions such as that between the immediate and the mediated are both untenable and a major source of philosophical and practical confusion and unhappiness. For exhaustive discussion of this point, see Michael Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); for one of the most important examples of this argument, see the discussion of the finite and the infinite below. Cavell does not make these sorts of arguments, but, in his ordinary language philosophy, any expression of the immediate will necessarily take a mediated form—which, as in Hegel, does not mean that the expression of the immediate is *really* only an expression of the mediated.

14. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 58; Hegel, *Werke*, 82. It is helpful to recall that the title of the next chapter of the *Phenomenology* is "Die Wahrnemung": merely taking up (*auf-nehmen*) an immediate impression as that of an external reality is not the same thing as taking something to be true (*wahr-nehmen*) about an enduring object (*Ding*) that has various properties. (The translation of the passage above refers to the *object* of knowledge in a way that the German does not.) Hegel's first chapter aims to make possible the transition from the first to the second, which, as in Cavell's gloss above, is the truth of the first, if a truth that will in turn itself vanish (*verschwinden*) and be sublated. On *verschwinden* as a technical term in Hegel, see Andrew Norris, "The Disappearance of the French Revolution in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *The Owl of Minerva: Journal of the Hegel Society of America* 44, nos. 1-2 (2012-13): 37-66.

15. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 64. Significantly, this is also true of the *I* that experiences the *this* that is *here* and *now*: "sense-certainty experiences this same dialectic acting upon itself. [...] I, *this* 'I,' see

this kind which is through negation, which is neither This nor That, a not-This, and is with equal indifference This as well as That—such a thing we call a universal."[16] A universal it is not something opposed to particular determinations, but something that includes them, but includes them as vanishing negations (as opposed to vanished, invisible, non-existent negations).[17] This, however, is not what the natural consciousness had in mind. As the subtitle of his chapter announces, Hegel frames this as consciousness' inability to say what it means: to speak as the natural consciousness does "is not to know what one is saying, to be unaware that one is saying the opposite of what one wants to say."[18] "We do not strictly say [*sprechen*] what in sense-certainty we *mean* to say [*wir … meinen*]. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we *mean* to say [*unsere Meinung*].[19]

One might wonder whether Cavell and Hegel differ here: for Cavell, the skeptic does not in fact mean what he thinks he means—he is under the illusion of meaning—while apparently for Hegel the natural consciousness means something perfectly intelligible, and only fails to express or speak it. But, if it that is so, why does that failure "contradict" (*widerlegen*) that meaning? There is no such contradiction between, say, the love that I feel for my daughter and my inability to fully express that love in words—indeed, my fumbling with my words may be the very best expression possible of that love. It would seem that in Hegel, too, we do not and can not always mean what we say. Cavell's closeness to Hegel on this point is even clearer in the Baillie translation than it is in the Miller from which I have been quoting. (As Cavell did not have strong German and the Miller translation did not appear until 1977, he almost certainly used Baillie's 1931 revision of his 1910 translation of the *Phenomenology*.[20]) "Language, however, as we see, is the more truthful; in it we ourselves refute directly and at once our own 'meaning'; and since language merely expresses *this* truth, it is

---

the tree and assert that 'Here' is a tree; but another 'I' sees the house and maintains that 'Here' is not a tree but a house instead. Both truths have the same authentication, viz., the immediacy of seeing, and the certainty and assurance that both have about their knowing; but the one truth vanishes in the other." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 61. As in Cavell, the subject is not a fixed essence—or, perhaps better, its essence is not to be fixed. Cf. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome*, 12: "'having' 'a' self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts."

16. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 60.
17. Ibid., 60-1.
18. Ibid., 65.
19. Ibid., 60; Hegel, *Werke*, 85.
20. One might think that, since *The Claim of Reason* came out in 1979, Cavell could very well have used the Miller. However, the claims regarding the generic object under consideration here date back to

not possible at all for us even to express in words any sensuous existence which we 'mean'."[21] Note the scare quotes Baillie has added around *meaning* and *mean*, neither of which are in the original German.[22] Note as well that the evidence of the greater truthfulness of *die Sprache* is, as in Cavell, *what we say*. If this is the Hegel Cavell read, the idea that the agent in question cannot really mean what she thinks she means is something he found there, if not only there.[23]

The deep resemblance between the two arguments is underscored when Hegel remarks that it is "astonishing" that "the dialectic of sense-certainty [...] is asserted as universal experience and put forward, too, as a philosophical proposition, even as the outcome of Skepticism."[24] The astonishment is that one would think that the movement of this dialectic terminated here in an epistemological claim, one that denies the possibility of objective knowledge. This would be to confuse "the pathway of *doubt* [*der Weg des Zweifels*], or more precisely [...] the way of despair [*Weg der Verzwei-*

Cavell's 1961 doctoral dissertation, *The Claim to Rationality: Knowledge and the Basis of Morality* (upon which most of the first 3/4s of *The Claim of Reason* is based). Cavell introduces the concept of the generic object in a critique of Austin's dismissal of skepticism on page 52 of *The Claim of Reason*. In the earlier version of this same material in his dissertation he refers to "the objects chosen as stalking-horses by the classical epistemologist" as "simple objects." But the analysis is the same: "It is no accident that that they [simple objects] are the examples the traditional philosopher has wished, has had, to work with. They are objects about which there is *no* problem of recognition or identification or description; ones about which the only 'problem' is not in knowing *what* they are, but in knowing whether we can know they exist, are real, are actually *there*." Stanley Cavell, *The Claim to Rationality: Knowledge and the Basis of Morality* (Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University, 1961), 68-9; cf. 286: "the traditional epistemologist [...] is not free to pick just any object to focus upon as exemplifying knowledge: it *must* be a 'simple object.'" In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell explains the terminological change as being motivated by a desire to avoid a possible misunderstanding: "I have tried various titles for this summary of the functions of the epistemologist's object; at one time I called then 'simple objects,' at another 'basic objects.' The unsatisfactoriness of these titles used to seem to me to be their prejudicing of the contrast they set up with Austinian [specific] examples, and in particular their sounding like a class of objects. Now I attribute the unsatisfactoriness to their prejudicing of the object's very appearance or function, which is just what they are to be the titles for. The traditional title for them is 'material objects,' and the background of my wish to re-title them is my feeling that the 'material' in that context also bespeaks not a species of object (tomatoes or sticks as opposed, say, to shadows or flames) but the spirit in which the object is put into question." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 53. A few pages before this, Cavell had written that he applies the term *skepticism* to any position which raises "the question of knowledge in a certain form, or spirit." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 46.

21. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, 152.

22. In the German, the words are in italics, as are a dozen other words in the short paragraph, none of which are especially doubtful or suspicious. Note the contrast with the Miller: "But language, as we say, is the more truthful; in it we ourselves directly refute what we *mean* to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 60, additions his.

23. In the so-called private language argument, Wittgenstein critically considers the possibility of the words of such a language referring to the speaker's "immediate [*unmittelbaren*] sensations," and apparently concludes that the conditions of successful reference could not be met. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 2001), §243.

24. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 64-5.

flung]" with an end point or terminus.[25] In Cavell's terms, the truth of skepticism is not the truth of the skeptic's claims, but a step on a journey towards a wider acknowledgment of the world. (On despair as an essential moment in this journey.)[26] In both, the false step is not marked as such by any external authority (that has superior knowledge of epistemology, or reality, or the rules of one's language), but by the internal contradiction it enacts in the one making it.[27] As Hegel puts it, "*widerlegen wir selbst unmittelbar unsere Meinung*." "Consciousness suffers this violence at its own hands."[28] In both Hegel and Cavell, it is this that accounts for the instability of the position, the fact that it points to a truth beyond itself.

The parallels between these two analyses are so pervasive and fundamental that it is impossible to believe that Cavell has not studied Hegel considerably more closely than his occasional references to him would suggest. This is not to deny either the enormous differences between a philosophy that centers on the truth of skepticism and one that culminates in Absolute Knowing, or the fact that Cavell insists his truth requires a personal engagement of a kind apparently quite foreign to Hegel.[29] But it does suggest, first, that Cavell may draw with profit from Hegel without becoming a card-carrying Hegelian, just as he draws over and over from Kant, without for all that becoming a doctrinaire Kantian; and, second, that at least some of the differences between Cavell and Hegel may be less stark than they initially appear. It is too often forgotten, to take another instance, that, far from insisting that a philosophical exposition will inevitably take the form of thesis/antithesis/synthesis, Hegel complains bitterly of the reduction of the triadic form to "a lifeless schema."[30] What is true of a moment in Hegel's Science is true of the whole: it is falsely understood if it is

---

25. Ibid., 49; Hegel, *Werke*, 72; cf. 21/38-9. The language of *Zweifel* and *Vewzweiflung* is repeated at the close of "Sense-Certainty." Hegel, *Werke*, 91.
26. See Cavell, "Hope Against Hope," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
27. For Cavell, this contradiction is between the skeptic's desire to speak metaphysically and his own commitment (as one of *us*) to "what we say when." Cf. Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say?" in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and ch. 1 of Norris, *Becoming Who We Are*, 2017.
28. Hegel, *Werke*, 85 and Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 60 and 51.
29. Though see Hegel's Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, where he insists that though "the truth concerning right, ethics, and the state is [...] as old as its exposition and promulgation in public laws and in public morality and religion [...] it needs [...] to be comprehended as well, so that the content which is already rational in itself may also gain a rational form." Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 11.
30. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 29.

reduced to a lifeless schema or formalism. As Hegel insists again and again, what it presents is the *experience* of consciousness, its life.[31] And the *Phenomenology*'s account of the unfolding of this life culminates—before turning to an account of the relationship between philosophy and religion—in an account of forgiveness and mutual recognition or acknowledgment (*gegenseitiges Anerkennen*), the need for which emerges out of the failures of Kantian morality.[32] Again, the echoes of Cavell—or Cavell's echoes of Hegel—could not be plainer.[33]

This raises interesting questions concerning the correct interpretation and placement of Cavell's Romanticism, which focuses, as Hegel does, on the issue of the *Ding an sich*.[34] Such questions, however, are difficult to answer, in part because it is not always clear that Cavell is aware of how close he and Hegel can be. At the close of "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant," an essay that identifies Romanticism with the project of inheriting and transforming Kant's problematic "solution" to skepticism and its reli-

---

31. Ibid., 5, 10, 21, and 55. For *life* as the anticipation of *Geist* in Hegel's system, see "Fragment of a System" in G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975). On the role of experience in Cavell, consider his description in *Pursuits of Happiness* of the need of at once "consulting one's experience and . . . subjecting it to examination." For Cavell, this requires "momentarily *stopping*, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track: coming to attention. The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust. The philosophical catch would then be that education cannot be achieved in advance of the trusting." This trust, he concludes, is "expressed as a willingness to find words for one's experience." Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (London: Harvard, 1981), 12. Doing so, as we have seen, is not always an obvious or easy task. Compare the *Phenomenology*'s insistence that "we" observe the experience (of repeated self-overcoming or sublation) of consciousness. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 54.

32. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 407-8; Hegel, *Werke*, 492-493. In Part Three of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell positions himself as a moral thinker by way of contrasts with the emotivism of Charles Stevenson, on the one hand, and the neo-Kantianism of John Rawls, on the other; and he pursues the latter contrast in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*.

33. Bristow points to a possibly deeper commonality when he argues that the distinctive feature of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and his "method" is his commitment to a "self-transformational" form of critical reflection that Bristow compares to a conversion process. William Bristow, *Hegel and the Transformation of Philosophical Critique* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 14. On the role of conversion in Cavell, see Chapter One of Norris, *Becoming Who We Are*. It is striking that Bristow describes his book as "beholden" in a "subterranean" fashion to Cavell's teaching at Harvard. Bristow, *Hegel*, vii.

34. In *Senses of Walden*, Cavell writes of *Walden*, "[e]pistemologically, its motive is the recovery of the object, in the form in which Kant left that problem and the German idealists and the Romantic poets picked it up, viz., a recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular, of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object." Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 95; cf. 107. In 60A of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel speaks of Kant's "dualistic" conception of cognition, "restriction and defect are only determined as restriction and defect by *comparison* with the Idea that is *present*—the Idea of the universal, or something whole and perfect. It is only lack of consciousness, therefore, if we do not see that it is precisely the designation of something as finite or restricted that contains the *actual presence* of the Infinite, or Unrestricted, and that there can be no knowledge of limit unless the Unlimited is *on this side* within consciousness." Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

ance upon the idea of the thing-in-itself,[35] Cavell notes that the Romantic critique of Kant can easily take the form of a retelling of the Book of Genesis's account of mankind's fall from grace, a fall from harmony into alienation. (Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*—a work that greatly influences Hegel—would be exemplary here.) Cavell goes on to contrast his interpretation of this fall with that of Hegel, whom he suggests in passing is a kind of Romantic. Hegel, he says, sees the drama of Eden as one in which mankind comes to a form of knowledge that entails its alienation "from nature, from others, from itself," an alienation that renders "the task of human life [as that of] recovery, as of one's country, or health." Cavell writes that he finds himself "winding up somewhat differently." On his reading, the problem is not simply the acquisition of knowledge (and the reification and alienation that this entails) but the vulnerability of knowledge (its repression in skepticism, and with that the repression of our acknowledgement of the world within which we know things and people in it):

> The feature of the situation I emphasize is that its sense of exposure upon the birth of knowledge pertains not only to one's vulnerability to knowledge, to being known, to the trauma of separation, but as well to the vulnerability of knowledge itself, to the realization that Eden is not the world, but that one had been living as within a circle or behind a line; because when God "drove out the man" the man was not surprised that there was an elsewhere.[36]

Cavell's alternative interpretation is, however, strikingly Hegelian. Indeed, one wonders whether Cavell, who as we have seen eagerly appropriates the Hegelian idea of *Aufhebung*, knew that this idea is deployed first and foremost against the illusion that we are limited by any sort of circle or line. Hegel's most direct explication of the idea of sublation, "Remark: On the Expression '*To Sublate*,'" is placed immediately before the *Logic*'s discussion of Determinate Being.[37] In both the *Logic* and the *Encyclopedia* this discussion requires Hegel to discuss the relation between the finite and the

35. Cavell, "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant (Terms as Conditions)," in *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 29-31 and 44-5.
36. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 48-9.
37. Hegel, *Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1969), 106.

infinite and to distinguish between a bad or *schlechte* infinite and the true infinite, the *Grundbegriff* of his and any genuine philosophy.[38] Where the true infinite is the sublation of the finite (and the finite the sublation of it), the bad infinite can only repeat (and not sublate) the finite because of its reliance upon the very illusory limits around which Cavell's story of the Fall revolves.[39]

> A limit [*Grenze*] is set, it is exceeded, then there is another limit, and so on without end. So we have nothing here but a superficial alteration, which stays forever within the sphere of the finite. If we suppose that we can liberate ourselves from the finite by stepping out into that infinitude, this is in fact only a liberation through flight. And the person who flees is not yet free, for in fleeing, he is still determined by the very thing from which he is fleeing.[40]

It is because the true infinite is only a way of being finite—as Hegel says, is "at home with itself in its other"[41]–that Hegel can write in the *Philosophy of Right*, "The will which has being in and for itself is *truly infinite*, because its object [*Gegenstand*] is itself, and not something which it sees as *other* or as *limitation*"[42]. "*The free will . . . wills the free will*" in that the realization of freedom is its ultimate object.[43] This freedom is not something opposed to the particularities of intimate, social, legal, and political life, but is rather found in them, when the forms they take are appropriate to it and are freely chosen by it. Likewise, in his *Aesthetics*, Hegel argues that beauty, "the pure appearance of the Idea to sense," is incomprehensible to the Understanding because the Understanding insists on "regarding reality as something quite different from ideality, the sensuous as quite different from the Concept [and thus] steadily remains in the field of the finite, the one-sided, and the

---

38. Ibid., 109; Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, §§89-93; and Hegel, *Werke*, 95A.
39. Just as "finitude *is* only as a transcending of itself," so true "infinity *is* only as a transcending of the finite; it therefore essentially contains its other and is [...] in its self the other of its self." Hegel 1969, 145-6.
40. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 94Z. Cf. in note 4 above. In *Senses of Walden* Cavell similarly criticizes the attempt to achieve freedom through flight; cf. Norris, *Becoming Who We Are*, 159-160. On the relation of the *Grenze* to the *Ding an sich*, see Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill,1950), 350-60.
41. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 94Z.
42. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §22.
43. Ibid., §27.

untrue."[44] Beauty, however, sublates the distinctions upon which such an approach rest:

> The beautiful [...] is in itself infinite and free. For even if there can be a question too of a particular content, and therefore, once more, of a restricted one, still this content must appear in its existence as a totality infinite in itself and as *freedom*, because the beautiful throughout is the Concept. And the Concept does not set itself against its objectivity by opposing to it a one-sided finitude and abstraction; on the contrary, it closes together with what confronts it and on the strength of this unity and perfection is infinite in itself. In the same way, the Concept ensouls the real existence which embodies it, and therefore is free and at home with itself in this objectivity.[45]

Beauty and human flourishing as they are found in our mundane world are both characterized by—both ensouled by—the self-sufficiency and absence of external determination that characterize the freedom of the infinite—the freedom, that is, to which we quite rightly aspire.

There is good reason to believe that Cavell was familiar with at least the latter claims regarding politics and beauty. Hegel reviews the claims about beauty in slightly different terms in the Introduction to the *Lectures*; see, e.g., 70f. Cavell likely read at least the latter, as he refers to page 78 (in an earlier edition, 185) in *The Claim of Reason*.[46] Cavell also cites the discussion of the individual will in the Addition to §124 of the *Philosophy of Right* in *The Claim of Reason*.[47] Even if we do not assume that Cavell read the book through to §124, and hence read the passages cited above, we can be fairly sure of his familiarity with the ideas canvassed in them, as 124A reviews

44. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 111.
45. Ibid., 111-2.
46. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 357.
47. Ibid., 467-8.

them.[48] All of this leads one to wonder why he does not acknowledge that Hegel shares what we might describe as his double-reading of the Fall, and, with it, his general understanding of the kind of problem Kant leaves us in his conception of the *Ding an sich*.[49] In both Cavell and Hegel, the two interpretations of the fall are interpretations or aspects of a single story, one that depicts the post-Kantian world as requiring a redemption that is at once spiritual and political. No doubt, part of Cavell's hesitance must concern Hegel's insistence on the systematic quality of his thought and its ability to address the totality both adequately and directly. But this has not deterred the many contemporary philosophers (Pippin, Wood, Pinkard, et. al.) who openly read Hegel quite selectively;[50] and it is not obvious why it would Cavell—particularly given that he is as influenced by Hegel as we have seen he is. On this point, however, one can only speculate.

---

48. In the passage Cavell cites, Hegel writes, "The right of the subject's *particularity* to find satisfaction, or—to put it differently—the right of *subjective freedom*, is the pivotal and focal point in the difference between *antiquity* and the *modern* age. This right, in its infinity, is expressed in Christianity, and it has become the universal and actual principle of a new form of the world." Hegel continues, "Its more specific shapes include love, the romantic, [...] morality and conscience, [and] civil society and [...] moments of the political constitution. [...] Now this principle of particularity is admittedly a moment within an antithesis, and in the first instance at least, it is *just as much* identical with the universal as distinct from it. But abstract reflection fixes this moment in its difference from and opposition to the universal."

49. And it is a double reading. Note in this regard the "not only" in the block quote from Cavell above. What is the idea of philosophy "*returning* us to the [eventual] ordinary, a place we have never been" if it is not a vision of our *recovery* from an originary loss? Stanley Cavell, "Something out of the Ordinary" in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005), 9-10. In a response to pieces on his work in *Modern Theology*, Cavell refers to "the human as the unnatural animal, a phrase which suggests that the Fall is not an accident that befalls the human being or a culture, but an essential feature of the human, which is essentially improper or inauthentic. Stanley Cavell, "Responses" in *Modern Theology* 27 (2011): 522.

50. For a good brief account of what they abandon, see Rolf-Peter Horstmann, "Substance, Subject, and Infinity: A Case Study of the Role of Logic in Hegel's System" in *Hegel: New Directions*, ed. Katerina Deligiorgi (Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006). The basic point naturally extends to the many philosophers who simply take what they find most appealing from Hegel, such as Kierkegaard, Marx, and Sartre.