2. Acknowledgment Beyond Empathy: Reclaiming Stanley Cavell's Philosophy of the Ordinary

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1. Introduction: Why Does Philosophy Matter to Us?

Stanley Cavell asks us to shift our manner of doing philosophy and, in so doing, makes us rethink why philosophy matters to us. *How* he says what he says illustrates how we might change aspects in our ways of seeing the other — the world and our own selves. And yet it is not easy to *explain* to other people *how* or *why* his words matter to us. To repeat what he says is futile: he asks us to find our own words in response to what he says and to test them in the eyes of others, including testing them against what Cavell himself has written.

In this paper, I have chosen to write about "Notes Mostly about Empathy" (hereafter cited as "Notes"),[1] not only because the topic of empathy sheds light on the heart of Cavell's philosophy of the ordinary but also because it exemplifies the way he does philosophy. The way he addresses empathy challenges us to rethink and re-see what it means to know the pain and suffering of other people — and, more broadly, how philosophy serves the happiness of ordinary people.

Today, the tragedy of human blindness has regained a momentum. On the one hand, especially undergoing the worldwide spread of COVID-19, our societies suffer from problems of isolation and solitude[2] band from the existential anxiety of

1. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).
2. See, e.g., Mitsuki Ishida, *Society in Anxiety for Isolation: Gap in Connections, Desire for Recognition and Fear of Solitude* (Tokyo: Keiso-shobo, 2018) (Japanese); *Sociology of Solitude: Prescription for Relationless Society* (Tokyo: Keiso-shobo. 2011) (Japanese); Ichiro Kishimi, *Philosophy of Solitude: To Have the "Courage to Live"* (Tokyo: Chuo-Koron Publishers, 2022) (Japanese).

"ambiguous loss."[3] Such anxiety can work as a barrier to empathizing with the pain and suffering of others. On the other hand, according to Michael Sandel, the root cause of social division is the tyranny of meritocracy, where "ugly emotions" such as loss of dignity and lack of self-confidence have produced a "politics of humiliation."[4] Sandel's analysis exposes a blindness in the liberal politics of the technocrat, which fails to see society as a whole. Why is it that, however much we extoll the significance of empathy, we *fail to see* the suffering and pain of the other? *How* can we *learn to empathize with the other*?

It is against this background that Cavell's "Notes" shows its contemporary relevance. In order to show this, I shall first, in the following, examine Cavell's discussion, in Chapter 12 of *Here and There*, of the idea of empathy that he finds in Bennett Simon's book, *Tragic Drama and the Family*.[5] The way Cavell thematizes empathy, I shall suggest, provides an entry into his idea of acknowledgment, which emerges as a richly significant aspect of his philosophy of the ordinary. Second, in connection with the cultivation of way of knowing the other that acknowledges separation as inherent in the human condition, I shall discuss Cavell's Wittgensteinian idea of an "attitude towards a soul." In conclusion, I shall summarize the way he practices *philosophy as a way of life*.

2. Empathy as an Entry Into Cavell's Philosophy of the Ordinary

It is tempting to appeal to empathy when we confront the suffering and pain of others. Surely it is an ordinary concept, which is accessible to anyone. Who can deny its significance? It sounds almost inhuman to doubt its value. Cavell, however, disturbs this apparently stable concept of empathy. These notes are remarks on Bennett Simon's book, *Tragic Drama and the Family* (1993). In this book, Simon describes literary tragedies including plays of Shakespeare and highlights the

3. See Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) and *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2022).
4. Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 25. See also Michael Young, *The Rise of Meritocracy* (New York: Routledge, 1982).
5. Bennett Simon, *Tragic Drama and the Family. Psychoanalytic Studies from Aeschylus to Beckett* (London: Yale University Press, 1993).

significance of empathy and the way that this grows in the audience. Cavell, however, casts doubt on this as follows: "the very attractiveness and immediacy of the idea that the audience of a great play is in a position, or space, that allows the capacity for empathy to grow somehow made me uneasy with the idea of empathy as a task of feeling into something or to someone."[6] From here, he tries to show how the concept of empathy creates "a sense of looseness or disorderliness" and why he had been avoiding appealing to this concept.[7] Rather than allowing us to get into the mind of the other, empathy can block the knowledge it claims, he writes. These provocative remarks prepare an entry into Cavell's reconfiguration of what it means to "know" another's mind — which is at the heart of his ordinary language philosophy. This is not to deny the importance of empathy, but Cavell tries to show that the use of this word is founded on the illusion, and even on an arrogance of the self, that one can and that one does wish to penetrate the mind of the other: this creates the failure to "appreciate what another, or oneself, is going through":[8] (How) can we appreciate "the reality of another's emotion"? "Why or how [do] humans matter to one another"?[9] What is "the validity of human knowledge"?[10] These are the central questions Cavell raises with regard to the concept of empathy, and they are ones that can lead us to realize the self-deception in our ideas of "knowing" the other.

The way he thematizes empathy is an entry into his idea of acknowledgment. In his view, the way empathy is used indicates that it is enlisted in a "philosophical tropism in which we come to sense the need for a passage past a standing barrier to knowledge of the other," in service of our "desire to overcome our separateness from each other,"[11] and in the all-too-human "estranged impulse to penetrate to the life of the other."[12] Philosophers fall into the "denial of reciprocity," which is a denial of the "necessary responsiveness."[13] What is wrong with these ways of thinking, Cavell writes, is not the absence of something but "the presence of something, namely the

6. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 165.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 169.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 166.
11. Ibid., 174.
12. Ibid., 167.
13. Ibid., 176.

refusal of knowledge."[14] Behind the apparently benevolent attitudes of empathy may lie an arrogance of knowing the other and a blindness to others' lives.

> The claim of suffering my go unanswered. We may feel lots of things — sympathy, *Schadenfreude*, nothing. If one says that this is a failure to acknowledge another's suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases, to *know* that he is suffering? It may or may not. The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. [...] A "failure to know" might mean just an ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A "failure to acknowledge" is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank.[15]

What is obliterated is the necessity of "*my knowing and understanding my response to the other*."[16] Cavell calls this shift towards a way of knowing the *passive direction* to the other[17] — as it were, to suffer from the other — in contrast to an active orientation characterized by "our getting from ourselves over to the other."[18] In this passive kind of knowledge, "I have to ask myself how it is that I *make* myself known, or fail to, to the other."[19] In other words, the issue of knowledge of other minds is in fact that of self-knowledge. Here is Cavell's shift from empathy to acknowledgment. At the heart of his idea of acknowledgment lies *separation* as inherent in the human condition. "The fundamental problem accordingly is not to get over to the other, and work our ways in, but to learn separateness."[20] Rather than "getting across, as if spanning an immeasurable distance" from and to the other, Cavell urges us to accept the reality that "I am always already on the other side of a distance, or say separation,

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14. Ibid., 166.
15. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 243.
16. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 174.
17. Ibid., 178.
18. Ibid., 176.
19. Ibid., 178.
20. Ibid., 179.

from the other, always already responsive, or defensive against response, to that other."[21] By accepting such an abyss, distance, we convert the way we relate ourselves to the other: in his words, "the knowledge of others, as of myself, is not an act, but an adventure; if one is lucky, it is an interesting and unending one."[22]

To be ready for such an adventure, we have to learn to expose ourselves to others. Thus acknowledgment heightens the singularity of the self, which is covered over in the language of empathy. With the recognition of separation, what we can achieve is not direct, intimate contact with each other but a state of neighboring, the state of being next to each other.[23] The way of finding ourselves is not necessarily immediate, but mediated, sometimes involving the taking of a detour. In the relationship of acknowledgment, the finding of our way is mediated by language. Acknowledgment already and always contains knowledge, and "knowing is an interpretation of acknowledging."[24] Language is an ingredient of true seeing, true knowledge.

3. Attitudes Towards a Soul

The Truth of Skepticism

In the end of "Notes," Cavell says that empathy is not a "mere shrug of mystery in knowing others but a human gesture of acknowledgment before the depth of the mystery of human separateness."[25] What Cavell proposes is not any kind of agnosticism, but the reconfiguration of what we mean by the private. As he writes: "Whereas I take [Wittgenstein's] teaching on this point to be rather that what is accurate in the philosophical or metaphysical idea of privacy is not captured, or is made unrecognizable, by the idea of secrecy";[26] and that "Wittgenstein does not deny that when I am in pain it is I who give it expression, or fail to — at all events, give it

21. Ibid., 177.
22. Ibid.
23. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 105.
24. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8, quoted in Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 76.
25. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 179.
26. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 330.

expression by expressing pain, I mean by expressing that pain."[27] Acknowledgment reveals the precarious border between the inner and the outer — a sort of intangible, untouchable and invisible territory of our lives in which human beings must live but in which they struggle sometimes to find expression. As Cavell says, "I would be glad to have suggested that the correct relation between inner and outer, between the soul and its society, is the theme of the *Investigations* as a whole."[28] This is the realm of our everyday lives where the tragedy of failing to see and the facility of being able to sense the pain of others takes place. Without going through this invisible territory of the private and the inner, and without paying attention to the particularities of this subtle border between the private and the public, there could be no public, no outer: claims to be able to jump directly to social policies and to solve social problems echo in vain. Sweeping generalization should not cover over the poignant sense of this innerness, of pain and invisible suffering: conversely, paying attention to those particularities of our lives is the door through which we can open ourselves to the public. How can we then cultivate such a way of seeing? How can we learn to empathize with the pain and suffering of others while acknowledging separation and blindness as aspects of the human condition?

These are the questions that have been addressed in philosophy with regard to skepticism. Discussion of skepticism in traditional philosophy has been widely understood as the province of epistemology. Cavell tries to show that what is beneath this tendency in philosophy is the manifestation of existential disturbance. Skepticism, for Cavell, is inseparable from seeing — from being seen, and failure to see and to be seen, from the question of what constitutes seeing properly and humanely; and it identifies denial and avoidance as a deeper source of blindness. We are inclined not to accept the fact that we do not accept our failures of acknowledgement. Acknowledging this blindness, and faced with the insistent responsibility to the other, Cavell asks us to get deeper into the realm of self-knowledge such that we ourselves are radically destabilized in the presence of the other, as a precondition for shared community. In this context, what Cavell calls the "truth of skepticism" exemplifies the attempt to re-place philosophy — to question what it is for human beings *to know*, and to take the

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 329.

terms of this question beyond those of traditional epistemology.[29] Our relationship to others is not a matter of re*cognition* — not one of knowing in an epistemological sense. Skepticism for Cavell is a matter of the tragic state of one's denial of the ordinary, of one's withdrawal from the world.[30] The truth of skepticism is inseparable from a vertiginous "anxiety that our expressions might at any time signify nothing" and a "fear" of "inexpressiveness," the result of which would be that "I am not merely unknown" but "powerless to make myself known."[31] The truth, he explains, is that human condition is by its very nature disturbed and in a state of separation. We cannot fully know the other, and we cannot fully see the other. Here lies our reactive drive to grasp exhaustively, resulting ironically in failure to see.

Cavell's question then is *how*, going through this endless depth of privacy, the "I" can express my position and attitude to others: *how* can I accept and live with this fact of separateness, yet at the same time continue to sustain interest in the lives of others? Cavell's take on skepticism constitutes his warning of the human tendency to grasp everything at once — that is, comprehensively. And this stance is what lies behind his reservations about empathy. Shakespeare's Othello exemplifies this preoccupation with completeness and control, where the craving for certainty is manifested in anxiety over the possession of evidence — the voyeuristic "ocular proof" that Othello demands in the depravity of his jealousy, this perversity of possession.[32] Anxiety over the unknown and the reactionary turn to comprehensive grasping are at the heart of the metaphysical dogma of wholeness. The fundamental task for Cavell, then, is to resist capture by the temptation of metaphysical wholeness.

At the heart of Cavell's ordinary language philosophy is the fragility of language, and hence the fragility of the human condition as a linguistic being. "We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations — a thin net over an abyss."[33] True seeing, if there is any, should begin with this human condition. The way towards empathy necessitates the acceptance of this fact.

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29. Ibid., 241 and 448.
30. Ibid., 83-84.
31. Ibid., 351.
32. Paul Standish, "Postmodernism and the Education of the Whole Person," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 1 (1995): 130 and 132.
33. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 178.

Correct Blindness

For one to feel the pain of others, and to acknowledge the other, one has to keep standing on the precarious border between the possibility and impossibility of expression, between the inner and the outer, and between the soul and the body. You are always exposed to the risk of failing to see, failing to know, as Cavell expresses this sense in *Here and There*: "The discovery that you were wrong about another is as important, as well as painful, as the pleasant conviction that you were right."[34] If this is the case, then, it is Wittgenstein's idea of *an attitude towards a soul* that is crucial here. Cavell writes:

> "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul."[35] And, to be sure, it is the attitude of a soul. Philosophy has its characteristic ways of avoiding this knowledge, and its motives for it. So have religion and politics their characteristic ways.[36]

> My words are my expressions of my life. I respond to the words of others as their expressions, i.e., respond not merely to what their words mean but equally to their meaning of them [...]. To imagine an expression (experience the meaning of a word) is to imagine it as giving expression to a soul.[37]

Standish says that "it is in our words that the attitude to a soul is to be found. And it is in words that remorse is to be felt and expressed."[38] Our use of language, then, needs to be understood in terms "less exclusively of communication and more fully of address and reception."[39]

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34. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 175.
35. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 178.
36. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 340-41; and he says: "The idea of the allegory of words is that human expressions, the human figure, to be grasped, must be read. To know another mind is to interpret a physiognomy, and the message of this region of the Investigations is that this is not a matter of 'mere knowing' [...]. The human body is the best picture of the human soul [...].The body is the field of expression of the soul. The body is of the soul; it is the soul's; a human soul has a human body" (356).
37. Ibid., 355.
38. Standish, "An Attitude towards a Soul," *The Annual Meeting of American Philosophy Forum* (February 18, 2023, online), 8.
39. Ibid.

Here the "soul of words" is anything but mystical or something emotional beyond language.[40] It is rather the nature of language *per se*. Words go beyond us. They say more than we mean. Words do not work in a systematic, algorithmic way. They are sometimes nonsense. In attempting to speak truly, we may find that our words are often bombastic, sentimental, and not quite right. Taken in the wrong way, words create misunderstanding. Words are open to new interpretation, and so they may be threatening, disturbing: this is one way in which language can be seen as always opening to new possibilities.

Towards the end of "Notes," Cavell says: "philosophy, as I care about it most, seeks to free us from self-imposed metaphysical darkness."[41] This is an echo of his remark on darkness he presented in *The Claim of Reason*:

> Wittgenstein's expression 'The human body is the best picture of the human soul' is an attempt to replace or to reinterpret these fragments of myth. It continues to express the idea that the soul is there to be seen, that my relation to the other's soul is as immediate as to an object of sight, or would be as immediate if, so to speak, the relation could be effected [...]. The block to my vision of the other is not the other's body but my incapacity or unwillingness to interpret or to judge it accurately, to draw the right connections. The suggestion is: I suffer a kind of blindness, but I avoid the issue by projecting this darkness upon the other.[42]

In place of this wrong-headed idea of darkness, Cavell talks about a "correct blindness." He elaborates on a line in the *Philosophical Investigations* in which Wittgenstein appears to face out his skeptical interlocutor: "'But if you are *certain*, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in face of doubt?' — They've been shut."[43] What can this apparent evasion, this shutting of the eyes, mean? Cavell phrases his own answer by way of a contrast between the responses of the "intellectual conscience" and of the "human conscience," favoring the latter and finding its expression of the human condition to be at risk of repression by the former:

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40. Ibid.
41. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 179.
42. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 368.
43. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §331.

> "They (my eyes) are shut" as a resolution, or confession, says that one can, for one's part, live in the face of doubt. — But doesn't everyone, everyday? — It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the threat of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it.[44]

It is noteworthy that Cavell here talks not about opening one's eyes fully in response to the metaphysical darkness, but about shutting one's eyes. He teaches us how *not* to see the world comprehensively.

4. Philosophy as a Way of Life

In "Notes," Cavell appreciates the contribution of Austin as "unfreez[ing] philosophy," while at the same time, he regrets that Austin "succumbs to the philosophical rigidity of treating the problem of knowing others in the way philosophy has characteristically treated knowledge, namely as a matter of achieving certainty."[45] The way he discloses the illusion about empathy has demonstrated how Cavell himself takes up the task of Austin and unfreezes philosophy further. And the way he does philosophy, the way he writes, makes us reconsider the task of philosophy. As his "Notes" shows, at the heart of Cavell's philosophy is the desire to address the question of "why or how humans matter to one another."[46] And in order to think through this issue as a living question, one has to relearn the way one does philosophy. With regard to the meaning of criticism, Cavell writes:

> If philosophy is the criticism a culture produces of itself, and proceeds essentially by criticizing past efforts at this criticism, then Wittgenstein's originality lies in having developed modes of criticism that are not moralistic, that is, that do not leave the critic imagining himself free of the faults he sees around him, and which proceed not by trying to argue a given statement false

44. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 431.
45. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 168.
46. Ibid., 169.

> or wrong, but by showing that *the person making an assertion does not really know what he means, has not really said what he wished*.[47]

The foremost task of philosophy, thus, is self-knowledge, knowing that one does not know, and reorienting knowledge in a *passive direction*.[48] We are singularized in the use of language, encountering our own selves, the way we live. We have to say, each of us, what we think, what matters to us, and test it in the eyes of others. Our words gain significance. If there is eventual unity with others, empathetic co-existence with the other, it should begin with this assiduous, endless task of self-knowledge. This places us, in practicing philosophy, as Pierre Hadot claims, in what amounts to "a way of life."[49] Cavell's work throughout his life might rightly be given this name.

47. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 175 (my italics).
48. See ibid., 443.
49. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).