4. From Deflection to Acknowledgment: Cavell and the Problem of Others

EDWARD WITHERSPOON

1. Introduction

The collection of Stanley Cavell's essays recently published under the title *Here and There* offers a wealth of delights. For me, the most valuable of these has been the chance to follow Cavell as he appraises his earlier writings in light of his subsequent reflections. I have found "Notes Mostly about Empathy" especially illuminating.[1] This essay revisits ideas that Cavell first broached in "Knowing and Acknowledging" and subsequently developed in the last part of *The Claim of Reason*.[2] "Notes Mostly about Empathy" contains the following assessment of an earlier effort:

> My dissatisfaction with my early essay [viz., "Knowing and Acknowledging"] was something that writing the essay itself taught me, namely that I had not been able to open far enough to view my sense that what philosophy regards as ignorance of the other, and pictures as the absence of something, is rather the presence of something, namely the refusal of knowledge, or said more plainly, an avoidance or rejection of the other.[3]

This passage invokes several themes that have preoccupied Cavell early and late: what is it that philosophy regards as ignorance of the other? What does philosophy regard as *knowledge* of the other? What is the temptation to avoid or reject the other? Why is philosophy vulnerable to it?

---

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. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
3 Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 166.

To address such questions, I will draw on all of the above-mentioned works. In them, Cavell criticizes the way the problem of other minds is framed within analytic philosophy. Because this critique is of the *framing* of the problem, it applies as much to the anti-skeptic as to the skeptic. Both sides have a distorted view of what is required to know what someone else is thinking or feeling. There are genuine obstacles to knowing others: others can dissimulate their thoughts and feelings or withhold them or lie about them. But philosophy tends to focus not on overcoming these obstacles but instead on puzzles generated by its distorted conception of what it is to know another person. Cavell focuses on the genuine obstacles, and why they matter. He investigates, in other words, why being known to each other matters. As we shall see, they matter because our personal relationships depend on mutual knowledge and mutual acknowledgment of one another's states of mind. Understanding the depth of our dependence on knowing each other allows us to explain why philosophy is constantly tempted to deny or distort that knowledge.

2. Ayer

For Cavell, the work of A.J. Ayer figures as a paradigm of analytic philosophy. It exemplifies the intellectual climate within which Cavell was trained and against which he had to react in order to philosophize in ways he found worthwhile.[4] Although Cavell does not specifically discuss Ayer's "One's Knowledge of Other Minds,"[5] this essay nonetheless provides a useful background for understanding Cavell's critique of philosophical debates concerning the problem of other minds. Ayer nicely captures what we can regard as the 'traditional problem of other minds', and mounts a classic anti-skeptical counter to it.

The problem of other minds, as Ayer presents it, arises from two necessary features of experience, to wit:

(i) "I have direct knowledge of my own experiences," and

4. See ibid., 178.
5. Alfred J. Ayer, "One's Knowledge of Other Minds," in *Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1954).

(ii) "I cannot have direct knowledge of anyone else's experiences."[6]

For Ayer, my awareness of my own experiences is the paradigm of knowledge. I can't have that kind of knowledge of other people's experiences. And because I don't have direct knowledge of other's experiences, when I make a judgment about what someone else is thinking or feeling, I can easily turn out to be mistaken: the other might be lying about their thoughts or faking feelings they don't actually have. It can easily seem that knowledge of another's thoughts or experiences is impossible, or is at best only *knowledge so-called*. As Ayer sees it, the problem of other minds is the problem of explaining how we could know what another person is experiencing when we cannot have *direct* knowledge of it.

There is one historically important position in the philosophy of mind that conjures away the epistemological problem Ayer has identified. *Behaviorism* defines mental states as patterns of behavior or as dispositions to behave. For a behaviorist, observing another person's behavioral patterns or getting reliable evidence of their disposition to behave *is* directly observing or getting reliable evidence of their thoughts and experiences. Ayer rejects behaviorism, retaining the natural idea that a mental state is distinct from the behavior that is associated with it.[7] But the notion of a behavior does play a central role in the problem of other minds. For Ayer, while behavior is not identical to a mental state, observation of behavior is the only possible mode of access to other's mental states: others' behavior is "the only ground that I can have for believing that other people have experiences."[8]

The fact that my beliefs about others' minds are grounded in my observation of their behavior marks the immense difference between such beliefs and my knowledge of my own experiences. In explicating my knowledge of my own experiences, Ayer writes:

> Presumably the knowledge claimed is knowledge that something or other is the case, that I have a headache, or that I am thinking about a philosophical problem: and the point is that if the statement which expresses what I claim to

6. Ibid., 191.
7. See ibid., 193.
8. See ibid., 192.

> know refers only to my present experience, I am in the best possible position to decide its truth. If I judge it to be true, it is on the basis of an experience which conclusively verifies it, inasmuch as it is the experience which the statement describes.[9]

Ayer here characterizes "direct knowledge of an experience": it is knowledge whose justification *is the very experience which is known*. So when it comes to my knowledge of what someone else is experiencing, my having direct knowledge would be *my having the very experience which the other is having*. And so now the question is: is that possible? Can I have someone else's experience?

Ayer's answer to this is *No*. It is a matter of logic that experiences had by different people are different experiences, precisely because they belong to *different people*.

> [I]t turns out that to share [someone else's] experiences, in the sense required, is to have his experiences, and that in order to have his experiences I have to be that person, so that what is demanded of me is that I become another person while remaining myself, which is a contradiction.[10]

For Ayer the very fact that an experience is *yours* entails that *I* cannot have it. This is a logical consequence of the notions of "being the same person." Furthermore, since directly knowing that an experience is occurring is to have the experience, it also follows that, for any experience that you might be having, I cannot *directly know* that you are having it. Since I lack direct knowledge of your experiences, any claim I might enter about your experiences or other states of mind could only be justified by inferences from what I do know directly, which is, for Ayer, my own experiences. How could my experiences justify my in attributing experiences to someone else? The key, as I briefly noted above, is *behavior*. I know my own experiences, and I know how they correlate with my behavior. I can observe other people's behavior, and then compare their behavior with mine: "I know that certain features of my own behaviour

9. Ibid., 193.
10. Ibid., 196.

are associated with certain experiences, and when I observe other people behaving in similar ways I am entitled to infer, by analogy, that they are having similar experiences."[11]

One can wonder whether the analogy is strong enough to justify my claims about the other's mind. The chief issue here is whether there is any way to confirm the analogy; that is, to confirm that the correlations between *my* experiences and *my* behavior do indeed correspond to the correlations between *the other's* experiences and *their* behavior. To confirm this analogy would seem to require direct knowledge of the other's experiences: if I could *directly* know someone else's feeling on some occasion, then I could begin to confirm that what they feel when they behave that way corresponds to what I feel when I behave that way. But, of course, direct knowledge of another's experience is exactly what I do not have.

Some philosophers would argue that the inability to confirm anything about the correlation between others' behavior and their experiences fatally weakens the analogy; they therefore deny that knowledge of others' minds is possible. But Ayer is undeterred by my lack of any direct confirmation of others' experiences: it is reasonable to assume that my constitution is similar to that of other people, and so it is reasonable to assume that our behavioral similarities are indicative of mental similarities. Consequently, my observation of your behavior is a sufficient basis for (at least some of) knowledge claims about their experience.

3. Contra Ayer

In Ayer's account, the skeptic starts from a conception of the ideal way for me to gain knowledge that someone else is in a particular mental state: it would be for me to have their experience. My having their experience would give me direct knowledge, just like their direct knowledge, of what they are experiencing. Since I can't have their experience, I can't have direct knowledge of their mental states. Ayer himself accepts this argument. Where he and the skeptic part company concerns whether there is a source of *indirect* knowledge of another's mental states. Ayer, as we noted, thinks

11. Ibid., 192.

that there is, in the form of similarities of behavior between the other and me. Skeptics argue that any such similarities are an insufficient basis for knowledge. They think that the analogy can only yield knowledge if we have instances of *direct* knowledge of others' experience, that is, instances in which I have the others' experience. Ayer pushes back against this demand. Since having someone else's experience is logically impossible, such an occurrence should not be imposed as a necessary condition for knowledge.

Cavell, like Ayer, focuses on the requirement the skeptic imposes on our knowledge of others. But where Ayer wishes to explain *why I cannot have* another person's experience. Cavell poses a more fundamental question. He asks, in effect, "*What good would it do* for me to have someone else's experience? What would I learn from it?"

In investigating this question, Cavell takes issue with the claim that it is logically impossible for one person to have another's experiences.[12] Cavell argues that it is intelligible that what befalls one person directly affects another's mind. Indeed, Cavell invents a scenario with just this feature. He presents his thought experiment as a variation on the Corsican brothers, whom he dubs First and Second: Second "suffers everything which happens to his brother First"; moreover, "Second never suffers unless First does."[13] When First is whipped, both he and Second writhe in agony, even if Second is miles away. Cavell concludes that "here we have a pain in *this* body and a pain in *that* body and it is numerically the same pain, literally the same. The thing which looked unintelligible [or logically impossible], was so, only given a certain picture."[14] So if there is a sense of 'the same pain' such that it is true that I cannot have the same pain as you, this 'cannot' is a function of our natural history, of the causal linkages (or absence thereof) between you and me. The 'cannot' in question is not a function of the definition of personal identity, as Ayer would have it.

Having given the skeptic what they demanded — the possibility that two people could have literally the same experience — Cavell now pauses to ask whether

---

12. I note again that Cavell is not specifically targeting Ayer in this argument. In "Notes Mostly about Empathy," Cavell has in mind any philosopher who thinks that the ideal case for my knowing another would be "having the very same experience they have," or "introspecting the other's feelings," (176) or anything of the sort.
13. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 251.
14. Ibid., 252. My interpolation.

anything has been gained. Does First, upon feeling the sting of the lash, know that Second is in pain? First feels pain, and, by hypothesis, Second feels the same pain. What does First 'directly' know? Surely *his pain*; the fact that it is *also* Second's pain is irrelevant. Now he may also know that whenever he feels pain, Second does too. But how has he come to know that? Not by feeling Second's pain (although it is true that he does feel Second's pain, since their pains are the same). First knows that Second feels pain (if he knows it), by having heard Second's testimony about his (Second's) experience, or by having observed Second expressing the very pains that he (First) was feeling. In other words, First knows that Second is in pain the way anyone else would — not through the fact of his having Second's experience. A case that was supposed to exhibit a perfect but unattainable basis for knowing others has turned out to rely on our ordinary, imperfect means of knowing them — to rely, in other words, on the very routes to knowledge the skeptic calls into doubt.

Does Second know that First is in pain? (This is the direction of fit that seems more relevant to satisfying the skeptic's wish, for the skeptic pictures direct knowledge as passively receiving another's experience.) Again, Second feels the sting of the lash, the very pain afflicting First. It is, indeed, *First's* pain: it is produced by what happens to First's body; it is alleviated by tending to First's wounds. All of Second's pains are First's. When it comes to pain, Second is not different from First. In Cavell's words:

> *his* [First's] pain no longer contrasts with *my* [Second's] pain, his has no further content so to speak; "his pain" no longer differentiates what he feels from what I feel, him from me; he is not *other* in the relevant sense.[15]

So while we could describe this situation by saying "Second knows First is in pain," we cannot say "Second knows that *someone else* is in pain." But the latter is the form of knowledge-claim that the skeptic wanted to ground on *having someone else's experience*. When we try to imagine what the skeptic claims to want, namely, direct experience of another's pain, what we actually have to picture is a fusion of

15. Ibid., 253.

consciousnesses.[16] To the extent that we can form a coherent idea of this, it is an idea that fails to be an instance of the thought "Another person is in pain."

What the skeptic presented as the ideal position for knowing what someone else is experiencing thus turns out to be useless for that purpose. This might seem to support Ayer's implicit suggestion that the skeptic is imposing an unreasonable demand on what counts as knowledge. But Ayer's understanding of the problem of other minds (and so his understanding of the range of possible solutions to it) remains structured by the skeptic's ideal. The other is in the ideal position for knowing what they are experiencing, begins the skeptic. Since I cannot be in that ideal position, my goal should be to get into a position as close to the ideal as possible. Our first attempt to do so was to imagine that I could have the other's experience. That attempt has been shown to be useless. But from it Ayer retains the idea that knowing another requires that I have something in common with them. On his view, the common something has to be our behavior. The more alike our behavior, the stronger the analogy that grounds my judgments about the other's experiences.

Because the anti-skeptic's account of our knowledge of others rests on our having something in common with them, it is subject to a criticism similar to Cavell's critique of the skeptic's wish for experiences in common. (The remainder of this section is inspired by Cavell's writings but is not meant as an exposition of them.)

You have banged your thumb with a hammer: for the Ayer-style anti-skeptic, if I am concerned to know what you are feeling, the epistemically scrupulous thing to do would be to hammer my own thumb. I would then be able to notice my behavior, and check that indeed it is similar to yours (the same hopping about, the same cursing, the same grabbing of the swelling thumb with the good hand, etc.); then I would be as justified as possible in asserting "I know you are in pain."

---

16. John L. Austin had earlier registered the absurdity of the idea that having another's pain is a route to knowing that they are in pain. To the objection that you ought not to say you know Tom is angry, because you don't introspect his feelings, Austin replied: "One: *Of course* I *don't* introspect Tom's feelings (we should be in a pretty predicament if I did). Two: *Of course* I *do* sometimes know Tom is angry. Hence Three: to suppose that the question 'how do I know that Tom is angry?' is meant to mean 'How do I introspect Tom's feelings?'... is simply barking our way up the wrong gum tree." Austin, "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 115-16. Cavell agrees with Austin's argument, but he seeks an understanding of what has elicited this confusion that goes beyond Austin's flippant '*of course*." See Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 167-68.

This method of determining another's inner state is patently ridiculous.[17] And one may object that this is an unfair portrayal of Ayer's position: we should understand him not as explaining how we *find out* that someone else is in pain, but rather as giving an account of how we *justify* claims about others' experiences. The occasion for my judgment that you are in pain is simply my seeing your cursing, hopping, thumb-cradling behavior. We learn to make such judgments in learning to talk, and for that no self-inflicted hammer wounds are necessary. The search for similarities of behavior belongs to the reflective mode of justification: to *justify* my attribution of pain, I retrospectively look for similar behavior I have exhibited; my findings are what I marshal to ground the judgments that I arrive at reflexively.

This defense of the search for similarities of behavior as the ground of knowledge claims about others' minds does not address the fundamental problems with the absurd picture of what it is to know what someone else is experiencing. The context of discovering that someone else is in pain cannot be hermetically sealed off from the context of justifying the judgment that they are. An account of how one justifies a judgment carries implications for what you must do in arriving at it, since making a judgment is always oriented towards making a *justified* judgment and so is oriented towards acquiring whatever our account of justification tells us we need. Consequently, according to an Ayer-style anti-skeptic, I cannot simply judge that another is in pain on the basis of what they are expressing; I must always keep one eye on myself, to check that I have behaved similarly in the past. For if I don't have the relevant past behavior, then I am rationally compelled either (a) to refrain from judging, or (b) to seek to generate the missing thing in myself.

Both of these disjuncts are unattractive responses to others who present novel expressions of their states of mind. Option (b) amounts to the recommendation to hammer my own thumb in order to attribute pain to you. But taking option (a) would leave me cut off from a vast range of human experience. If there is anything idiosyncratic about the other's expression of pain, taking option (b) would bar me from making a judgment about them. Indeed, even if the other's behavior is typical,

17. At one point Ayer comes close to suggesting that we proceed in the absurd way I have just imagined: "I infer that my friend is in pain, because of the condition of his tooth, because of his nervous system, because of his wincing, and so forth; and the connection of these properties with a feeling of pain is one that I can, in principle, test, one that I may in fact have tested in my own experience." Ayer, "One's Knowledge of Other Minds," 213.

but is of a type different from any I have exhibited, then I can make no well-founded judgment about them. Seeing a man wailing and tearing at his clothes and pouring dust on his head as he bends over the body of his dead child may naturally affect me to judge that he is in extreme emotional pain, but I am not entitled to make that judgment unless I have acted in similar ways myself in the past. Contrary to the proponents of the argument from analogy, it is often in such cases of extremity that we feel most certain of what the other is experiencing. Do you have to have gone through childbirth to recognize that a woman in labor is suffering? Do you have to have broken a limb to recognize the agony of someone who has just fallen from a ladder and whose leg lies twisted under them? (If you are a reader who feels that these rhetorical questions are question-begging, I ask you to bear with this essay a little longer. Your objections will get a hearing.)

Even in cases in which the anti-skeptical position licenses judgments about others' experiences, they do so in phenomenologically implausible ways. For the anti-skeptic, a judgment about another's experience is always equally a judgment about my own. So to know another I have to direct my attention in two directions, towards them and towards myself, so that I can ascertain how much *like me* the other is. On this view, carefully attending to the other — finding out what makes *them* tick, how *they* manifest their thoughts and feelings and attitudes — yields knowledge of them *only if* what I discover corresponds to what I have noticed in myself. Ayer-style anti-skepticism makes it impossible for me to expand my understanding of others through focusing exclusively on *them*.

Ayer purports to be an anti-skeptic. And it is true that, as against skepticism, he carves out a limited range of cases in which we *can* be said to know what someone else is feeling. But in all cases in which I don't exhibit the same behavior as the other person — that is, in the vast majority of my encounters with others — his view entails that I cannot know and should not make judgments about their experiences. And even in the cases in which his view would grant that I have knowledge, its account of *how* I come to know puts the focus on me as much as on the other, and so occludes the fact that we can learn about others by attending to *them*.

4. Empathy

This criticism of anti-skepticism requires a qualification. My perception of the other often *does* involve a certain kind of reference to myself, and there is a sense of 'having the same experience' as someone else that is relevant to knowing their mind. This is the sense of sharing an experience that contributes to mutual understanding. I depend on other's having had life experiences similar to mine when I try to communicate what is going on with me. Someone who has never felt sexual desire might not be able to understand what a lover feels for their beloved. Someone who has never lost a close relative might be limited in their understanding of my grief at the death of my sibling. To know what intense grief, remorse, joy, boredom *are* may well require having known them, that is, having experienced them and gaining words or other means of expressing them.

Cavell gives voice to a perceived failure of understanding: "What do you, with your protected life, know of despair or shame or failure or ecstasy?"[18] This is an outburst. But Cavell puts it in the form of a question. And it is not obvious that the answer to the question should be, "Nothing." What it would take for someone who has lived a protected life to know something of despair or shame or failure or ecstasy is left open. But Cavell gives what is needed a label in the sentence that follows the outburst: "The question is evidently not about certainty but about — perhaps we might say — empathy."[19] I would characterize empathy as the ability to feel your way into another's state of mind. It is what enables us to know what it is to be in that state of mind, and so enables us to grasp the content of the judgment that someone is in that state. The role of this kind of understanding is not to provide the *justification* for the judgment; it is not the route to gaining *certainty*. So while we must grant that it is essential to knowing another's state of mind that I have empathy enough to know what they are experiencing, we can retain the conclusion of the preceding section that my judgment is not based on my sharing patterns of behavior with them.

---

18. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 169.
19. Ibid.

5. Deflection

As we have seen, what the skeptic advances as the ideal of knowing another's mind – namely, having their experiences – is in fact irrelevant to such knowledge. Yet the question of whether one person can have another's experiences has been a topic of intense philosophical controversy. On one side Ayer and the skeptics he engages with insist that the answer is no, as a matter of logic. Opposing them is Norman Malcolm, who insists that the answer is yes, as a matter of the grammar of our language.[20] According to Malcolm, the rules for the use of our language entail that two people *can* have the same pain and that it is nonsensical to say that they *cannot*. When Ayer or a skeptic tries to assert the contrary, then they are either being perverse or are ignorant of the rules for the use of expressions like "the same pain."

Cavell is not satisfied with any philosophical criticism that describes its target as ignorant or perverse. (This is why he has reservations about J.L. Austin's treatment of philosophers who — in Austin's view — misuse language.) When it comes to skepticism in particular, Cavell finds that the skeptic has deeper, more compelling motivations than anti-skeptics in the mode of Malcolm and Austin: the skeptic perceives profound truths about human life:

> The skeptic comes up with his scary conclusion — that we can't know what another person is feeling because we can't have the same feeling, feel his pain, feel it the way he feels it — and we are shocked; we must refute him, he would make it impossible ever to be attended to in the right way. But he doesn't *begin* with a shock. He begins with a full appreciation of the decisively significant facts that I may be suffering when no one else is, and that no one (else) may know (or care?); and that others may be suffering and I not know, which is equally appalling.[21]

The skeptic moves from decisively significant facts to the conclusion that we cannot ever know what another person is thinking or feeling. To undermine that scary

---

20. Norman Malcolm, "The Privacy of Experience," in *Epistemology: New Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Avrum Stroll (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).
21. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 246-47.

conclusion, Malcolm asserts that two people *can* have the same experience. Ayer asserts that while two people *cannot* have the same feeling, nevertheless they can acquire justified beliefs about each another's experiences. Malcolm, Ayer, and the skeptic thus become embroiled in a complicated three-way debate that hinges on the having of the same experiences.

In the continuation of the above passage, Cavell describes this situation:

> But then something happens, and instead of pursuing the significance of these facts, he [the skeptic] is enmeshed — so it may seem — in questions of whether we can have the same suffering, one another's suffering.[22]

By showing that my having your experience is not relevant to my knowing what you are experiencing, Cavell allows us to appreciate how far Ayer, Malcolm, and their skeptical interlocutor have departed from the skeptic's original insight. Cavell offers a term for this phenomenon, wherein the "full appreciation of decisively significant facts" gives way to an irrelevant dispute: he suggests that "the issue has become deflected."[23]

To be deflected in this context is to turn away from a difficult truth towards a philosophical puzzle.[24] Philosophers know how to deal with puzzles: they have graduate school training in making distinctions (qualitative versus numerical identity), constructing analogies (the other's behavior is like mine), imagining outlandish possibilities (telepathy). They don't have academic training in confronting the fact that others whom I need or wish to know can remain enigmas. So philosophers are vulnerable to subtly shifting the topic, in this case, from the stubborn *otherness* of others to having the same experience (a possibility that — at first blush — promises to connect me with others). In the face of this challenging feature of the human condition, engaging in a philosophical dispute serves as an escape, a shift to a topic well suited to philosophical analysis.

---

22. Ibid., 247.
23. Ibid.
24. Cora Diamond calls attention to this moment in Cavell's response to skepticism. She puts the concept of deflection at the center of her account of how philosophy evades what she calls "difficulties of reality." Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," in Cavell, Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 56. My discussion is deeply indebted to hers.

Ayer provides a textbook instance of just such a deflection:

> It may in fact be the case that other people baffle or deceive me. I have some evidence to show what they are really like, but it is not sufficient for me. Even though they tell me, with every appearance of honesty, what is going on in their minds, I may still doubt whether they are telling me the truth. How can I ever be sure, in such a case, that I am not mistaken? A question of this sort frequently expresses a felt anxiety.
>
> But how is this anxiety to be allayed? If someone finds himself in this position, what can be required to reassure him? Perhaps only that he should get to know other people better, and this he may achieve; it is at all events a practical problem. Perhaps he needs something out of the ordinary, like telepathy, which he may not in fact be able to achieve.[25]

And now Ayer enters into questions and puzzles about the possibility of telepathy.
[indent] We start with a fact, a real problem:
We start with a fact, a real problem: other people can baffle me. Ayer notes that there may be ways to address this problem. But rather than discuss what these ways may be, he invites us to imagine a condition that promises to make the problem disappear — telepathy! And the definition and possibility of telepathy (of *directly knowing* the experiences of others) are problems that philosophy can go to town on.

Cavell wants to avoid getting deflected from the facts that Ayer notes and that skeptics emphasize. Skeptics and anti-skeptics fail to pursue the significance of these facts, Cavell says. What would it be to avoid deflection, to pursue the significance of these facts?

For a start, we could enumerate the facts themselves. They include these: there is often a gap between what someone *is* and how they *appear*. We are capable of lying. We can dissimulate our feelings. We can hide our thoughts. And, on the other side, we can be obtuse; we can fail to perceive what is going on with the person right in front of us. These features — our powers of deception, our power to suppress our feelings and withhold our thoughts, on the one hand, and our distractedness, our

25. See Ayer, "One's Knowledge of Other Minds," 195.

obtuseness, on the other — often mean that we do *not* know what is going on with others. I might be suffering, and no one else know (or care); and the person before me might be suffering and I not know (or care). On the other hand, as Ayer notes, there is such a thing as getting to know other people better. Often, this is a simple matter of paying attention to them. Sometimes it is a matter of gaining experience (becoming more worldly, as we say), or getting better acquainted with the people we are trying to read.

These observations about how we get to know someone else's mind — and the facts of human obtuseness and deception that often stand in the way of such knowledge — are so banal as to appear to be almost without significance. (Ayer can mention them and drop them in a sentence or two.) But Cavell says that these facts *are* significant. Why? Well, one part of the answer is that they provide the animus of the skeptic's worry that I might *never* know what is going on in another's mind. Cavell is more interested in a different aspect of the significance of these facts: they can be *appalling*. Now, what's appalling about the fact that I sometimes don't know what someone else is feeling or the fact that my own feelings might go unnoticed and unknown by others? When I am suffering, and others do not know, it's pretty clear why I would be appalled: I am not getting the attention and care I need. My distress arises not just from a lack of care for my injury. It also comes from the added insult that I feel from others' lack of awareness. I thought they cared, but they can't be bothered to pay attention to me; or I had counted on them to be sensitive, and I realize I have misjudged them. There are countless gradations of disappointment (with myself or others) that are possible when my suffering goes unnoticed, and many of them are indeed appalling. (There will be other cases in which I seek to conceal my suffering; then it might be other people's *discovering* my suffering that would appall me. Philosophy has scarcely scratched the surface of the range of possible reactions elicited by unknown suffering.)

But why should *I* be appalled when I am ignorant of someone else's suffering? Well, sometimes ignorance is a failure — it is my not knowing something that I *should*. And when I fail to recognize suffering that I should, the failure is not just a cognitive deficiency: it leads me to fail in my obligations to the other.

> Your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer — I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what "(your or his) being in pain" means. Is.[26]

The suffering of another person makes a claim upon me. When I encounter a suffering person but fail to recognize their suffering, I am failing in my obligations to them. And that is a cause for self-reproach and for being appalled at my lack of awareness.

The risk — or I should say the fact — of our failures to know others helps explain the attractions of the skeptic's ideal of knowledge. Let us consider actual disappointments in our quest for knowledge of those around us, instances in which we have misunderstood others, failed to perceive their sufferings or failed to register their interests or aspirations. These disappointments are often due to our own obtuseness, carelessness, lack of engagement, and other forms of ineptitude. Now, prompted by such failures and possible failures, the skeptic offers a picture of what it would be to know, *really* know, another person's mind. The skeptic's picture has disappointment built into it; it requires would-be knowers to achieve something they cannot achieve. This may be discouraging. But at the same time, focusing on this allegedly necessary disappointing of our urge to know masks or excuses our *actual* failures. ("I did not realize that my colleague was upset at the way we were discussing job candidates" can become "I cannot really know whether my colleague was upset").

6. Acknowledgement

Cavell says that another's suffering calls for acknowledgment. For me to acknowledge another person's suffering is to let them know that I know that they are in pain. Putting my knowledge into the public space (the shared cognitive realm between me and the other) constitutes what I go on to do as a *response* to their suffering (or as a failure to respond). (If I am simply ignorant of the other's suffering, then what I do is not a response to it — even if what I do happens to alleviate it.)

---

26. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263.

Acknowledgment is a rich and complicated phenomenon. Cavell has done more than any thinker I am aware of to chart its contours.[27] I will draw on his work to describe the important role that acknowledgment plays in our lives together. Cavell enables us to see that the traditional skeptical problem space is incompatible with recognizing that role. Registering this fact will illuminate the poverty of the traditional skeptical debate, and will give us a reason to interpret it as a deflection from the demands of social life.

Cavell, as we have seen, introduces the concept of acknowledgment to describe the first, necessary step towards responding to the other's suffering. Suffering makes an especially urgent call for acknowledgment, but such calls are ubiquitous. We can get a sense of the pervasiveness of acknowledgment, as well as its structure, by considering a homely example from Cavell.

When I am late, say, late to the class I am supposed to teach, I have several courses of action open to me. I know I'm late (I looked at my watch as I hustled across the quad), but I can brazen it out — just waltz in and proceed as though there is nothing wrong. Alternatively, I can say, "I know I'm late. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting" and then (perhaps) add an explanation or excuse. These different responses to the fact of my lateness convey different attitudes and will create different relationships with my students. If I ignore my tardiness, that is, if I fail to acknowledge it, that may convey that I am oblivious — perhaps I wish to cultivate a reputation as an absent-minded philosopher with my mind on higher matters — or it may convey that I have little regard for my students' time. On the other hand, acknowledging my lateness conveys that I regard my students and me as living within a common practical framework in which timeliness matters. My acknowledgment does not determine any particular further actions; it doesn't guarantee that I will be on time for the next meeting, for example. But it does create a shared cognitive space in which my actions (past and future) can be discussed: was this a one-off delay, or do I need to change my routine, or does my internal clock just not conduce to this meeting time? Whether such questions come up on this occasion or not, the fact that

27. A sign of its importance in his work is the fact that the last, long, chapter of *The Claim of Reason* is entitled "Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance" (329-496). This title alludes to the standing temptation to avoid the claims that my knowledge of others imposes on me. This temptation motivates the tendency of philosophers to be deflected from difficult human truths towards philosophical puzzles.

I have acknowledged my lateness makes them possible, whereas brazening out my lateness means I will not even entertain such questions.

From this example we can sketch some structural features of acknowledgment. Acknowledgment concerns facts relevant to myself and (some) others, e.g., the fact that I am late, the fact that you are in pain. My acknowledgment of that fact is typically expressed simply by stating it — sometimes with an emphatic "I know."[28] My statement does not just assert a proposition; it does not just communicate a fact. It also communicates that *I* know it: by stating the fact I avow the knowledge as *mine*. I thereby explicitly take on the responsibilities that possessing that knowledge entails. Similarly, when I acknowledge doing something, I put myself on record as being the agent of that act — I avow it as mine — and I thereby accept the responsibilities that performing that action entails. We should note that the mere fact that I acknowledge knowing something or doing something does not by itself determine what these entailed responsibilities are; rather, negotiating these responsibilities becomes possible in the shared cognitive space that my acknowledgment opens. And accepting these responsibilities does not entail that I will fulfill them. But the explicit acceptance puts me in a different moral situation from someone who does *not* acknowledge what they know or what they did. And the moral situations of those who acknowledge or refuse to acknowledge what they know and do differs also from the situation of someone who is ignorant of the relevant facts or deeds.

Let's bring this back to the problem of other minds. When I acknowledge your state of mind, I am publicly committing myself to treating you as someone in that state. My knowing that you are suffering a headache already obliges me to show appropriate consideration (e.g., bringing you a painkiller, keeping my voice down, dimming the lights, etc.); my acknowledging that you have a headache makes that commitment public to you and anyone else to whom I acknowledge it. I might fail to fulfill that commitment (I might absent-mindedly slam the door and flip on the lights) but my acknowledgment makes special forms of criticism possible: others can recognize that I am being inconsiderate or blamably forgetful, not just obtuse or ignorant.

Mutual acknowledgment belongs to the warp and weft of our lives together. With the expression 'our lives together' I mean to refer to the web of interpersonal

28. See Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 255.

relationships that each of us stands in to a world of others. These are constituted by what P.F. Strawson calls the "personal reactive attitudes": attitudes like "gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings."[29] Acknowledgment is an essential ingredient in expressing these attitudes. For example, in expressing gratitude to my benefactor, I acknowledge the good deed they have done me. In expressing resentment, I acknowledge that I have been harmed by the person I resent. "To ask to be forgiven is in part to acknowledge that the attitude displayed in our actions was such as might properly be resented."[30] Expressing, evaluating, and acting on these attitudes — which requires acknowledging them and all that they entail — is (part of) what it is to participate in our lives together.

7. Acknowledgement and Knowledge

Anyone moved by skeptical worries is likely to feel that, with all this talk about acknowledgment as expressing a speaker's knowledge of facts — including facts about other minds — we have simply begged the question of skepticism. The skeptic will remind us of a point that Cavell himself emphasizes: acknowledgement is predicated on knowledge.

> It isn't as if being in a position to acknowledge something is *weaker* than being in a position to know it. On the contrary: from my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know I'm late (which is what my words say); but from my knowing I am late, it does not follow that I acknowledge I'm late — otherwise, human relationships would be altogether other than they are. One could say: Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge).[31]

---

29. Peter F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 4.
30. Ibid., 6.
31. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 256-57.

I cannot acknowledge that I am late to class if I don't know that I am. Similarly, I cannot acknowledge your suffering if I don't know that you are suffering. But you might be dissimulating or lying, or I might be misreading your behavior or misinterpreting your words. The skeptic, in reminding us of these possibilities, demands that I rule them out. Cavell insists on the facts of human opacity, and so it can appear that he has done nothing to rule out these skeptical possibilities. And if the skeptical possibilities are live, he is not entitled to help himself to the concept of acknowledgment.

Someone might try to accommodate the importance of acknowledgment while maintaining the epistemological standards that make skepticism seem rationally compelling. This accommodation would start with Cavell's insight that acknowledging your suffering involves a practical response: it is doing something to answer the call that your suffering makes on me, the call whose content is typically to provide aid and comfort. And I can deliver aid and comfort without any particular *epistemic* stance as regards what you are actually feeling. Thus we can try to bring skepticism into harmony with the practical demands of acknowledgment:

> When you appear to be suffering, the essential thing is that I respond to that appearance. I don't have to *know* that you are suffering. Even though (as the skeptic reminds us) I cannot know that you have the thoughts and feelings that you appear to have, I can ascribe them to you based on the observable cues that we normally use for such ascriptions. The claim that your putative suffering makes on me is to treat you *as though* you have the thoughts and feelings that you appear to have. When you wince and clutch your temples, I am to say "Oh, you have a headache," and I am to dim the lights and fetch you a painkiller. We can call this attitude "knowledge for all practical purposes," as opposed to the genuine knowledge that is out of reach. And this is enough for us to sustain our lives together.[32]

Let's consider this from the point of view of someone who stands in need of sympathy. Imagine that you have just had your heart broken. You confide your

32. Some interpreters of Cavell seem to think of acknowledgment in just this way: as a practical stance toward others that is a *substitute* for knowledge. My argument in this section is meant to show why this reading is not sustainable.

emotional pain to your philosopher-friend. Your philosopher-friend wants to be responsive while remaining rationally scrupulous. So after you share how hurt you are by the break-up of your relationship, your friend replies:

> You are giving every appearance of being someone with a broken heart, and I will treat you as such. Strictly speaking I cannot confirm that you are really in emotional pain, but I will behave towards you as though you are. So let me give you a hug, and, here, take this tissue to wipe your eyes.

This would be a poor attempt at consolation. When you are heart-broken, you need your friend to *recognize* that you are. It is not enough — indeed, it can be quite infuriating – for your friend to treat you *as though you are upset*. You need your friend to acknowledge that you *are* upset. The friend's attitude — "You say you are upset, but I don't really know that you are" — denies you what you seek. The friend's response is inadequate not just because the friend *expresses* their lack of knowledge. Your dissatisfaction with your friend would not be diminished — in fact, it could be exacerbated — if they kept their uncertainty quiet. Imagine that you discover later that your friend doubted your experience, that they harbored the thought that maybe you weren't really upset at the break-up of your relationship: you would quite rightly feel betrayed or duped.

Why does it matter that others *know* what I am experiencing? Whether someone actually knows that I am suffering a headache or merely treats me as though I am might not make a difference to the outward aspects of the care I receive: either way, they could fetch a painkiller and dim the lights. But we care not just about what people around us *do*, but also about their attitudes towards and judgments about us. We typically care about being seen for what we are. We seek to be known. (Not known by everyone, and not every thought or feeling, of course. But we regard as pathological persons who wish to keep their thoughts and feelings concealed from everyone, even their intimates. In saying that people who do not wish to reveal themselves to others are exhibiting a 'pathology', am I just expressing a prejudice? The subsequent argument will provide a basis for answering, No.)

8. Conversation

A purely practical response to suffering (providing a tissue or an analgesic) may not on its own amount to an acknowledgment of that suffering; the acknowledgment requires also the expression of knowledge, and knowledge is typically expressed through *saying something*. Conversation is important in at least two respects: first, it is often the means by which we discover what someone else is thinking or experiencing, and it is typically the vehicle through which we express that knowledge and thereby acknowledge the other's state of mind. By unpacking some of Cavell's thoughts about the significance of conversation we will discover another way that philosophy is prone to misrepresent our lives together.

J.L. Austin, in describing *genuine* doubts (as opposed to the merely "metaphysical" doubts that — in his view — skeptics offer), says, "When to all appearances angry, might he [a person I seek to understand] be feeling no emotion at all?"[33] To this and similar descriptions, Cavell responds as follows:

> Austin's drummed-in phrase "When to all appearances angry" suggests that one or another blatant displays of this common and blatant state may be feigned or otherwise misunderstood by us or express some other way of being stricken (say in suddenly remembering an appointment you are pained to have forgotten). Now such cases are most obviously ones in which conversation would swiftly clarify what is happening, but I recall no instance in these texts of a suggestion that conversation might even be essential in becoming clear about one's feelings, hence none about the importance of failing to appreciate what another, or oneself, is going through, the importance to the other or the importance to you, no suggestion, you might say, concerning why or how humans matter to one another.[34]

The first point to glean from this remark is the observation that conversation provides the chief way we learn about others' minds. This may sound so obvious as to hardly be worth mentioning. But philosophy's portrayal of what happens in

33. Austin, "Other Minds," 112.
34. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 168-69.

conversation should give us pause. Both skeptics and anti-skeptics portray us as detached observers, collecting behavioral evidence (bodily movements, mostly, but maybe also the emission of sounds), from which we infer — justifiably (anti-skeptic) or not (skeptic) — the mental states of the being under observation. The reality is that when we seek to understand someone else, we are normally an engaged participant with them: we are trying to communicate or to cooperate with them, or we are competing or fighting against them. It matters to us to read others' minds correctly, and through sustained interactions with them we can generally obtain good grounds for judging that we have done so — where these grounds are what they say and do, *not* an interpretatively neutral base of behavior and emitted sounds. We can on occasion take the distanced attitude of a mere observer who is trying to figure out someone else.[35] But adopting the distanced attitude takes special training and effort, and the ability to adopt it and to interpret others from it is parasitic on our normal attitude of engagement. That is, it is a suspension of the personal reactive attitudes that are our default approach to others.

Conversation has another aspect that Cavell identifies in the above passage. When I converse with another, I am not only discovering their mind, I am also revealing my own. Moreover, self-revelation is also self-discovery. Frequently I learn what I think through finding out what I say; I clarify my feelings through choosing how to express them. The work of communicating with others — of establishing a shared understanding — forms our minds; conversation is not just a matter of conveying to each other what is already formed.

Conversation is thus a two-way activity of revelation and discovery. But it has another crucial dimension: my discovery of my own mind is shaped by the other's acknowledgment (or lack thereof). I depend on my interlocutor not just to *receive* my expression of my mind, but to confirm or disconfirm it — to connect with *me* through what I have said. This does not mean that I let the other tell me what I think. But when I trust my interlocutor, I take seriously their take on things — including me — and adjust my understanding in light of theirs, sometimes by agreeing with them, sometimes by articulating my disagreement. This is why finding a suitable interlocutor is so important, and so difficult.

---

35. We can, in other words, adopt what Strawson calls the "objective attitude" towards another person.

If this account of conversation is correct, it provides at least part of an answer to the question of why it matters that others know what I am experiencing: it is because I depend on their knowledge to become who I am.

9. Exposure

We have been discussing conversation as the most natural — and most overlooked — answer to the questions, "How do you know another's state of mind? How and why do you reveal your own?" Those questions are urgent because they inform our relationships with one another. Our interpersonal relationships are predicated on our acknowledging pertinent facts about each other (that we are fellow citizens, that you are in pain, that I am late again, etc.). And acknowledgment is predicated on knowledge, including especially knowledge of others' thoughts and feelings. Our discussion has sketched a set of facts about how our lives together depend on knowing each other.

But there is another set of facts, the ones of primary importance to the skeptic: we are opaque to one another, we can conceal our true thoughts, we can fail to communicate what we want others to know. A moment's reflection on conversation should bring these facts to the fore: conversation is the medium not only for revealing one's state of mind, but also for concealing it. The conversation I thought so indicative of your mind — and so helpful in clarifying my own — might turn out to have been a con job. Because of the depth of possible deception, not to mention obtuseness and indifference and other obstacles to knowing, one might feel that we should cultivate the distanced attitude of the skeptic; only so can we protect ourselves from being duped and from suffering all the harm attendant on that. We may (from politeness or necessity) normally treat other people *as if* they are thinking and experiencing what they say they are. But to be rationally scrupulous, we should make no judgments as to what they are *actually* thinking or feeling.

Cavell remains always aware of the skeptic's facts. In "Notes Mostly about Empathy," he registers the possibility of duplicitous interlocutors:

> If conversation is the golden path to — and from — the other, the only process that seems to allow of an idea of order in this realm naturally subject to

> hurried imprecise or simplified description, conversation may also, briefly or permanently, close or disguise its paths.[36]

Despite this possibility, Cavell describes himself as "always already on the other side of a distance, or say separation, from the other, always already responsive, or defensive against response, to that other."[37] He envisions the objection we are considering: doesn't his stance, in its commitment to the interlocutor's having a mind that is apt for being known, beg the question? Cavell responds by redescribing his position as "my occupying the space of trust."[38]

In adopting this attitude, is Cavell simply ignoring the fact that he might be fundamentally mistaken about the other, the fact that the person he trusts might betray him? The skeptic has argued that there is no good basis for judgments about others' minds, and we have seen that anti-skeptics give us inadequate and inappropriate bases for such judgments. Cavell offers no refutation of skepticism. So doesn't our discussion of the centrality of acknowledgment and of conversation rest on an unjustified assumption, to the effect that we *can* know others' states of mind. And isn't that an irrational stance?

Skeptics and anti-skeptics seek a secure basis for answers to the question, "How do I know that the other is a minded human being, and how do I know their particular state of mind?" They want a basis that cannot be overthrown, a basis that works around the fact of opacity to get to something indubitable; they seek an ocular proof, a mark or feature that guarantees the truth of claims about others' minds. This is a wish to inhabit a protective shell, a position that is cognitively secure and that is protected from practical danger by not relying on trust.

In contrast to this wish for — or fantasy of — security, Cavell highlights how claiming to know others leaves us *exposed*.[39] "The other can present me with no mark or feature on the basis of which I can *settle* my attitude."[40]

---

36. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 176.
37. Ibid., 177.
38. Ibid.
39. As she does in her discussion of deflection, Cora Diamond, in her discussion of Cavell's notion of *exposure*, brings to light important dimensions of the concept that I would otherwise have missed (see Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality," 69-74).
40. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 433.

> I do not know that there is a confident answer to the question, "How do I know that there are (other) human beings?" [...] To accept my exposure in the case of others seems to imply an acceptance of the possibility that my knowledge of others may be overthrown, even that it ought to be.[41]

Whenever I make a judgment about others, I am exposed in several dimensions. First, I expose my own view of others, and (as I have argued above), in doing so I reveal something of myself. Furthermore, in my judgments about others, my capacity as a reader of others is at stake: if my judgments turn out to be false, that failure is likely to be a consequence of my naïveté, my obtuseness, my vulnerability to deception, my rush to judgment, or some other defect. And even if I am not blamable for getting others wrong, my error exposes me to confusion (at least) or danger or injury. From a skeptic's (or anti-skeptic's) point of view, to believe others, to trust others' judgments about oneself, to rely on others to keep their agreements, is to run an unjustified risk. Cavell agrees that being in relationships with others is a risk, and that there is no justification for it of the kind the skeptic demands. But he also charts the costs of refusing to run those risks. As we have seen, to refuse to know others would be to exile oneself from personal relationships, to live as an outsider, even if you continue to inhabit a community.

Skeptics might well grant that, our nature being what it is, it is inevitable that we seek and claim knowledge about one another's minds. Still, they can press the question: but is such a life rational? Your answer to this will reveal what kind of philosopher you are and what stance you take towards our (putative) lives together. In doing philosophy, we are exposed.

41. Ibid., 439.