Conversations 2

THE JOURNAL OF CAVELLIAN STUDIES

Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies

2

Date

2014

Contributors

Nikolas Kompridis (Australian Catholic University)

David Macarthur (The University of Sydney)

Jennifer A. McMahon (The University of Adelaide)

Paul Patton (University of New South Wales)

Robert Sinnerbrink (Macquarie University)

Publisher

uOttawa Open Access

Morisset Hall

65 University Private

Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5

Canada

ISSN

1929-6169

Website

https://uottawa.scholarsportal.info/ojs/index.php/conversations/index

Table of Contents

Themes from Cavell

EDITORIAL COMMENT

The papers collected in this special issue were delivered at a conference titled "Themes from Cavell" that I organized in the Philosophy Department at the University of Sydney, Australia, on February 27–28, 2012. Australian philosophy is famous for a strong allegiance to analytic metaphysics in the form of scientific materialism and what Devitt calls "jack-booted realism." In this high altitude low-oxygen environment it is worthy of note that there exist dissenting voices who would like to return philosophy to more habitable, more commonable, climes. Stanley Cavell is a worthy hero of this renegade movement as a philosopher who brings words back from their metaphysical to their personal, so interpersonal, employment. It is this return from theory-driven abstractionism that particularly characterizes his powerful reading of Wittgenstein's vision of language, his special emphasis on one's own "experience" in matters of art and aesthetics, and his unheralded discovery for philosophy of the deeply personal orientation of actual moral and political thought and talk. These papers reflect engagements with Cavell's thought in the land of Oz, where dreams of another life for philosophy are closer than we realize.

DAVID MACARTHUR

Cavell on Skepticism and the Importance of Not-Knowing

DAVID MACARTHUR

> In Wittgenstein's work, as in skepticism, the human disappointment with human knowledge seems to take over the whole subject.
>
> CAVELL, *The Claim of Reason*

> How do we learn that what we need is not more knowledge but the willingness to forgo knowing?
>
> CAVELL, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

Prelude

In an early essay Cavell set his sights on trying to make Wittgenstein's philosophy available to Anglo-American philosophy in the first decade after the publication of *Philosophical Investigations* when it was hard to see what Wittgenstein was up to through the haze of logical positivism, linguistic conventionalism and American pragmatism.[1] In this paper I would like to make an analogous attempt to make Cavell's philosophy available to Anglo-American philosophy against a perception of it as being slighted, missed, or avoided in contemporary philosophical discussion. Part of the irony of this attempt is that misreadings of Wittgenstein that Cavell was most concerned to resist continue to stand in the way of the availability of Cavell's own philosophy. This family of misreadings points to the peculiar nature of the difficulty of hearing what Wittgenstein and Cavell are saying. And that itself points to the difficulty and delicacy of their attempt to overcome philosophy's insistent drive to overgenerality and hyper-abstraction in order to put particular flesh and blood voices

1. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 44-72.

back into philosophy whilst doggedly maintaining an interest in the conceptual — precisely what had driven philosophers to generality and abstraction — in what Wittgenstein calls "the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not [...] some non-spatial and non-temporal phantasm" — precisely what drives philosophers away from the conceptual.[2]

I want to illuminate Cavell's thinking by reflecting on what is supposed to be most familiar, namely, his treatment of skepticism, leaving aside his detailed diagnostic work of drawing the similarities and differences between other minds and external world skepticism. The aim is to remove a widespread misreading of Cavell's general conception of the problem of skepticism, hence the kind of response that is appropriate to it. I cannot here explore the fascinating theme of Cavell's employment of skepticism as a lens through which to read the human. The theme of not-knowing, and its importance and import, will emerge gradually as we get Cavell's conception of skepticism into better focus.

Introduction

Let me begin then, with four salient features of Cavell's approach to skepticism that are, collectively, distinctive of it:

1. Skepticism, for Cavell, is not the name of a negative epistemological thesis — say that we cannot know, or know for certain, that the external world or other minds exist — but a pervasive threat to something he calls (after Wittgenstein) "the ordinary." What is at issue is nothing less than our capacity to apply words to the world at all.

2. The threat named by the term "skepticism" is further described as our tendency to repudiate "our" (Wittgensteinian) *criteria* for the use of the ordinary concepts of the language we share. This perverse tendency is a pervasive feature of the human, that is, of "creature[s] complicated or burdened enough to possess language at all."[3]

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations (1958),* 4th edn., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), §108.

3. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 140.

3. Cavell, following Wittgenstein (at least as Cavell reads him), is not in the business of refuting skepticism. Whatever else he is doing he is not trying to build an argument for a counter-assertion to the skeptical conclusion.

4. And, perhaps most famously, while skepticism about the external world is not straightforwardly true there is a "truth" in skepticism: "namely, that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing."[4] Elsewhere he further clarifies this: "our relation to the world as a whole, or to others in general, is not one of knowing, where knowing construes itself as being certain."[5]

How are we to understand this complex knot of thoughts? Michael Williams sums up the views of many in responding thus,

> Stanley Cavell [...] thinks that the skeptic can be convicted of only seeming to make sense. Cavell argues that though the skeptic speaks in grammatically correct sentences, he uses them in a peculiar, indeed finally unintelligible, way. This results in a kind of illusion of sense. The skeptic deploys familiar words and phrases. But in a way that makes it impossible to see what *he* means by them. However, because we know what *they* mean, it seems that his pronouncements must mean something, even if we can't quite grasp what it is.
>
> If all this is so, we have a refutation as definitive as we ever see in philosophy.[6]

Michael Williams's understanding of Cavell's interpretation and response to skepticism is sufficiently representative to warrant calling it *the standard interpretation* of it — an interpretation that can be found more or less intact in other notable commentators including Marie McGinn,[7] Stephen Mulhall[8] and Barry Stroud.[9] On this read-

4. Cavell, *Claim*, 241.
5. Ibid., 45.
6. Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 16.
7. Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
8. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Admittedly Mulhall shows a greater awareness than others that this reading does not do full justice to Cavell's text even though he continually returns to formulations such as this: "the skeptical impulse [...] [is] an impulse to repudiate or deny the framework within which alone human speech is possible" (104).

ing Cavell is seen as another (perhaps somewhat more subtle) incarnation of a familiar Wittgensteinian approach to skepticism which sees skeptical pronouncements not as false claims capable of refutation — where refutation is a matter of demonstrating the negation of the skeptical conclusion — but as senseless strings of words that the skeptic has not been able to render meaningful. The meaninglessness is not a matter of employing nonsense words like "yendys" — a new word I've just made up by reversing the letters of the name of the city, "Sydney." On the contrary, the skeptic transgresses the bounds of sense, on this story, by using familiar meaningful words outside the conditions that govern their intelligible employment. It is not the words as such that are meaningless — they have, let us say, their standard dictionary definitions and a history of past uses — it is the skeptic's distinctive employment of them that founders. What fails, on this line, is the skeptic's attempt to employ words with familiar public meanings to mean what he says under the extraordinary circumstances of what Hume calls his "intense reflection."[10]

This standard interpretation offers explanations of each of the four features of Cavell's account of skepticism we have articulated: 1) the skeptic does not have a thesis because he speaks nonsense, nothing either true or false; 2) speaking nonsense is a standing liability of human speech; 3) one cannot refute a nonsensical utterance; and 4) in the context in which the skeptic considers the existence of the external world it is not something that he can properly claim to know or not to know. As Cavell puts it, the context is "a non-claim context".[11]

Without further exploring the details of this reading let us ask why we should accept it? Well, for one thing, it certainly finds apparent confirmation in Cavell's texts. For example, in Part 2 of the *Claim of Reason*, Cavell talks of providing "a schema for a potential overthrowing or undercutting of skepticism" which he describes as follows:

> The "dilemma" the traditional investigation of knowledge is involved in may now be formulated this way: It must be the investigation of a concrete claim if

9. Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

10. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Mark C Rooks (Charlottesville: InteLex, 1995), bk. 1, pt. 4, sect. 2.

11. Cavell, *Claim*, 217. This aspect of Cavell's diagnosis is traced to key, often unnoticed, features of traditional epistemology: the solitariness of the skeptic's rehearsal; and the peculiarity of the "best case" of perceptually based knowledge that he chooses to raise doubts about.

> its procedure is to be coherent; it cannot be the investigation of a concrete claim if its conclusion is to be general. Without that coherence it would not have the obviousness it has seemed to have; without that generality its conclusion would not be skeptical.[12]

Cavell here seems to be convicting the skeptic of incoherence on the ground that his reason for doubting a "best case" of perceptually based knowledge — say, that there is a piece of paper in my hands — wavers inconsistently between an incoherent general doubt required by global skepticism and a coherent concrete doubt whose very specificity raises no skeptical conundrums.

Furthermore, the standard interpretation of Cavell on skepticism fits with the familiar "nonsense policeman" reading of Wittgenstein (as we might call it) defended most ably by Peter Hacker. This reading puts considerable weight on the idea of the philosopher as an authority about the rules of language and the nonsense-producing philosophical transgressions of such rules.[13] Additionally, it can also seem to fit with the deeper "new Wittgenstein" reading of *Philosophical Investigations,* associated in particular with the writings of Cora Diamond, Jim Conant, Alice Crary, Rupert Read and the Hilary Putnam (at least in his writings in the last two decades of the twentieth century).[14] This interpretation builds on a Cavellian reading of Wittgenstein that contests the idea that Wittgenstein places great importance on the notion of a rule; or that he polices grammar as Hacker and his followers would have it. A key feature of the new Wittgenstein reading is the way it places methodological importance on an insubstantial notion of nonsense as mere *non*-sense, a failure to give words a sense in one's employment of them; and the therapeutic advance made possible through the imaginative self-realization that what one had previously taken for genuine under-

12. Cavell, *Claim*, 220.

13. Cf. Peter Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986). For persuasive criticism of the dogmatism involved in this stance see Oskari Kuusela, *The Struggle Against Dogmatism: Wittgenstein and the Concept of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008).

14. I do not mean to suggest that any of the new Wittgensteinians would support the standard interpretation of Cavell on skepticism. The support it lends to this interpretation is, perhaps, *only* apparent. But it is interesting to note that Putnam, who once accepted the new Wittgenstein reading, renounced his allegiance to this aspect of Wittgenstein's thought precisely on the grounds that it trades in a highly problematic idea of grammatically-based nonsense. See Hilary Putnam, "Wittgenstein: Pro & Con", in *Philosophy in an Age of Science*, ed. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

standing had in fact been one's own imaginative capacity to hallucinate a sense. The new Wittgensteinians are more subtle about how we achieve grammatical insight than Hacker but, nonetheless, their (apparent) view of Cavell on skepticism can still seem to be a skepticism-defeating elaboration of Wittgenstein's teaching as one might imagine it expressed in this remark: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense."[15]

Is Cavell offering a Once-and-for-All Response?

But, despite the power of the standard interpretation of Cavell on skepticism and the considerable weight of scholarship that apparently supports it, the difficulties of this reading are, upon unprejudiced reflection, overwhelming. For a start, on this reading Cavell comes across as staggeringly unoriginal. The basic position was, in fact, sketched out by Strawson as long ago as 1959 in his book *Individuals*, where he remarks: "[The skeptic] quietly pretends to accept a conceptual scheme, but at the same time quietly rejects one of the conditions of its employment."[16] The connection between Strawson and the standard reading of Cavell is straightforward. Since *claiming* involves applying concepts in judgments so discerning *the conditions of claiming* can be equated with discerning the conditions of the rightful employment of the concepts (or the conceptual scheme) involved in such claiming. The two accounts are virtually equivalent.

But does the picture of Cavell as Strawson redux do justice to Cavell's conception of the role of skepticism in philosophy, one that must accommodate the claim that "skepticism cannot, or must not, be denied"[17]? We will return to consider this point in detail.

Furthermore, as Williams correctly sees, if the extent of Cavell's contribution is a variation on Strawson then "we have a refutation as definitive as we ever see in philosophy"[18] — thereby starkly contradicting one of Cavell's central tenets. And it won't

15. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §464. See also §119.
16. Peter Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959), 24.
17. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism & Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 5.
18. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 16.

help to protect Cavell here by carping that the term "refutation" should be reserved for the business of *answering* the skeptic. Skepticism would indeed be refuted in a wider but perfectly intelligible sense if, assuming the Strawsonian diagnosis works, it is fully and completely *dissolved*. An unintelligible problem is no problem at all. There is nothing left that requires a response.

To make matters worse, Strawson's diagnosis leaves one wanting to hear a great deal more about what the legitimate conditions of employment of a conceptual scheme are. And so, too, with Cavell (on the standard interpretation) and the conditions for legitimate claiming. On this reading of Cavell it is possible to complain, as Williams and Stroud[19] before him have indeed complained: if *this* is what Cavell is up to then he owes us a theory of the conditions of intelligibility or of what it takes to make genuine claims that are assessable in the epistemic terms of true or false, justified or unjustified, known or unknown. And, of course, Cavell nowhere supplies such a theory of intelligibility or of genuine claiming.

Not-Knowing & Meaning

I take it that the problems with the standard interpretation are sufficiently numerous and damaging for us to look for another approach. I will argue that getting Cavell on skepticism properly into focus allows us to see the importance of aspects of our lives that are not well-viewed from an epistemological point of view, that is, as matters of epistemic assessment from the detached perspective that is particularly associated with the traditional concept of knowledge as founded on a fixed and impersonal structure of reasons. These overlooked aspects of our lives are what I will call matters of not-knowing.[20]

The most compelling reason to take issue with the standard interpretation is that it is in the business of refutation in the wide sense of providing *a once and for all dismissal of the problem*: if not an answer to the skeptical conclusion — negating what the skeptic affirms — then a dissolution of the skeptical argument or problem on the

19. Stroud, *Significance*, 261.

20. What is to the fore, then, is not-knowing in the sense that philosophers have wished to know. In some areas (e.g., morality, aesthetics), the appreciation of not-knowing in that sense gives rise to a deeper appreciation that nothing counts as (ordinary) knowing either.

grounds of its ultimate unintelligibility. Countering this, Cavell is unfailingly clear and insistent that one of his main ambitions in his writing is "to attempt to keep philosophy open to the threat or temptation of skepticism."[21] In no way does Cavell want to answer, undermine, overcome, or close off access to skepticism or the skeptical impulse. Indeed a central feature of Cavell's method is *not* to take sides in philosophical disputes. In order to better understand this gnomic practice we need to attend to Cavell's appeal to certain procedures of ordinary language philosophy associated with Austin and Wittgenstein that have, in many philosopher's eyes, been thoroughly discredited and so are all but forgotten in contemporary philosophy.[22] Cavell's untimeliness is one of the main reasons that his philosophy falls on deaf ears and, as a consequence of that, that the standard interpretation has become, precisely, standard.

In philosophizing Cavell situates himself as one who responds to philosophical puzzlement by the method of recounting or recalling criteria, which, according to his Wittgenstein-inspired vision of language, "articulate the ordinary."[23] The theme of the ordinary — alongside skepticism, the most difficult and many-sided theme in Cavell's work[24] — can be initially approached by attending to the fact that criteria are "our" (actually or potentially or hopefully) shared criteria for the application of concepts that competent speakers are perfectly (routinely, uneventfully) familiar with: concepts of mind and its inner and outer workings, and of ordinary or everyday things, actions, objects and events. The concepts at issue are not specialized or esoteric but commonplace, familiar, workaday: the sort of concepts any competent speaker of the language knows how to use (or is expected to): such as being red, or what things counts as tables, or what gestures or actions count as an expression of pain, or as having had a dream, or what we call a tree as opposed to a bush or a shrub or a vine, what is rain as opposed to drizzle, what a cloud, a shadow, what sunshine and so on and so on. From this flows a point of great methodological importance in Cavell's thinking: *that the philosopher has no special authority in eliciting criteria.* Since the philosopher has no expert knowledge nor any special claim on our atten-

21. Cavell, *Quest*, 35.

22. This is not to say that Cavell is an "ordinary language philosopher" as that is commonly understood. Cavell's notion of the *ordinary* is not a stable site for refuting the skeptic (as ordinary language philosophers tend to suppose, e.g., Austin, Strawson) but the unstable site of contrary incentives towards, and away from, skepticism.

23. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (La Salle: Open Court, 1990), 68.

24. Perhaps it would be better to speak of an extendable thematics of the ordinary (hence, of skepticism) in Cavell's writings.

tion — since what is at issue is the almost ubiquitous natural capacity to speak in one's native tongue — he or she is in the same boat as every other master of the language to accept or reject this elicitation. And that applies no less to the two sides of the confrontation between the philosopher of ordinary language and the skeptic.

To further elaborate this vision: linguistic communication depends upon what Cavell calls being "attuned" in our criteria, which is a matter of sharing criteria as well as following, or being prepared to adopt, each other's projections of criteria into new or future or just different contexts. Nothing explains or guarantees this attunement and the capacity to remain attuned through the slings and sorrows and contingencies of outrageous fortune: not meanings, not conventions, not rules, not basic terms, not foundational beliefs. As Cavell puts it, "nothing is deeper than the fact, or the extent, of agreement itself."[25] No philosophical explanation can explain this agreement; and no philosophical explanation is deeper than it.

Here is the first entry point for the theme of not-knowing. Cavell is saying that we do not know any theory of language or any theory of knowledge or any theory of mind capable of explaining why we are attuned when we are and why we fall out of attunement when we do. But far from this concession being regarded as a weakness Cavell turns it into a strength by making it a central plank of his method of philosophizing, remarking:

> The ordinary language critic [is] at the mercy of his opposition [...] a test of his criticism must be whether those to whom it is directed accept its truth, since they are as authoritative as he in evaluating the data upon which it will be based.[26]

The attempt to build a reading of Cavell around the claim that the skeptic is inevitably unintelligible is here seen to crumble into rubble. There is no inevitability about a diagnosis of unintelligibility and it cannot be even provisionally established unless and until a thorough examination has been made of what the skeptic says and under what conditions: To whom? Under what circumstances? Given what stakes or assumptions or allegiances? And, one must add: *unless and until* the skeptic himself acknowledges

25. Cavell, *Claim*, 32.
26. Cavell, *Must*, 241.

that he has been speaking nonsensically. Only then can the diagnosis be definitively established. If the skeptic does not accept a diagnosis of meaningless attaching to his words then that counts against, and threatens to undermine, the diagnosis. We simply *do not know* that the skeptic is speaking nonsense without the skeptic's acknowledgement and say-so — which is not to say we cannot decide for practical purposes, or from exhaustion, or boredom, that his words are nonsense, meaning that we cannot here and now do anything with them or with the skeptic's explanations of them. The upshot is that the diagnosis of unintelligibility carries little weight, and no finality, without the skeptic's own acknowledgement.[27] Initially it is a stand-off. Whether it remains so becomes a highly personal matter of whether I am inclined to continue the conversation with the skeptic, to await a change of mind on his part, or mine. Perhaps I can make something of his words after all, say, tomorrow or the day after that; or perhaps I simply hope for a further illumination that will persuade the skeptic of his own incoherence.

Skepticism & the Ordinary

Another point of divergence from the standard interpretation can be approached by asking, "What is skepticism?" The common assumption of almost every interpreter of Cavell's, not to mention the vast majority of current writers on modern skepticism, is to suppose that the answer to this question immediately fragments into specific skepticisms concerning some region we want to engage with, say, the external world, or other minds, or the past; as well as some story about which epistemic state is being called into question, say, certain knowledge, or everyday knowledge, or justified belief. But Cavell thinks quite otherwise, remarking,

> I do not [...] confine the term ["skepticism"] to philosophers who wind up denying that we can ever know; I apply it to any view which takes the existence of

27. That this is also Wittgenstein's attitude is strongly suggested by his repeated and dogged attempts in *On Certainty* to give sense to Moore's paradoxical and apparently pointless (hence *non*-sensical) pronouncement "I know that here is a hand". And in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein remarks, "When a sentence is called senseless [...] a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation" (§500). But such withdrawn words can, of course, return if one finds a way of employing them.

> the world to be a problem of knowledge [...]. I hope it will not seem perverse that I lump views in such a way, taking the very raising of the question of knowledge in a certain form, or spirit, to constitute skepticism, regardless of whether a philosophy takes itself to have answered the question affirmatively or negatively.[28]

The most important thing to note here that that Cavell labels *both* traditional external world skepticism as well as constructive epistemology, that attempts to prove the existence of an external world, as forms of "skepticism." This will seem perverse or bizarre without a proper appreciation of the motivation for this way of thinking. Let me explain.

Cavell's approach to skepticism is everywhere coloured by the experience in his early days as a graduate student in philosophy of the confrontation between ordinary language philosophy and skepticism. On Cavell's understanding of this confrontation the way our criteria come to grief in modern skepticism represents how any ordinary concept, at any time, in any mouth, or text, can come to philosophical grief. So the term "skepticism" comes to name the violence we do to our everyday criteria for the applications of ordinary concepts whether by way of excessive doubt or constructive epistemological ambitions to quell such doubt. In so far as both traditional skepticism and constructive epistemology attack our ordinary criteria (of knowledge or justification or belief or...) in language they are *both* expressions of the skeptical impulse.

It is worth remarking that the basis of skepticism is here being understood fundamentally in semantic, not epistemic, terms. From this Cavellian perspective, skepticism not a matter of our failing to satisfy some demanding standard of justification or certainty; rather, it arises from a reflection on how the application of criteria comes to seem disappointing within a certain kind of philosophical reflection in so far as it fails to conclusively establish the reality of whatever the criteria are criteria of. And this shortcoming of criteria undermines our claims to know since "all our knowledge, everything we assert or question (or doubt or wonder about...) is governed not merely by what we understand as 'evidence' or 'truth conditions,' but by criteria."[29]

---

28. Cavell, *Claim*, 46.
29. Ibid., 14.

To make this enlarged idea of skepticism clearer let us consider as an example Peter Unger's discussion of flatness. On Unger's view when we say that a table is flat that by common standards would be deemed flat (not warped or bent or broken etc.) we do not speak truly because if we look at the table surface more closely — say, with the aid of a powerful magnifying glass or microscope — we will discover that the surface is actually covered in tiny bumps and crevices that are undetectable to the naked eye. On the basis of this consideration he concludes that it's not *really* flat after all despite what we say in everyday speech. 'Flat', as Unger understands it, is an *absolute concept* for which the criterion of employment he proposes is this: *a surface is flat only in so far as there is no surface that is flatter*. Given this criterion Unger fairly soon acknowledges that "we should at least suspend judgment on the matter of whether there are any physical objects with flat surfaces".[30] That is, according to this view perhaps *nothing* is flat and we *never* speak truly when we say that a table or a bench or a plank of wood or a pancake (etc.) is flat. Everyday thought and talk is convicted of systematic and ineradicable error and various accommodations and qualifications have to be made to explain our practice of saying that things are flat when they are not.

Here Peter Unger is suffering from what we might call a small bout of skepticism in the Cavell's sense, since he is openly attacking the ordinary criteria for whether some ordinary object, like a table, is flat or not. And so, a new philosophical sub-discipline is borne… flatness skepticism!

To Accommodate or Not?

A qualification is necessary, however. Cavell does not simply equate skepticism with an attack on ordinary criteria, for example, our usual criteria for flatness. Although many of his pronouncements are misleading on this issue, Cavell's considered opinion is that *skepticism is an attack on (our attunement in) ordinary criteria that we refuse to accommodate ourselves to*.[31] For example, we might accommodate ourselves to Unger's criteria of flatness at least whilst in conversation with him — in which case it would not be a case of skepticism after all. We would not then feel our

30. Peter Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1975), 67.
31. Cf. Cavell, "The Argument of the Ordinary", in *Conditions*.

access to the world or others (or just *this* other) teetering. But such an accommodation would have consequences of course. We would lose the ordinary contrasts between flat and bumpy or curved or irregular or uneven and so on. And what would become of such terms as "flatten" if nothing is flat? It looks as if we would need another word for everyday (non-absolute) flatness since that's something we needed our ordinary concept for. Perhaps we could handle these consequences in a way that has no parallel when it comes to an attack on a best case of perceptual knowledge.[32] But there is no sharp line dividing cases which we can and do accommodate to, from cases which we cannot or will not.

Now once this phenomenon of attacking the ordinary (understood in terms of what Wittgensteinian calls criteria) is in focus it is clear that the same thing happens in constructive epistemology too: think of Descartes' treatment of certainty where the (extraordinary!) criteria he deploys — namely, indubitability, the *impossibility* of doubt — effectively rules out there being anything certain, at least in extra-mental reality.[33] Indeed, pressing upon this criterion even threatens the supposed certainties of intra-mental reality, too, since we can always raise some minor doubt about whether we are applying concepts correctly to our "inner" goings-on.[34] Descartes's notorious metaphysicalization of doubt shows a similar distain for our ordinary criteria since we do not normally regard the statement "But perhaps you dreamt the whole thing?" as a legitimate doubt in ordinary circumstances where we are asked to testify to the facts in, say, tennis matches, courts of law, scientific laboratories, or senate committees. In all of these cases it is not at all obvious — is it even plausible? — to suppose that what Unger or Descartes' meditator is saying is nonsense, as the nonsense policeman reading of Wittgenstein would have us believe. Our notion of sense is not all-or-nothing but comes in degrees; and we seem to have to acknowledge that the skeptic makes at least *some* sense; or at least we must suppose his words may make a sense we do not currently comprehend in so far as a native speaker of the language who is not mad or psychotic or merely playing with words (etc.) takes himself to be speaking intelligibly, something that bears on our sense of what makes sense. Of

32. If such a best case fails then we can reason, "If we don't know *this* then we don't know *anything* (on the basis of the senses)."

33. René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Vols. I-III*, ed. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

34. John Austin, "Other Minds," *Philosophical Papers* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1961).

course, admitting that is consistent with accepting the way in which assaults upon our ordinary criteria, the more extreme they get, increasingly undermine the point of (or the value of, or our interest in) using the concept in question.

The fragility of our criteria, their liability to distortion, idealization and repudiation, typically shows up most pointedly or acutely in the areas of epistemology (traditional skepticism, foundationalism, etc.) and metaphysics (say, various invidious distinctions between "appearance" and "reality"). And in these disputes since the question of the elicitation of criteria is one that we are all equally authoritative about then we cannot appeal to any independent facts or rule-books or judges to establish who is right and who wrong in what we take to be criteria — say, for flatness, or a piece of paper, or a hand, or what counts as a chair, etc. etc. In every case it is a matter for *investigation* — what Wittgenstein would call a *grammatical* investigation. There is no initial claim that one's opponent speaks nonsensically. Rather, there is an initial experience of losing one's way with these words of another (perhaps another side of oneself), not finding them natural projections from past usage, not seeing their point or value or interest. That is to say, the matter of nonsense does not enter at the beginning of philosophical perplexity as some readings of Wittgenstein might have it but, if ever, only upon its resolution; and always, ultimately, for practical purposes. Contrary to the suggestion of some new Wittgensteinians, we need not decide to count the perplexing words as nonsense — we could suspend judgment and await further explanation.[35] And if we do make a judgment of nonsense this resolution remains open to being contested since it comes without any guarantee — indeed is based on nothing more than one's own sense of what makes sense. If words as spoken today lack sense then there is nothing to stop someone giving them a sense tomorrow. This casts the question "Who is the skeptic?" in a new and disturbing light since *any* projection of criteria might turn out to be an idiosyncratic projection that fails to be acknowledged by others. Of course, one can hold out for a future or eventual community that will acknowledge one's criteria where the actual community does not. But, once again, holding out has its costs and limits. For this reason Cavell says Wittgenstein's "is a vision [of language] as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying."[36]

35. Cf. Cavell, "The Argument of the Ordinary," in *Conditions*.
36. Cavell, *Must*, 52.

Here it is worth recalling Cavell's memorable remark,

> The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason.[37]

This opens up another entry point to the theme of not-knowing that I have been pursuing: we *do not know* that our words make sense (or not) on any given occasion of use. Which is not to say that we know that they do not. Rather we *trust* that they do. We have nothing else to go on than "our sense that they [do] make sense," an unsupported intuition that is tested by the acknowledgement, or lack of acknowledgement, of others. By pursuing this thought we see the motive for the connection Cavell sees between skepticism and tragedy and madness, everything we say running the risk of emptiness, isolation, and self-defeat. Of course, by the same token, everything we say is no less open to the possibilities of contentfulness, community and self-becoming expressiveness.

Why, then, did Cavell speak — apparently quite misleadingly — of "a schema for the potential overthrowing or undercutting of skepticism"[38]? Here it is of particular importance to clearly distinguish, as perhaps Cavell does not, Cavell's *generic conception* of skepticism — the unaccommodated repudiation of our attunement in ordinary criteria — from *specific expressions* of skepticism, and realize that the schema refers specifically to *Cartesian* external world skepticism, not everything that might be called "external world skepticism." Nothing in Cavell's practice forbids an eventual diagnosis of one's having an illusion of meaning so long as one admits that it is fragile and inevitably conditional. Any such diagnosis is highly specific, a response to given words on a given occasion, and in no way overthrows or undercuts a skepti-

37. Cavell, *Claim*, 20.
38. Ibid., 220.

cal problematic such as external world skepticism in all of its variety and certainly not skepticism in the enlarged sense that Cavell employs (i.e., the generic sense). Indeed even Cartesian external world skepticism is never dissolved once and for all; after therapeutic undermining and diagnosis it is perhaps set aside, felt to no longer create a skeptical crisis. But we can lose conviction in today's convictions; and lose faith in today's dissolutions.

The great distance between the standard reading of Cavell on skepticism and Cavell's actual stance can perhaps be best brought out by considering an example. Hans-Johann Glock elaborates his Strawsonian conception of the anti-skeptical philosopher as nonsense policeman writing,

> [D]oubt and justification are subject to grammatical rules. In drawing limits to the meaningful employment of words, these rules sets bounds to meaningful doubt, limits to what could possibly count as questioning or vindicating a claim of a particular kind. Doubt and justification make sense only relative to the rules guiding the use for the expressions involved [...] reasons must come to an end [...]. when, after going through the ordinary procedures for assessing a claim we are confronted with doubts which are not provided for by our rules, i.e. which do not count as legitimate moves in the language game. If I have justified a claim in the ways licensed by these rules, I can only react to further challenges by rejecting them.[39]

From a Cavellian perspective this way of thinking of skepticism — as "doubts not provided for by our rules," hence illegitimate and rejectable — almost entirely misses the power of skepticism in its confident suggestion that it is a simple matter to say what is or is not "provided for" or "licensed" by our "rules." *What* rules? *What* licences? *What* provisions? And what authority does the philosopher who says this claim to have? How does he come to be in a position to lay down or enforce the grammatical rules of the language? It is precisely Cavell's point in his remarks about the projection of (our criteria for) a concept that there are indefinitely many uses or directions of

39. Hans-Johann Glock, "Stroud's Defence of Cartesian Scepticism — A Linguistic Response," *Philosophical Investigations* 13:1 (1990): 56-7.

projection that are "licensed" by whatever we may or may not be able to provide in the way of rules. Glock suggests that it is quite obvious what the rules (and projections of rules) of language are, as if they could be simply read off from our practice. But ordinarily we are not aware of appealing to rules in order to speak intelligibly. And even where we do so, rules are of no avail in the confrontation with skepticism for the skeptic is not concerned with what *normally* happens. His concern is with extraordinary possibilities for which no provision has been made. Even in those cases where there are explicit agreements about rules under normal circumstances, there are typically no rules for the extraordinary circumstances in which skepticism arises. And there is the familiar point that very often there are no rules for the application of rules and even if their were they would not exclude all possible disagreements and divergences and innovations in application.

Skepticism confronts us with the problem of how to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate "moves" in language, but that this is a *problem* is nowhere evident in the quoted passage. Since language has no ready-made and agreed-upon rule-book and rules do not form a surveyable structure to which we can appeal to settle skeptical doubts, skepticism cannot be simply "rejected" in this way. Indeed, in so far as there are rules of language — and many remarks of Wittgenstein are designed to question the extent and explanatory power of invoking rules to explain language[40] — they are part of what the skeptic is putting under strain. And, again, philosophers have no special authority in the matter.

Not-Knowing & Existence

A second entry point for the theme of not-knowing concerns what we might call the ground of our attunement in criteria. If, as Cavell suggests, criteria mediate the relation between concepts and the world like transcendental schemata in Kant's system, then we can ask: what is our relation to the existence of the world that is taken for granted in our capacity to apply concepts to the people and things of this world? The traditional project of epistemology attempted to *prove* that the external world exists,

40. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §80–86.

something Descartes only achieves by invoking the guarantee of a well-intentioned God.[41] Kant called our lack of such a proof a scandal.[42] Hume called it a malady.[43] As we have seen, Cavell regards this attempt at constructive proof as itself an expression of skepticism, something that reveals what he enigmatically calls "the truth of skepticism", which he puts this way, "that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing."

The phrase "what we think of as knowing" refers to the philosophical idea of knowing with certainty, the goal of the traditional quest for certainty which dominated modern epistemology for centuries. Misled by this formulation McGinn and Williams read Cavell as supposing that there is a basic set of framework beliefs or presuppositions — a belief in the existence of the external world being a prime example — that are not matters of knowledge or justification. Williams then reasonably complains, "[i]f we say the propositions in question are factual how have we rebutted the skeptic, who claims that what we think of as knowledge rests on factual presuppositions that cannot be justified?"[44]

Since, as we have seen, Cavell is not attempting to refute the skeptic in any sense, let us focus on the more subtle misinterpretation evident here. McGinn and Williams both take Cavell's apparent focus on the concepts of knowledge and certainty in his initial statement of the truth of skepticism too literally. Cavell's actual point is more radical: that *traditional epistemology as a whole* fails to do justice to the ground of our attunement in language, our natural relation to the world and each other. The skeptic prosecutes his doubts as if it is obvious that we ordinarily have a *belief* in the external world, which the skeptic reveals as standing in need of justification. But, on Cavell's view, this is not at all an accurate description of our situation but more or less an invention of skepticism, one that plays straight into the skeptic's hands — a point that curiously tends to escape notice in philosophical discussion.

41. Descartes, "Meditations."

42. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), xl.

43. Hume, *Treatise*, bk. 1, pt. 7, sect. 2.

44. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 159.

Inspired by Wittgenstein's remark, "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul,"[45] Cavell improvises, "Nor am I of the opinion that there is a world, nor that the future will be like the past, etc. If I say that such ideas are the ground upon which any particular beliefs I may have about the world, or the others in it, are founded, this does not mean that I cannot find this ground to crack".[46] Cavell speaks of our "natural relation" to the world, and of "this sense of intimacy with existence, or intimacy lost."[47] These sparse and gestural attempts to give words to an inchoate intuition are not to be understood as first attempts to state a thesis; they are, rather, voicings of what Cavell calls "a genuine, a fruitful, perplexity."[48] It seems irresistible to say that here we do not know what to say, which, as Wittgenstein tells us, is the sort of perplexity that incites philosophy. Put otherwise, we have a condition of not-knowing where that registers not a gap in our knowledge that must be filled up, not a failure of the human condition as such, but only a failure of epistemology in its pretension to once and for all put this perplexity to rest. The stance of not-knowing is internal to Cavell's attempt to keep the question open.

Why does Cavell describes this perplexity as *fruitful*, however? I understand this to say that a condition of not-knowing is not to be equated with a condition of not-saying or silence. It is possible to make advances in the understanding of a perplexity, and in providing an accurate portrayal of its phenomenology without resolving it or denying its continuing power. For Cavell, this is a point where literature and philosophy profitably cross paths since, for one thing, literary expressiveness may take over where philosophical expressiveness runs aground and may even lead the way.[49] As we know, Cavell goes on to explore the way the intimacy or the loss of intimacy with existence is taken up (and arguably better expressed) by literary art, perhaps especially in Shakespearean tragedy and Romantic literature, respectively. The entry of literary tropes into philosophy at this point makes available a way of writing philosophy that says no more than it knows or, in literary art itself, presents ideas in a

45. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, pt. 2, 178.
46. Cavell, *Must*, 240.
47. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 23.
48. Ibid., 22.
49. On Cavell's view, something like this is true of Shakespeare's anticipating the modern hyperbolic skepticism philosophy finds in Descartes. Cf. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

realm of not-knowing (for surely literature is that) and so, in either case, becomes a way of keeping a question open against the almost irresistible urge to close it off. It is precisely by finding imaginative ways to voice a certain disappointment with epistemology — its unsatisfying descriptions and explanations, its relentless need to intellectualize and universalize — that Cavell finds a way "to preserve [skepticism], as though the philosophical profit of the argument would be to show not how it might end but why it must begin and why it must have no end."[50]

The Importance of Not-Knowledge

I have focused on the theme of not-knowing in two main areas: our capacity for sense-making; and what skepticism reveals of our relation to the world and others. But I find variations on the theme everywhere in Cavell. It also shows up, to briefly touch on two more examples, in his treatment of moral and aesthetic judgement. The rationality or "logic" of both kinds of judgment leaves room for the possibility of what Cavell calls "rational disagreement"[51] where the rationality of neither party to a dispute is impugned by their disagreement despite their being in full command of the relevant facts of the case. This is something that a candidate for knowledge apparently cannot tolerate.[52] So morality and aesthetics are not areas of knowledge but, let us say, subjective understanding — which is not to say that it is not worthwhile to explore the astounding extent to which our subjective understandings agree or overlap.[53] The search for impersonal subjective understanding is one way to characterize Kant's treatment of aesthetic judgment in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In Cavell's transformation this becomes the search for community, the search for others

50. Cavell, *Quest*, 5.

51. Cavell, *Claim*, 254.

52. These discourses fail to satisfy the a priori constraint of knowability that Crispin Wright calls "cognitive command": "in any region of thought where our beliefs are the product of genuinely representational cognitive function… differences of opinion… have to involve some form of cognitive shortcoming." "Precis of 'Truth & Objectivity'," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56:4 (1996): 863-8, 866.

53. It is worth noting how this way of thinking undermines traditional distinctions in philosophy such as that between non-cognitivism and cognitivism. Moral and aesthetics judgments are not candidates of knowledge for Cavell, so count as non-cognitive; but since they are also judgments capable of truth and rational support, they are presumably also cognitive. Clearly the traditional distinction is unable to do justice to this region of Cavell's thought.

who share one's way of seeing things, looking for what Wittgenstein calls "agreement not in opinions" but "in *language*"[54] (something he elsewhere describes as "the possibilities of phenomena"[55]).

The moral of the theme of not-knowing in Cavell's work is that vitally important aspects of our lives are covered up, lost to us, by treating them in epistemological terms as items of objective knowledge, justification, belief and doubt. The traditional project of epistemology attempts to build a fortress against skepticism from an impersonal perspective — in modern philosophy, typically (and hopelessly!) from sensory materials.[56] On Cavell's view this project, far from ensuring our relation to the world, actually stands in the way of giving a realistic account of the depth or intimacy of our attachment to the world and others, even — something I have not touched on — the distinctiveness of our relation to ourselves. These are subjective matters of (the achievement or failure of) acknowledgement and responsibility rather than objective matters of knowledge and doubt.

Cavell's writes:

> What skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of others is not to be known, but acknowledged.[57]

And, apparently in tension with this:

> I do not propose the idea of acknowledgement as an alternative to knowing but rather as an interpretation of it… "For the point of forgoing knowledge is, of course, to know," as if what stands in the way of further knowledge is knowledge itself, as it stands, as it conceives of itself.[58]

In the first passage acknowledgement is opposed to knowledge; and in the second it is spoken of as another interpretation of knowledge. But this tension is merely appar-

54. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §242.
55. Ibid., §90.
56. That this project is doomed to continually collapse into privacy and then solipsism does not, astoundingly, seem to undermine the endeavour.
57. Cavell, *Must*, 324.
58. Cavell, *Quest*, 8.

ent. In this region of thought we must forgo the demand for the impersonal (hence universal) "knowledge" of epistemology — with its foundationalist mythology of an impersonal 'order of reasons'[59] — to recover the sort of ordinary knowledge that is expressed in a subject's acknowledgement of another, or in one's admission or confession to another or oneself. Here I find it helpful to recall Wittgenstein's remark:

> Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.[60]

Our ordinary involvement in the world is a matter of actions and reactions that must be acknowledged (or accepted) as a condition of ordinary knowledge. Wittgenstein repeats this lesson: "Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement".[61] One can know the genuineness of another's expression of feeling on a certain occasion, for example, without being able to say how one knows as traditional epistemology demands.[62] Must uncovering this dependence of knowledge of another on one's own perhaps unaccountable sensibility and sensitivity impugn one's knowledge?[63]

Since acknowledgement and acceptance are things one *does* they are matters of personal responsibility. The theme of not-knowing thus opens up into the need to reawaken one's sense of the deeply personal nature of one's attachments (to the world, or others, or oneself) and one's own responsibility for maintaining or disowning them. The importance of this return of the human subject to itself in philosophy is its power to reawaken or enliven one's sense of oneself, one's attachments to others and one's world; and the importance of not-knowing in the liberation of one's creative (hence destructive) powers to remake oneself, recommit or renounce one's attachments to others, and to reconceive one's world.

---

59. On the relation of a foundationalist 'order of reasons' to traditional epistemology see Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*.

60. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §204

61. Ibid., §378.

62. Wittgenstein speaks here of "imponderable evidence". *Investigations*, pt. 2, sect. xi, 358-60.

63. A fuller discussion of these issues would have to explore Cavell's far-reaching claim that "we live our skepticism" in our acquaintance with other minds. Here, too, the theme of not-knowing is to the fore: one formulation of what he intends speaks of "this ignorance of about our everyday position towards each other". *Claim*, 440.

Moral Perfectionism and Cavell's Romantic Turn

NIKOLAS KOMPRIDIS

The first book of Stanley Cavell's that I read is the only book that I ardently wished I had written, *The Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Why this book, and not some high impact, world-historical book like Heidegger's *Being and Time* or Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*? Well, there are a number of reasons, some of them personal and some of them, well, Cavellian. Most immediately, the book explained to me why I so much enjoyed watching again and again over the course of more than three decades the films which are the objects of Cavell's interpretations — why, in short, watching these films made me so happy, why they filled me with goofy delight, always bringing a smile to my face, a smile not unlike that smile of Cary Grant's (from *Holiday*) reproduced in the pages of *The Pursuits of Happiness*.

The explanation Cavell offered was almost overwhelming in the relief it offered to me, since it allowed me to give an account of what it was I saw in these films, and why it was I could stand to watch them repeatedly, as though I were somehow stuck, not quite getting on with life, not quite ready to "grow up." (Which, on a Cavellian view, might be saying something about philosophy as an activity involving the education of grown ups, grown ups who for reasons that may not be entirely clear to themselves are not yet ready to "grow up"). The experience of reading *Pursuits of Happiness* manifested for me the meaning of moral perfectionism before I rightly understood it conceptually — it helped me to understand how it works, how one gains imperfectly and incompletely some new degree of self-intelligibility through an encounter with an other. So it was that through his readings of these films, Cavell played the role of the "friend" so central to his conception of moral perfectionism, the "friend or figure [...] whose conviction in one's moral intelligibility draws one to discover it, to find words

and deeds in which to express it."[1] Until my encounter with Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness*, I thought I was just indulging in escapist "romantic" fantasies, pleasurable fantasies, but fantasies, nonetheless. I had no idea *my* moral intelligibility was at stake in my response to these re-marriage comedies. Who would have thunk that? Certainly not me, not when I was watching old Hollywood movies that very few people had any interest in, at least not back when I started watching them, on an old black and white TV, courtesy of a Canadian public television program devoted to Hollywood classics — "Saturday Night at the Movies." Of course, Cavell was watching these films before I was born, having literally and philosophically "grown up" with them.

Now if I had read nothing else of Cavell's, I would be always grateful for this gift of self-intelligibility. Perhaps, if I were not an academic philosopher, I might not have read anything else, or just restricted myself to Cavell's other film books, since obviously I'm some kind of film buff. Frankly, I cannot say that Cavell's other books on film have had the same effect at all, although the essay on the Marx Brothers came close. But the gift of self-intelligibility that came with the reading of *Pursuits of Happiness* was a gift that kept on giving in ways that I could not foresee when I first read it. Cavell's writing showed me how one could take seriously, in the most philosophical sense of serious, things that philosophers could not treat as philosophically serious, and do so, without taking oneself (so) seriously. Now this is an essential feature of Cavell's kind of philosophical writing: it not only takes on subjects that philosophy is not supposed to take seriously, it also takes on, simultaneously, the question of what philosophy's proper subject should be. The metaphilosophical question of what should be philosophy's proper business is a question that is posed continuously and unashamedly in Cavell's writing. It is never taken for granted, nor ever fully settled, although Cavell has some pretty definite ideas of what philosophy should be, ideas that conflict with the profession's view of the business of philosophy, and not just the Anglo-American side of the profession. Moreover, the question of philosophy is at one and the same time posed as the question of one's own philosophical voice, a voice one must also seek out, treat as a matter of one's own self-intelligibility, thus placing oneself *as a philosopher* uncomfortably on moral terrain, even if it is not moral in the conventional sense.

---

1. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), xxxii.

Thus, engaging with Cavell is inevitably to be prompted to engage with the question of what one thinks one is doing when one is doing philosophy, and whether in doing it one is really comfortable in one's own skin — or, put in a more typically Cavellian way, whether one is doing philosophy in a way that the doing of it makes manifest that one's own voice is at stake, and the matter of one's voice is not independent of the matter of one's chosen philosophical problematic. This the moral terrain which Cavell's writing negotiates, the moral terrain on which one is placed (or displaced) through one's philosophical encounter with that (kind of) writing. Put bluntly, the matter of *my* voice must matter to any candidate conception of philosophy if philosophy is to be an activity that facilitates the "education of grown-ups" — if philosophy can itself ever "grow-up." And if it is to matter at all, it will matter only if *I* take it on, if the matter of philosophising is not separated from the matter of my voice. In other words, if philosophy is to have any chance of "growing up," and quite often it doesn't look at all like the chances are remotely good, we will have to turn the question of what philosophy's proper business should be into a matter of its self-education, and its self-education a matter of ours.

My first encounter with Cavell was fortuitously at the time I started teaching philosophy, at the moment of full professionalization. As anyone who works or has worked in a department of philosophy will know, the profoundly political but philosophically vacuous distinction between "analytic" and "continental" philosophy can suck out one's soul, like the dreaded Dementors of Harry Potter's school world. Through the gift of self-intelligibility, the gift that keeps on giving, Cavell became an exemplar of how one can steer clear of the pressure to identify with one or another of these philosophical ideologies, seeking out instead alternative identifications in philosophy's past and in its possible future. It was just at this point that "romanticism," what I began to call "philosophical romanticism,"[2] offered liberation from the fallacious dichotomisation of philosophy into analytic and continental, as if these two options exhausted the logical space of philosophical possibility.

Romanticism was not new to me; my interest in it was long-standing, preceding my career in philosophy, going back to a prior career in music. But Cavell's approach to romanticism was different from those with which I was already familiar,

2. Nikolas Kompridis, *Philosophical Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 2006).

especially from contemporaries such as Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty who identified romanticism as a particularly important influence, even if they didn't quite identify with romanticism. Cavell's romanticism didn't feel dated or over-ripe, nor deflated and domesticated; it was a romanticism that grew on the soil of the New World, the soil prepared by Thoreau and Emerson, and it was still fresh, still alive with possibilities, which I was keen to explore and realise. Moreover, Cavell's willingness to stake his own philosophical identity in going "romantic," so to speak, gave me courage to do the same. My impression is that this going romantic was not so much an explicit philosophical decision as it was an exercise of full sensibility; that going romantic *is* the exercise of full sensibility — an exercise not without its own particular risks and challenges.[3]

I have only alluded, barely, to what it was about Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* that spoke to me so directly and intimately that made me wish intensely that *I* had written it. What was the explanation that Cavell offered for the experience of happiness that was pleasurably repeated in each and every viewing of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The Lady Eve* (1941), *The Awful Truth* (1937), and *His Girl Friday* (1940)? Well, it was that people can, and, improbably, do change, and, indeed, under conditions that would seem to be the most adverse conditions under which to change — such as when they have they lost their way, when their connection to others, to what most matters to them, breaks down, when they become unintelligible to themselves, rendering them incapable of going on as before, not knowing how to go on, either as whom, or with whom. What is more, the improbable change they undergo is shown to be *complexly pleasurable*, not just hard, bloody painful work on oneself. Complexly pleasurable, because the pleasure in question is composed of both pain and pleasure, the pain of change and its attendant joy. The change the characters undergo is a change they pleasurably let happen, knowing full well that they are thereby making themselves vulnerable to both pain and embarrassment, if not shame and regret as well, a change they are capable of pre-reflectively affirming even if they are not yet ready reflectively to justify the reasons for the change they are letting themselves undergo.

3. For my own views of romanticism and its contemporary renewal, see the following: "Romanticism," in Richard Eldridge (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 247-270; "Re-Inheriting Philosophical Romanticism," in Nikolas Kompridis, *Philosophical Romanticism*, 1-17; and "The Idea of a New Beginning: A Romantic Source of Normativity and Freedom," 32–59.

No one in the comedies of re-marriage better exemplifies this kind of change than Cary Grant's character in *Bringing Up Baby*, Dr. David Huxley aka David Bone aka Jerry the Nipper, who, whenever he is around the character portrayed by Katherine Hepburn, society heiress, Susan Vance, finds himself behaving in ways that are completely unintelligible to himself and to those around him. But the truth is that at the point when David meets Susan he is someone who has already lost his way, but Susan, playing the role of the Emersonian or Cavellian friend manifests both David's lostness to himself, and "another way" through which to recover his self-intelligibility. At a decisive moment in the film, David says to Susan: "Now it isn't that I don't like you, Susan, because, after all, in moments of quiet, I'm strangely drawn toward you, but — well, there haven't *been* any quiet moments." Which is another way for David to say, I'm having the time of my life, but I'm deeply confused about why this is so, since at the very same time my life as I have known it is unravelling at a frightening speed in the most inexplicable way. Change is not very often as complexly pleasurable as it so obviously is for David Huxley through his various adventures with Susan Vance; but it is a question why *our* typical attitude towards such change is that it must be joyless, unromantic, a painful burden — How did being romantic become so closely identified with being unrealistic, such that change of this kind comes to be seen as too demanding, too risky, to threatening?

Apropos, in the preface to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Cavell asks:

> What makes change [...] hard? Why does it suggest violence? Why, asked otherwise, is perfectionism (apparently) rare? How may a perfectionist [...] account for the apparent fact that so few people choose to live it, but instead apparently choose lives of what Thoreau calls quiet desperation, what Emerson calls silent melancholy? Why is this perpetual pain preferred to the *apparent* pain of turning?[4]

This question is as impertinent as it is unavoidable, and yet for all the force of its impertinent insight it is a question that poses the matter of change one-sidedly, twice over. Cavell is right to ask why it is that there is a standing preference for the perpet-

4. Cavell, *Conditions*, xxxi (my emphasis).

ual pain of a life that remains unturned to the "apparent" pain of turning. However, is it not also the case that a life that remains unturned *requires* (and does not merely just *suggest)* violence to remain a life that is not for turning? How else can one lead a life without bearing the demands of moral perfectionism, with its morally distinctive "emphasis before all on becoming intelligible to oneself."[5] The only thing that can justify such an emphasis is the understandably elusive knowledge that a standing "threat to one's moral coherence comes most insistently from that quarter, from one's sense of obscurity to oneself, as if we are subject to demands we cannot formulate, leaving us unjustified, as if our lives condemn themselves."[6] Becoming unresponsive to that threat surely must involve a violence of refusal, and of avoidance, so it is then just as important to ask not only why we are attached to lives not responsive to the demands of moral perfectionism, but also to notice the violence that we must endure at our own hand, so to speak, in order to refuse, and to avoid, those demands — to deny they make any claims on us, for after all those demands do not arise from a philosophical doctrine but from human as well as non-human others with whom we share a form of life.

Now as I have indicated above there is another reason to be wary of Cavell's one-sided framing of the task of change as suggesting violence, and that is provided in many of the splendid films that produce his stunning insights in *The Pursuits of Happiness*. Change can be hard, yes, threatening, yes, demanding, yes, but change can also involve pleasure, too; complex pleasure intermingled with pain, to be sure, but pleasure nonetheless, lots of it, suggesting something very different from violent change. From which it follows that the work of change has to be conceived differently, in richer and more capacious terms, suggesting, promising, the pursuit of happiness, let's say, something like a utopia, a place where we can be at home in the world, where the world is what we come home to when we are at home.

> [W]hat is it about our work, and our ideas of work, that keeps the things we most want to happen from happening… Is there a way alternative to the romantic to ask the question? If you do not produce such an alternative; and if nevertheless you desire to keep hold of the question; then you will have not

5. Cavell, *Conditions*, xxxi.
6. Ibid., xxxi-xxxii.

> only to conclude that we are not beyond the demands of romanticism, but you will have to hope that the demands of romanticism are not beyond us.[7]

For reasons I will make all the more explicitly shortly, I do not think Cavell should be posing the first set of questions regarding the pain and violence of change, of its refusal and avoidance, from the standpoint of his moral perfectionism; rather, he should be posing them from the standpoint of his romanticism, proposing that the demands of moral perfectionism are internal to the demands of romanticism. Thus the first set of questions should be posed from within the standpoint of the second set of questions concerning what it is about our work and "our ideas of work, that keeps the things we most want to happen from happening." I would argue that if we were to rethink Cavell's conception of moral perfectionism from the ground up, we would see it as a species of romanticism, not as something that stands apart from or even complements the romanticism that Cavell came rather emphatically to espouse at about the same time as he came to espouse his moral perfectionism. (Genealogically speaking, both are an effect of, but not exclusively an effect of, his readings of Thoreau and Emerson.) Refiguring the demands of moral perfectionism as a form of romantic perfectionism extends those demands from a concern with self-intelligibility to a concern with fostering the conditions for the transformation of culture. A passage from Emerson's "Circles" that Cavell is fond of citing captures the proper response to this latter concern, quite well, quite romantically: "A new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits."[8]

As Cavell figures it, moral perfectionism's "emphasis before all on becoming intelligible to oneself" is continuous with its emphasis "on culture and cultivation," which is "to be understood in connection to this search for intelligibility [...] this search for direction in what seems to be a scene of moral chaos [...] the scene of the dark place in which one has lost one's way.[9] For the romanticism that Cavell inherits from Emerson and Thoreau and rearticulates, the state of having lost one's way, finding oneself in a scene of moral chaos, is not just something particular to one individual, a matter of contingency or chance; rather, it is essential to "their vision that the

7. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Alberquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 113-114.

8, Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 178.

9. Cavell, *Conditions*, xxxii.

world as a whole requires attention, say redemption, that it lies fallen, dead; it is essential to what we call their romanticism."[10] Hence the importance of words that demand or draw "conversion" or "transfiguration" or "reattachment," and which are themselves internal to the processes through which we exercise, practise, culture and cultivation, not as bourgeois indulgences but as normative stances from which we redeem the world and thereby ourselves.

Why does it matter whether moral perfectionism is part of Cavell's romanticism? Because it is Cavell's romanticism, and not his modernism, that is the best and most significant gesture of Cavell's entire oeuvre. It is also the framework within which we should situate his work on scepticism, looking at his romanticism as a response to scepticism, as he defines it. The story that must be told to capture Cavell's transition from modernism to romanticism would have to begin from its very first appearance, announcing itself inexplicably but urgently in the second half of *The Claim of Reason*. As he wrote retrospectively some years later, the "outbreaks" of romantic texts at the very point at which he was trying to bring his investigations to a satisfying conclusion ("threatening the end of my story") were "outbreaks" of an intuition, which at the time he could barely explain, let alone, justify.[11] But the "pressures" to make sense of these "outbreaks" preoccupied him for some time thereafter, such that he had to ask himself: "What is philosophy for me, or what has it begun showing itself to be, that it should call for, and call for these, romantic orientations or transgressions?"[12]

I do not have the space here to give an account of Cavell's transition from modernism to romanticism, and the pivotal causal role that his investigations of scepticism played.[13] Even without such an account, one can nonetheless infer quite a lot simply from the position that Emerson and Thoreau came to occupy as his most important interlocutors, and whose New World romanticism became the model of his own. Who could be less modernist, more susceptible to modernist scorn and irony,

10. Cavell, *America*, 82.

11. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 6.

12. Ibis., ix.

13. For a full account of the connection between Cavell's romanticism and/as his response to skepticism, see Nikolas Kompridis, "Romanticising Skepticism: Cavell, Philosophy, and the Redemption of Human Nature," in Stephen Heatherington and David MacArthur (eds.), *Living Skepticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

than Emerson and Thoreau? Cavell certainly did not make it easy for himself. In order to become responsive to two thinkers who in Cavell's time had become so "untimely," in Nietzsche's sense, as to be almost beyond the reach of our hearing, he had to set aside, and leave behind, the much more respectable modernist problematics that were the preoccupation of a number of the essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* Who, today, would be responsive to the words of Emerson and Thoreau as words that philosophers are obliged to hear — to hear in their terms not ours, to hear as writers *and* philosophers — had Cavell had not made us aware of their "mode of illumination," their philosophical styles of staking themselves in their writing, allowing us to hear them (again) as if for the first time? Listening to them and hearing them in such a careful and attentive way that he could release their words in the less than hospitable intellectual atmosphere of our late modern, irony-infected time, such that they could shimmer and dazzle and perplex and puzzle with all the force of new words and new perspectives, as though never uttered before. I should not hesitate to describe this intellectual achievement, an achievement of sensibility as much as of intellect, as itself performing romanticism in Cavell's Emersonian and Thoreauian sense, and manifesting for us another way to read and write of and for the other.

If we were to speculate on the reasons why Cavell quietly abandoned his modernist concerns for his embrace of romanticism, particularly in its Emersonian and Thoreauian forms, one of the most important might be the realisation that there was something about the way romantics conceived of the future, that made the future the object of a special concern and praxis, requiring every effort to keep the future open, to prevent it from being foreclosed, either through conformity to or fixation with our currently available possibilities. It may have therefore been the realisation that modernism was both an insufficiently reflective form of skepticism and an insufficiently reflective response to skepticism. Having itself become deadened to the world (through disappointment with it), it had become incapable of responding to the world as possibly redeemable, as somehow in need of redemption — but from what, then, and with what?

In a short but remarkable essay, "The Future of Possibility," which could just as easily and accurately have been entitled, "The Possibility of a Future," Cavell's opening remarks on the occasion which led to its writing, reveals his romantic undertaking as a response to the counter-romantic mood of our times.

> In 1994, invitations to the Sixth *Le Monde* Forum held at Le Mans, with the title "The Future Today," posed to its participants an introductory statement for discussion that contained the following passage: "Everything is worn out: revolutions, profits, miracles. The planet itself shows signs of fatigue and breakdown, from the ozone layer to the temperature of the oceans." The disappointed or counter-romantic mood of this passage produced the following intervention from me, one that has distinctly affected my work since that time.
>
> Keep in mind that I come from that part of the world for which the question of old and new — call it the question of a human future — is, or was, logically speaking, a matter of life and death: if the new world is not new then America does not exist, it is merely one more outpost of old oppressions. Americans like Thoreau (and if Thoreau then Emerson and Walt Whitman, to say no more) seem to have lived so intensely or intently within the thought of a possible, and possibly closed, future that a passage like the one I just cited would be bound to have struck them as setting, that is putting on view and enforcing, an old mood.[14]

If we now see that the New World is not new, and that "America" does not exist, does that mean that a "new world" is out of our reach, that the future is closed to us? How is philosophy to respond to this? From where does it respond? Does it, can it, draw its response only from itself? Which self? What would philosophy have to become to be responsive to circumstances in which futurity itself is at stake (and not just its own)? Cavell has always been a philosopher who did not shy away from metaphilosophical reflections about what it is philosophy is or should be. But only with his turn to romanticism could he speak of philosophy's task in these terms — the romantic redemption of the very possibility of the human:

> Philosophy's peculiar task now — that which will not be taken up if philosophy does not take it up — is, beyond or before that, to prepare us, one by one, for the business of justice; and to train itself for the task of preparation by

14. Cavell, "The Future of Possibility," in Nikolas Kompridis (ed.), *Philosophical Romanticism* (London: Routledge), 21.

confronting an obstacle, perhaps the modern obstacle, to that business: I mean a sense of the exhaustion of human possibility, following the exhaustion of divine possibility.[15]

15. Cavell, "Future," 27.

The Sense of Community in Cavell's Conception of Aesthetic and Moral Judgment

JENNIFER A. MCMAHON

1. Introduction

Cavell's interest in aesthetic objects can be understood to be motivated by an interest in the nature of meaning and value. The idea is that perceptual objects considered as cultural artefacts under-determine the meaning and value attributed to them. The process involved in determining their meaning and value is essentially a creative one. Through his study of film, literature and music, Cavell could be said to indirectly address the axiomatic, or what is sometimes referred to as the bedrock, of our value judgments. In being embedded within larger cultural commitments, such axioms are impenetrable to the traditional analytical approaches in Anglo-American philosophy. Cavell's style of philosophy can be understood to have been pioneered to attempt to understand and clarify aspects of experience which elude traditional analytical methods.[1]

Cavell explores the way objects acquire meaning by considering the peculiar conditions of modern art where the audience is often unapprised of the traditions or theories on which the meaning of the work relies. The way such conditions raise the issues of sincerity and fraudulence illustrates an important aspect of our reliance on community traditions where meaning is concerned. Meaning is inadvertently constructed through a form of improvisation predicated on community norms and values. When traditions are weak, improvisation, or what we can refer to after Immanuel Kant as modelling,[2] is unsupported and hence fails. This demonstrates the

1. In particular, see Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) and "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 267-353.

2. See the role played by models in Kant's theory of genius, in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (hereon *CJ*), trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), AK 5: 308-310.

degree to which the processes on which we rely for understanding objects and setting them within a meaningful system or narrative is rudderless without community traditions. Cavell implicitly refers to what Kant conceived as a common sense (*Sensus Communis*) which operates within a comparative setting and grounds aesthetic reflecting judgment.

Cavell can be understood to argue that modern art is the exception that proves that there is a comparative edge to all kinds of judgment including aesthetic reflecting judgment and this comparative edge implicates a community context. To understand this, we need to understand Kant's influence on Cavell's conception of rationality which emerges through Cavell's implicit adoption of the concept of aesthetic reflecting judgment from Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. To show how this conception grounds Cavell's theory of meaning and value, section 2 addresses Cavell's response to the anti-intentionalist debate in three essays published in his collection of essays, *Must We Mean What We Say?*[3] Cavell effectively redefines the terms of reference of that debate by shifting the emphasis away from personal interpretation to the public nature of the relevant terms, and showing how the conditions of interpretation only become obvious in their absence. In section 3, Cavell's implicit notion of attunement-to-community is shown to be an application of Kant's conception of the common sense as it is developed in the "Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments."[4] Finally in section 4, I address the problem of bootstrapping that is raised by the possibility of genuine creativity, on which Cavell's conception of the renewal and evolution of our evaluative terms is premised. I argue that Cavell's pragmatist epistemology steers a path out of the problem of bootstrapping by revealing an essential truth about the construction of meaning more generally; that the objective basis of meaning and value is provided by the attunement-to-community of our evaluative terms.

The theory of meaning and value found in Cavell, particularly the role that attunement-to-community arguably plays, can be seen as a demonstration in terms of cultural artefacts of the theory of meaning and value also found in John McDowell.[5] The stakes of the debate are high for both aesthetics and meta-ethics. In the former,

3. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," "A Matter of Meaning It," and "Music Discomposed," in *Must*, 73-96, 213-237, 180-212.

4. Kant, *CJ*, 160-212, AK 5: 279-335.

5. See John McDowell, "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following," in *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 198-218.

for example, Cavell's theory of meaning and value has implications for what constitutes the realism of aesthetic properties[6] and in the latter it has implications for understanding moral motivation. The grounding of meaning and value in attunement-to-community provides a conception of non-cognitivism and rule following, which is relevant to the debate in meta-ethics between internalism and externalism[7] or particularism and principled action.[8] My concern is not to visit these implications here but instead as a first step to such an end, to set out the theory of meaning and value found in Cavell which shows that the conception of objectivity employed in many of these debates amounts to a category mistake, or as McDowell has referred to the concept of objectivity necessary to the natural sciences, "not something to which it is clearly compulsory to succumb in all contexts."[9] In addition, the enquiry undertaken here contributes to Cavellian Studies more specifically by arguing that Cavell's indebtedness to R. W. Emerson did not involve a naïve notion of Romanticism according to which the artistic genius operates in isolation. This conception is not textually supported in either Emerson or Cavell.[10]

2. Cavell on Modern Art and Indeterminacy

According to Cavell, the indeterminacy of evaluative terms is only obvious when the traditions from which we draw our terms of reference are weak. He argues that when this is the case, we become aware of the degree to which the meaning of our evaluative terms rely upon knowledge and experience of the relevant community standards. The way he develops this idea exposes the limitations of the preconceptions inherent

6. See, e.g., Cavell's account reveals the naïve realism in the conceptions of aesthetic realism of Berys Gaut, in *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Nick Zangwill in *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); and a considerable body of writing in aesthetics in the same vein.

7. See, e.g., Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 95-111; Julian Markovits, "Why Be an Internalist About Reasons?," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 6, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 255-279; Simon Blackburn, "Realism, Quasi, or Queasy?," in *Reality, Representation and Projection*, ed. John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993), 365-383; and Peter Railton, "What the Non-Cognitivist Helps Us to See the Naturalist Must Help Us to Explain," in ibid., 279-300.

8. See Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 118-139.

9. McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 218.

10. This conception is arguably a confection of the Twentieth century art market though I do not argue for this here.

in the standard intentionalist and anti-intentionalist arguments regarding the basis of the objective interpretation of an artwork. According to the intentionalist, the meaning of art depends on the intention of the artist, and depending on the particular theory, this intention can be either explicit, implicit or hypothesized. On the other hand, for the anti-intentionalist broadly conceived, the artwork, whether painting, film, music or novel etc., is largely created in reception. The more standard versions of anti-intentionalism or formalism as it came to be known, limit the basis of an interpretation to perceived qualities of the artwork.[11] For the more enlightened anti-intentionalist however, such as T. S. Eliot, the relevant reception involved sharing a tradition with the artist.[12] While Eliot focused on art traditions to explain appropriate interpretation, the New Criticism to which Eliot's views gave rise, further developed his conception of formalism. According to reader-response theory for example, one's interpretation of a work can only be endorsed by a community if members of that community understand one's reasons for responding in just that way and this relies on sharing a tradition, experiences and training.[13]

A Kantian response to this might be that the more communicable one's response to an artwork, the more publicly structured one's response can be said to be. The thought is that to communicate feeling one must have structured that feeling according to shared terms. In line with the Kantian response, Cavell saw that the meaning of an artwork can be understood to be a product of a community rather than a product of an individual or isolated psyche, and that the latter does not describe the artist.[14] This conclusion did not fit with the standard notions of intentionalism, beholden as they were to a spurious interpretation of Romanticism, but nor did this conclusion fit with standard notions of anti-intentionalism. This is because the idea of community attunement (a successor to the New Criticism and hence formalism) might be said not to exclude artistic intention but instead requires a re-conception of

11. See, e.g., W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Frank A. Tillman and Steven M. Cahn (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 657-699.

12. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36-42.

13. An example of the New Criticism is reader-response theory developed by Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). His theory can be considered formalist in Eliot's sense of anti-intentionalism. In Fish's version, tradition is replaced by community norms.

14. For a summary of the various theoretical strands in the debate to which Cavell responds, particularly concerning Wimsatt and Beardsley, "Intentional Fallacy"; see Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 14-21.

what constitutes the relevant sense of intention. Cavell draws this out by a consideration of modern art.

The emergence of the polarized theories regarding the objective basis of the meaning of artworks, including the intentionalism and anti-intentionalism mentioned above, correspond to the advent of modern art. Cavell in his response to this polarizing of the possible bases of interpretation, draws our attention to the way Modernism gave rise to an anxiety about artistic intention because the sincerity of the artist could no longer be guaranteed. For example, T. S. Eliot's anti-intentionalism entailed that only the structure of traditions within which a work was produced could provide a standard by which to interpret and evaluate it.[15] However, this would prove problematic when relevant traditions were weakened, fragmented or rejected, which was the condition that characterized modern art according to Cavell. Modern art "lays bare the conditions of art" wrote Cavell, reflected in the fact that

> we haven't convention or technique or appeal to go on any longer. [...] [Modern art] lays bare the condition of art altogether [...] it shows what kind of stake the stake in modern art is [...]. The task of the modern artist [...] is to find [...] something he can mean.[16]

Earlier he had written: "Often one does not know whether interest is elicited and sustained primarily by the object or by what can be said about the object. My suggestion is not that this is bad, but that it is definitive of a modernist situation."[17]

Intentionalism fares no better than anti-intentionalism when it supposes that the artist's actual or hypothesized intention is the basis of an objective interpretation. Unless the evaluative terms are shared between artist and audience, descriptions of intentions whether actual or hypothesized require the same conditions as anti-intentionalism in order to be understood and valued. Cavell in effect shows that the focus on intention as conceived by the standard theories was a red herring. This view pervades his discussion and is articulated directly in his contrast between the generality of statements compared to what art expresses. Regarding the latter, Cavell con-

15. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent."
16. Cavell, "Music," 211-212.
17. Ibid., 207.

trasts the goal-directed nature of moral action with what Kant represents as art's "purposiveness without a purpose," in order to deflate the sense of intention used in the standard theories.[18]

Cavell avoids the polemic which developed in Eliot's wake in the form of the New Criticism and eventually in W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's now famous article, "The Intentional Fallacy."[19] The latter eventually led to a plethora of versions of formalism[20] which sparked in turn, as many opposing intentionalist doctrines. Cavell's response to this debate implied that both intentionalism and formalism were attempting to solve an anxiety about authorship which was based on a misconception of the artist and of artistic meaning. For Cavell, interpretation was not settled by considering the artist's psyche and intention, nor by a given set of objective properties of the artwork. The relevant basis for interpretation was masked rather than clarified by this way of carving up the possibilities.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a much cited influence on Cavell. Emerson's conception of genius belies the popular stereotype of Romanticism. Emerson wrote:

> Now that which is inevitable in the work has a higher charm than individual talent can ever give, inasmuch as the artist's pen or chisel seems to have been held and guided by a gigantic hand to inscribe a line in the history of the human race.[21]

Emerson located the artist's creative sources within a community which provided the terms by which the artist understood herself and her purposes. Similarly, Cavell resisted the conception of the isolated artist and the dichotomy of intentionalism and formalism to which it arguably gave rise, by identifying the conditions that would preclude interpretation. One such condition was personal isolation: the result of failing to acquire the relevant community norms by which expression of inner states and interpretation were prompted and structured. This condition was met when the inde-

18. Cavell, "Music," 198.

19. Wimsatt and Beardsley, "Intentional Fallacy."

20. In addition to Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, see the author function in Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124-127, and the reliance on reception in Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday, 1977), 142-148.

21. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, 2 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), 329.

terminacy of evaluative terms was not masked, that is, when we found ourselves in the state in which evaluations no longer blurred into fact. In this state, which Cavell treated as an exception to the norm, we experienced the contingency of meaning. Cavell argued that modern art represented just such an exception to the norm. It was the exception (no community norms by which to interpret) that proved the rule (meaning, creative expression and interpretation require a community). In this sense, modern art made isolated entities of us, reliant on personal responses. Under such conditions, we relied upon our "personal relationship [...] [to art] unsponsored by [...] community".[22] Cavell wrote:

> we can no longer be sure that any artist is sincere — we haven't convention or technique or appeal to go on any longer: anyone could fake it. And this means that modern art forces the issue of sincerity, depriving the artist and his audience of every measure except absolute attention to one's experience and absolute honesty in expressing it.[23]

In the face of modern art, we struggled in isolation to make meaning because we did not have a community based set of values and norms with which to make sense.

The nature of indeterminacy in meaning was also explored by Cavell through the re-phraseability problem in aesthetics.[24] The re-phraseability problem refers to whether content conveyed in artistic form can be exhaustively captured in description, without leaving anything out. This relates to the debate surrounding whether our literal or determinate concepts capture all there is to experience. One would expect Cavell's implicit pragmatist leanings to lead him to hold a view compatible in many respects to McDowell's theory of meaning, according to which experience involves determinate concepts all the way out, so to speak (experience actualized and realized).[25] Cavell however rescued this position from precluding the indeterminacy of evaluative terms[26] by suggesting that the way terms acquire meaning is always indeterminate whether they are evaluative or descriptive terms. That is, while percep-

22. Cavell, "Matter," 229.
23. Cavell, "Music," 211-212.
24. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems."
25. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
26. See Jay M. Bernstein, "Re-Enchanting Nature," in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, ed. Nicholas H. Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 217-245, on what McDowell's account precludes.

tions may be expressions of our concepts, concepts are in a constant state of evolving, and hence our terms are indeterminate to the extent that they are susceptible to cultural transformation. This reading of Cavell is reinforced where Cavell discusses the revision of meaning that occurs in the light of new cultural discoveries.

In the essay "Music Discomposed,"[27] Cavell discussed how new painting styles, movements or genres changed the way we perceived or construed earlier art to the extent that he wondered whether one should think of this change as manifested as new meaning or new object.[28] Considering how art acquires meaning, Cavell drew our attention to the way each new discovery in art changed the terms of reference for earlier art and consequently, what we noticed and found significant in all art. In other words, our construal of an artwork, and consequently its meaning and significance, changes by what comes after it. The same might be said concerning each new cultural development. Cultural norms alter the way we carve up and attribute meaning to experience. However, without the relevant generative forms (and concepts) at our disposal, as in the case when traditions are weak or fragmented, we must consciously construct meaning. We no longer have clear norms against which to judge intentions, and as such, according to Cavell, we become aware of trying to find the basis for distinguishing between sincerity and fraudulence. In this process, we feel the insecurity of cultural isolation.

The idea that Cavell teased out was that when tradition and convention are well established and endorsed, we might hardly notice that our value judgments have different conditions to matters of fact. That is, when traditions are well established and relevant to the case in hand, we do not notice the degree to which our responses and interpretations are steeped in cultural norms internalized by way of our community based exchanges. According to Cavell, in the normal course of events, within an established and entrenched tradition, we make sense of cultural artefacts and activities by inadvertently improvising. That is, we draw upon generative forms or heuristics provided by our community's conventions and norms through which we experience what seems like recognition of an object's meaning. A rather flat footed example might be a calendar-type landscape painting. We might

27. Cavell, "Music," 184.

28. Arthur Danto also adopted this idea (also found in Adorno) of the canon reshuffle after each development (discovery) in visual art. See Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), 233-248.

simply respond in a stereotypical way, such as finding mild appreciation in the calm serenity of the scene, regardless of whether the historical context of its making and references within the painting are conducive to this or a more demanding response. Once a painting of landscape triggers entrenched schemas (improvisations, as Cavell might say), we take ourselves to be responding to the objective standard represented by the object.

In improvisation, an artist and her audience engage heuristics or models they have inadvertently inherited from cultural exchanges. Such heuristics or models evolve through exercising one's "recollection, tradition, training, and experience" in a purposive way according to Cavell.[29] When they are established, entrenched and pervasive throughout our culture, we do not notice them as anything less than objective standards. Particular heuristics or models are comprehended as coherent unities among those who can access the same or commensurate "recollection, tradition, training, and experience."[30]

Cavell argued that "improvisation" or the generative nature of communicative forms, were undermined when conventions were weak as they were where modern art was concerned. In this context, instead of implicitly recognizing the meaning of the artwork, we had to consciously construct a configuration which could be perceived as compatible with a rational intention.[31] In some cases, this might take the form of consciously searching for what the artist could have meant and in turn, what they would be justified in meaning. However, in these conditions, relying on some form of intentionalism proves as inadequate as attempting to rely on traditions. According to Cavell, we could not confidently put ourselves into the artist's shoes or

29. Cavell, "Music," 195.

30. Ibid. See Philip Pettit, "The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism," in *Pleasure, Preference and Value*, ed. Eva Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 17-38. I do not defend the role of perceived intention in the structure of perception and cognition here but there is an abundant sample of recent philosophical and empirical work on perception and cognition which support this view. See, e.g., G. Ganis, W. L. Thompson, and S. M. Kosslyn "Brain Areas Underlying Visual Mental Imagery and Visual Perception: An fMRI Study," *Cognitive Brain Research* 20 (2004): 226-241; Rick Grush, "The Emulation Theory of Representation: Motor Control, Imagery, and Perception," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 27 (2004): 377-442; Peter Langland-Hassan, "A Puzzle about Visualization," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 10 (2011): 145-173; Mohan Matthen, *Seeing, Doing, Knowing: A Philosophical Theory of Sense Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Susanna Siegel, *The Contents of Visual Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Casey O'Callaghan, *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)). See also Jennifer A. McMahon, "The Aesthetics of Perception: Form as a Sign of Intention," *Essays in Philosophy* 13:2 (2012): 404-422, http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1428.

31. Cavell, "Music," 190. 206.

automatically find the relevant heuristic and this raised in our mind the possibility of insincerity and fraudulence. This demonstrated the extent to which we were normally reliant on community norms to establish the meaning of objects and events. In order to flesh out this idea further, and consider how it requires a different notion of creativity and intention than is found in standard accounts of intention and form, I turn now to arguably the precursor to Cavell's conception, represented by the notion of *Sensus Communis* in Kant's mature aesthetic theory.

3. Attunement-to-community in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*

Aesthetic reflecting judgment in Kant's aesthetic theory involves finding a concept for aspects of experience which elude determinate categorization relative to our current conceptual stock. Kant writes of aesthetic reflecting judgment "taste should also be regarded as a faculty for judging everything by means of which one can communicate even his feeling to everyone else."[32] Judgment for Kant involves comparing our judgment with our notion of reason in general or, one could say, what we would consider others would judge under the same conditions. As such, when exercising aesthetic reflecting judgment, we adopt the terms of reference of our community for the purposes of communication, and this in turn structures our response according to community standards. The motivation is our natural sociability according to Kant, that is, our need to communicate our perceptions which finds it voice through a process Kant conceives in terms of aesthetic reflecting judgment.

The idea of indeterminacy plays an important role in Kant's aesthetic theory where it refers to the basis of a particular kind of judgment. A judgment is indeterminate when there is no explicit set of criteria or rules from which the judgment can be deduced or according to which the use of a term can be judged competent. There are no actual rules but we act as though there were, and this drives a search for consensus. Aesthetic reflecting judgment makes an *a priori* claim on everyone's assent according to Kant, in just this sense. It refers to a continual search for common terms of reference when forming and communicating our perceptions. In this sense, an aes-

32. Kant, *CJ*, 176, AK 5: 297.

thetic reflecting judgment involves a concept and is rule based even though the concept is indeterminate and the rule cannot be stated. [33]

Kant grounds the postulated universality in what he calls *Sensus Communis*. Kant writes that aesthetic reflecting judgment is a kind of *Sensus Communis* where the latter is "a power to judge that in reflecting takes account [...] of everyone else's way of presenting [...] to compare our own judgment with human reason in general."[34] One way to understand this is that aesthetic reflecting judgments are always made with an idea in mind of what one thinks others would judge. At the very minimum one might suppose, in virtue of the common terms employed, judgments are comparative in nature. As such, judgments always indirectly make reference to the endorsement of (some conception of) community or common sense. Consider that according to Kant, an aspect of experience that is brought under a concept is transformed into communicable form. This applies no less to the object of aesthetic reflecting judgment. The peculiarity in the aesthetic case, however, is that the form, referred to as aesthetic form (or by Kant as exhibiting purposiveness but without a determinate purpose) is indeterminate. The indeterminacy is made compatible with communicability through the constraints of discourse, or as Kant writes, the *Sensus Communis*, where we compare our own judgment with what we would consider human reason in general. In other words, the competent use of the relevant terms develops in unison with an ongoing attunement to the ever changing norms of a community. The relation between the competent use of terms and the norms of a community is symbiotic.

The relevant constraints on the terms of reference which ground the possibility of *a priori* universality of indeterminate concepts, can be understood in the singular as attunement-to-community. This is not a condition isolated to the artworld. The indeterminacy of aesthetic reflecting judgment can be understood to draw out key principles of rationality in the respect that evaluative terms acquire meaning through the practices of a community of language users. This draws upon a theory about the nature of perception according to which perceptual objects are not simply given. Instead, the interests of a community, developed under adaptive pressures, and subjected to justifications required of communicative exchanges, direct our attention to aspects of the

33. See Kant's antinomy of aesthetic judgment in *CJ* AK 5: 338-341.
34. Ibid., 160, AK 5: 293.

world. From this process emerge our concepts and in turn, what we consider perceptual objects.[35] One can assume that the principles underlying the structure of language which drive the giving and asking for reasons (the default communicative exchange), reflect principles which underpin physical nature, given language has evolved under adaptive pressures according to the same physical laws.[36] In this case, the giving and asking for reasons when conducted in a systematic and openly critical way (in theory what we might call inductive reasoning within a community context), is the procedure whose outcomes lead toward rather than away from how things are in themselves, so to speak. The indeterminacy of terms is required in order to explain the possibility of development, creativity and invention, in other words, cultural renewal. The drive of each generation to reconstruct or revise meaning in newly evolving social contexts, speaks to human agency. Aesthetic reflecting judgment demonstrates this process. This concept of aesthetic reflecting judgment is a Kantian legacy in Cavell's understanding of meaning by which he can be understood in today's terms as an internal realist.[37]

Kant's interest in aesthetic reflecting judgment revolved around the need to account for creativity, human agency, or as he might say, spontaneity. He reasoned that the mind must provide a rule based judgment whose rule cannot be identified or exhaustively articulated in terms of determinate concepts because otherwise the way new ideas can be generated seemingly from outside established and entrenched norms would not be accounted for. Without some room in his system of mind for creativity, critical assertions about human agency would be merely dogmatic. Kant's reference to indeterminate concepts was a reference to rule governed communicative forms which conveyed meaning not exhausted by literal terms. Cavell's motivation for attempting to understand aesthetic reflecting judgment was compatible with that of Kant. Cavell wrote:

> A work of art does not express some particular intention (as statements do), nor achieve particular goals (the way technological skill and moral action do),

35. See the internal realism of Hilary Putnam, "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: An Inquiry Into the Powers of the Human Mind," *The Journal of Philosophy* 91:9 (1994): 445-517.

36. The structure of language drives a giving and asking for reasons, in Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), Robert Brandon, *Between Saying and Doing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Jürgen Habermas, "From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom's Pragmatic Philosophy of Language," *European Journal of Philosophy* 8:3 (2000)*:* 322-355.

37. See Putnam, "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses" for a demonstration of internal realism.

> but, one may say, celebrates the fact that men can intend their lives at all (if you like, that they are free to choose), and that their actions are coherent and effective at all in the scene of indifferent nature and determined society. This is what I understand Kant to have seen when he said of works of art that they embody "purposiveness without purpose".[38]

Cavell here endorsed a form of intentionalism that was not found in the polarized debates on intentionalism verses formalism. Instead, his notion of the relevant sense of intention was closer to Kant's notion of purposiveness. In the polarized debates, Kant's account which included this notion of "purposiveness" was classed as formalism as opposed to intentionalism, which in the light of more nuanced discussions such as Cavell's, is revealed to be a misrepresentation of Kant's mature aesthetic theory.[39] Kant's sense of purposiveness is better understood in Cavellian terms as the freedom to choose.

In the "Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments" Kant grounded aesthetic reflecting judgment in comparative, inter-subjective and communal aspects of exchange.[40] Aesthetic reflecting judgment was subjective in that it involved personal endorsement but the comparative dimension was the sense in which it was inter-subjective. Kant treated aesthetic reflecting judgment as exemplary of judgment in general in the sense that one only took oneself to be exercising aesthetic reflecting judgment when judging from a perspective that was both subjective and communicable, rather than private or personal. Kant wrote: "We could even define taste as the ability to judge something that makes our feeling in a given presentation *universally communicable* without mediation by a concept".[41] "Without mediation by a concept" referred to the way we communicated feeling or what we could call epistemically charged perception. In contrast to determinate concepts which were conveyed through literal language, the communication of an aesthetic reflecting judgment involved showing someone how to conceive, construe or perceive an object and as such, one was attempting to communicate one's experience of the object. As such, the

38. Cavell, "Music," 198.

39. See Jennifer A. McMahon, *Art and Ethics in a Material World: Kant's Pragmatist Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2014) for an analysis of Kant's formalism.

40. Kant, *CJ* AK 5: 279-334.

41. Ibid., 162, AK 5: 295.

judgment was not personal nor private but public (or as in Kant's nomenclature, *a priori* universal).

Kant revealed in what sense one's critique of art involved looking for the universal voice. He discussed the role of the critic. He wrote that critics should reason through examples to "correct and broaden our judgments of taste" bearing in mind that it was only through example that they could do this as it would be impossible to do so by way of proofs.[42] Kant also discussed the education of the artist as a matter of internalizing models and heuristics rather than learning explicit principles. The point seemed to be that the rational foundations of aesthetic reflecting judgment were to be found in the epistemic basis of the perceptual object. For Kant, the perception of an object was not an irreducible aspect of experience but involved a construal. We learnt to construe an object in a particular way. This construal involved an evaluative element and in turn, the way an object would strike us varied according to our construal of it. In other words, the basis of the perceptual object was not a given but the result of the way we described, configured, or conceived of the experience to which the object in its particular context gave rise. This conception would depend on what we took the point of our exchange with the object to be and it would involve an evaluation of the object's relevance relative to our interests or ideological orientation. The particular way interests and ideological orientations were manifested, would be dependent on the norms of our community. In the case of aesthetic reflecting judgment, the perceptual object or our construal of a particular aspect of experience would be, in effect, under construction.

Aesthetic reflecting judgment revealed the extent to which norms and conventions played a role in what we considered worthy of attention and in turn the meaning we attributed to objects. The perceptions involved engaged our personal dimension yet when put to the task of judging, were compared with what we would imagine others would perceive in the same object. Kant wrote that the way we responded to an aesthetic disagreement revealed that we treated aesthetic judgment "as if it were an objective judgment".[43] It was in this sense that Kant referred to aesthetic reflecting judgment as universal. For Cavell, the significance of modern art is that it provides the conditions for alerting us to the indeterminacy of our terms of reference. Instead of affirmation of our cognitive and moral orientations through the confirmation of

42. Kant, *CJ*, 149, AK 5: 286.
43. Ibid., 145, Ak 5: 281.

objective standards, modern art reveals the dependence of our cognitive and moral standards on common terms of reference. Without such commonality, we worry whether we are being duped.

4. Bootstrapping and indeterminacy

While indeterminacy leaves open the possibility of revision and renewal, it might seem to secure this at the expense of the possibility of communication given the indeterminacy required of our terms for genuine innovation. That is, without determinate conventions and norms to shape communicative forms, innovation might be reduced to creative nonsense. The only alternative to this would seem to demand a "metaphysical re-gestalt" at the "subliminal level."[44] As exemplified in modern art, you might say that modernist art engages us all in a form of bootstrapping: a process where the concepts we possess let us down and we invent or simply recognize new ones. However, if all experience is constituted by concepts (a typical pragmatist view), then one might ask, from what base can we notice anything outside of such concepts.

Cavell might be understood to address the question of bootstrapping when he refers to knowing "by feeling" or "in feeling."[45] He wrote:

> "Knowing by feeling" [...] is not a case of providing the basis for a claim to know. But one could say that feeling functions as a touchstone: the mark left on the stone is out of the sight of others, but the result is one of knowledge [...] it is directed to an object, the object has been tested, the result is one of conviction. This seems to me to suggest why one is anxious to communicate the experience of such objects.[46]

The object has been tested in the sense that it is in the public arena, set there to elicit the responses the audience member takes herself to be having. However, the com-

44. Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on the Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 114. I borrow this phrase from Sherman when she addresses the problem of bootstrapping which she argues is involved in Kant's notion of moral motivation.

45. Cavell, "Music," 192.

46. Ibid.

parative dimension of aesthetic reflecting judgment where our attitudes and feelings toward an object are compared with a conception of the attitudes and feelings others would take toward the same object is relevant here. Aesthetic reflecting judgment is the process of calibration of value between members of a group or community; its outcome is never fixed although there are degrees of certainty relative to established systems or relative to one's "recollection, tradition, training, and experience."[47]

Cavell reasoned that without strong conventional forms of valuing in place, community sponsorship is diminished and we are more vulnerable to the isolation of our own personal preferences. However, the more we are reliant on personal preferences, the less substantive is our aesthetic reflecting judgment. It might be worth drawing some comparisons between Cavell's moral and aesthetic theories at this point. According to Cavell, the human or moral life involves an ongoing archaeological investigation into one's own assumptions and bases of reasoning.[48] This can only take place within social contexts and discourses because it is only in such a context that one's thoughts or actions can be found wanting. Consider that if we remained isolated in our moral introspection, we would remain in a personal, idiosyncratic and increasingly irrational state regarding our moral status. In order to live life as human beings requires testing our perspectives and attitudes against the perspectives and attitudes of other members of our community.

As we have seen, Kant drew our attention to the social basis of judgment in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. He grounded our capacity to judge in what he called the *Sensus Communis*. Here is the fuller context of the earlier quote:

> We must [here] take *sensus communis* to mean the idea of a sense shared [by all of us], i.e., a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else's way of presenting [something], in order *as it were* to compare our own judgment with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones, an illusion that would have a prejudicial influence on the judgment. Now we do this as follows: we compare our judgment not so

47. Cavell, "Music," 195.

48. See, e.g., Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 322-326, where he compares the aims and objectives of games compared to moral judgment.

> much with the actual as rather with the merely possible judgments of others, and [thus] put ourselves in the position of everyone else.[49]

Jürgen Habermas may help us understand this point. Habermas construes all evaluative choices as only intelligible and rationally justified insofar as they are placed within particular social contexts and discourses. Our actions and commitments impact upon others and if we are to create the conditions of our own sociability, communication requires we expose our assumptions, commitments and convictions to the critique or scrutiny of others. As Habermas points out, consensus or "coming to a rationally motivated mutual understanding" is built into the very structure of language.[50] By drawing upon Kant's conception of the conditions of aesthetic reflecting judgment as exemplary of judgment in general, and seeing this thought more fully realized through Habermas' conditions of communication (which is conceived to some extent in opposition to coercion), we begin to see that the artist's communication is not complete until a discussion takes place within a social context regarding its meaning and significance. The outlines of Kant's aesthetic theory, particularly Kant's deduction of pure aesthetic judgments involving a common sense, is arguably furthered in Habermas' conception of discourse. For Habermas, the principles of discourse — consensus and accuracy relative to a conception of the objective state of the world — are universal irrespective of disagreements between rival cultures. There need not be actual agreement between judgments for the structure of those judgments to be universal.

In the light of Habermas' principles of discourse, we realize more fully an aspect of Kant's conception of aesthetic reflecting judgment. We do not make an aesthetic reflecting judgment unless we take ourselves to be judging from a universal standpoint, regardless of actual axiomatic differences which would thwart such agreement in practice. This drives us to attempt to communicate our feelings and in doing so, inadvertently creates the conditions for calibrating our thoughts and feelings with those of our peers.[51] It might be said that the indeterminacy of judgment is

---

49. Kant, *CJ*, 160, AK 5: 293-294.
50. Habermas (1985) p.96.
51. Habermas, "Extract from Questions and Counterquestions," in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 280; McMahon, "Aesthetic Autonomy and Praxis: Art and Language in Adorno and Habermas," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19:2 (2011): 155-175, for a further discussion of the significance of Habermas' Discourse Ethics for understanding Kant's concept of aesthetic judgment.

necessary for the continual renewal and advance of understanding. In turn, the possibility of communication is grounded in rationality broadly conceived: rationality as constituted by grounding the competent use of shared terms on common aspects of "recollection, tradition, training, and experience."

Cavell operates with just such a broad notion of rationality. Furthermore, like Kant, Cavell holds that aesthetic or moral disagreement does not necessarily suggest that some aspect of the process of deliberation and comparison is irrational.[52] It is that we take ourselves to be speaking on behalf of others that characterises the way disagreements are conducted. We do not put aesthetic or moral disagreements down to individual preference but expect to discover within discussion and debate the right or apt response or action. This expectation leads us to ask for and give reasons, the process by which the attunement-to-common values and terms of reference is possible.

We could consider a number of commentators on Kant who argue that he implicitly thought of aesthetic and moral autonomy in terms of the freedom that grounded the public as opposed to the private use of reason.[53] The private use of reason is slave to self-interest, appetite and dogma, all of which preclude agency. The more we bring the stuff of such inclinations under community endorsed concepts, the more we are able to exercise agency (public reason) in the actions and choices which are then possible. Cavell constructs his understanding of judgment within this tradition. In Cavell we find an implicit concept of community which grounds judgment in a way that reverses the popular romantic privileging of the individual psyche over and above the norms of a society. On the contrary, the community is the primary unit in understanding the grounds of each individual's moral and aesthetic judgment.

5. Conclusion: A Matter of Meaning It.

By way of his attention to sincerity, fraudulence and improvisation, Cavell addresses the relation between what it is possible for us to mean, and our means of communi-

52. Stanley Bates's "Stanley Cavell and Ethics," in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15-47, discusses Cavell's notion of "rational disagreement" along these lines (25).

53. See Onora O'Neill, "Kant's Conception of Public Reason," in *Kant and the Concept of Community*, ed. Charlton Payne and Lucas Thorpe (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 138-149, where she analyses public and private reason in Kant.

cating it. Cavell suggests that the structure of this relation is revealed when traditions are weak and as such, modernist art shines a light on this relation.

As meanings shift and terms lose their potency, we develop new terms or add disjuncts to existing conceptions. This shifting is a subtle and never ending process. It progresses through improvisation most of the time until at certain junctures we become uncomfortably conscious of the constructive nature of meaning. The take home point is that in Cavell's thinking, an implicit conception of community grounds rationality and communicability. This conception involves critique and endorsement among a group using shared terms. Cavell effectively demonstrates that creativity and spontaneity in our thinking are possible because of the indeterminacy of terms. Furthermore, the possibility of communicating our perceptions (synonymous with calibrating thought and feeling) ensures the conditions for establishing shared terms of reference. As such, a predisposition to community implicitly grounds the notion of rationality which emerges in Cavell's thought and provides the objective ground of aesthetic reflecting and moral judgment.

Cavell and Rawls on the Conversation of Justice: Moral versus Political Perfectionism

PAUL PATTON

Introduction

A primary concern of Stanley Cavell's Carus Lectures is to respond to the question posed in the first sentence of the Introduction: "Is Moral Perfectionism inherently elitist?"[1] By elitist, he means undemocratic. While there are senses in which he would not want to deny that Moral Perfectionism is elitist, and while he admits that there are perfectionisms that do not require democracy, neither of these are Cavell's concern. Rather, he wants to show that his preferred version of perfectionism, variously named Moral, Emersonian and Nietzschean perfectionism,

> is a perfectionism that happily consents to democracy, and whose criticism it is the honor of democracy not only to tolerate but to honor, called for by the democratic aspiration.[2]

In other words, Cavell's response to the charge of elitism is to argue that his preferred perfectionism is necessary for the maintenance of a truly democratic society. His argument proceeds partly by way of critical engagement with John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, a work that he admires in part for the manner in which this book establishes a systematic framework for the criticism of constitutional democracy from within.[3] His disagreement with Rawls is a product of Cavell's own commitment to such criticism of democracy, as he says:

---

1. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1.
2. Ibid.
3. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

> My direct quarrel with *A Theory of Justice* concerns its implied dismissal of what I am calling Emersonian Perfectionism as inherently undemocratic, or elitist, whereas I find Emerson's vision of perfectionism to be essential to the criticism of democracy from within.[4]

In fact this argument with *A Theory of Justice* has much of the character of a staged confrontation with an opponent of straw. One the one hand, Rawls's dismissal of perfectionism is directed at a principal of distributive justice that differs substantially from the Emersonian or Nietzschean moral perfectionism defended by Cavell. On the other hand, Cavell argues with a conception of constitutional democracy that Rawls had already abandoned by the time these lectures were delivered. Cavell explains in the Preface to these lectures, published in 1988 some three years after Rawls's "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical" and one year after his "On the Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," that he came late to Rawls's work in his philosophical education and that he does not take into account anything published after *A Theory of Justice*.[5] Whatever the merits of his justification for not having considered any of Rawls' later work subsequent to *A Theory of Justice*, this limitation calls for a further, no less artificial confrontation between Cavell's views of the relationship between perfectionism and democracy and the relationship outlined in Rawls's account of political liberalism. After outlining Cavell's disagreements with *A Theory of Justice*, I will argue that there is an explicit political perfectionism in Rawls's political liberalism that, in some respects, parallels Cavell's moral perfectionism. At the same time, political liberalism's conception of democratic society as encompassing a diversity of comprehensive moral points of view casts doubt on Cavell's claim that perfectionism is necessary for democracy.

Cavell's perfectionism and Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*

Let us begin with Cavell's understanding of perfectionism and its supposed dismissal by Rawls. It will come as no surprise to readers of Cavell and Wittgenstein that he

4. Cavell, *Conditions*, 3.

5. Ibid., xiv. Rawls's "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical" appeared *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985): 223-51, while "On the Idea of an Overlapping Consensus" appeared in *Oxford Journal for Legal Studies* 7 (1987): 1-25. Together, these articles outlined key elements of Rawls's political liberalism.

does not offer a definition of perfectionism, where this would entail "a complete list of necessary and sufficient conditions for using the term."[6] Instead, he offers an open-ended characterization of perfectionism as developed in philosophical works as diverse as those of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Emerson, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, as well as in literary works by Kleist, Ibsen, Matthew Arnold, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. As he understands it, perfectionism is not so much a particular conception of the moral life as it is "a dimension" of the moral life that involves a concern with "the state of one's soul" and that places particular weight on "the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one's society."[7] On this view, being a moral person must be understood to involve a capacity for self-criticism and self-transformation. Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism involves a conception of the person as always complete but also oriented towards his or her "next" state of being. In this sense, it is a self that is always oriented towards an "unattained but attainable self" and the capacity for self-criticism that is an important part of being a moral person may be redescribed as "the capacity to consecrate the attained to the unattained self."[8] Importantly, the character of this unattained self is a function of the self that seeks it:

> I do not read Emerson as saying [...] that there is one unattained/ attainable self we repetitively never arrive at, but rather that "having" "a" self is a process of moving to, and from nexts. It is, using a romantic term, the "work" of (Emerson's) writing to present nextness, a city of words to participate in.[9]

From Emerson and from Nietzsche Cavell takes the idea that embracing this kind of perfectionism and dedicating ourselves to the next self requires that we become ashamed of our present selves, or that in some sense we come to hate our present selves.[10] One of the dangers associated with such moral aspiration to a higher or bet-

6. Cavell, *Conditions*, 4.
7. Ibid., 2.
8. Ibid., 8, 49.
9. Ibid., 12.
10. Ibid., 16. Deleuze and Guattari similarly point to the feeling of shame as "one of philosophy's most powerful motifs." Invoking the shame of being human that Primo Levi identifies in relation to the Nazi camps, they suggest that we also experience such shame "before the meanness and vulgarity of existence that haunts democracies, before the propagation of these modes of existence and of

ter state of oneself and the world is that it will fail and lead to cynicism, or worse. For Cavell, Emersonian perfectionism provides means to withstand such cynicism and protect us from despairing the possibility of achieving the good of which we are capable:

> If there is a perfectionism not only compatible with democracy but necessary to it, it lies not in excusing democracy for its inevitable failures, or looking to rise above them, but in teaching how to respond to those failures, and to one's compromise by them, otherwise than by excuse or withdrawal.[11]

It is at this point that Cavell's conception of perfectionism engages with the limitations of Rawls' criticism of democracy from within in *A Theory of Justice*. He takes it that Rawls addresses the aim of teaching citizens how to respond to the inevitable failure of actual democracies to live up to their ideals by suggesting that a life lived in accordance with the principles of justice as fairness is a life that is "above reproach."[12] Cavell takes issue with this response, suggesting that looking for a life that is above reproach is not enough to contain the sense of compromise that results from the failure of the societies to which we consent to live up to their ideals. Something else is required, namely the idea of and the commitment to "the cultivation of a new mode of human being" that he finds in Emersonian perfectionism.[13] To that extent that this perfectionism provides resources to deal with the sense of compromise produced by the inevitable shortcomings of our actual democracies, Cavell argues that it is not only compatible with democracy but also essential to it.

At the same time, he is impelled to respond to Rawls' dismissal of perfectionism in *A Theory of Justice*, even though Rawls understands perfectionism in a different way to Emerson and Nietzsche. For Rawls, perfectionism is taken to be a teleological principle of distribution, namely one that distributes the benefits and obligations of political society in order to realize a form or forms of human excellence. Such a principle, he says, comes in two versions. In its moderate version, per-

---

thought-for-the-market, and before the values, ideals, and opinions of our time." — *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 107-108.

11. Cavell, *Conditions*, 18.
12. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 422.
13. Cavell, *Conditions*, 25.

fectionism is one principle among others supposed to govern the distribution of benefits and obligations of social cooperation and to arrange institutions "so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence, in art, science, and culture."[14] This version of perfectionism is contradicted by Emerson's and Nietzsche's disdain for the cultural institutions, or institutionalized culture, of the day. As Cavell puts it: "The distribution of nothing of high culture as it is now institutionalized is to be maximized in Emersonian Perfectionism, which is in that sense not a teleological theory at all."[15]

In its extreme version, the perfectionism dismissed by Rawls is not just one principle among others but the sole principle governing the institutions and obligations of society. Rawls illustrates this version by reference to a passage from Nietzsche's third *Untimely Meditation*, "Schopenhauer as Educator":

> Mankind must work continually to produce individual great human beings – this and nothing else is the *task* [...]. For the question is this: how can your life, the individual life, retain the highest value, the deepest significance? [...] Only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable specimens [exemplars].[16]

Cavell points out that the German word translated as "specimens" in the passage cited by Rawls is *Exemplare,* which implies an altogether different phenomenon: not samples of a particular class or genus but rather signs or indicators of something for those for whom it serves as an exemplar. This sense accords with the way in which Nietzsche goes on to characterize the life of culture, namely as a life lived "for the good of the one living it."[17] Such a life is in a sense exclusive and therefore elitist but not inherently unjust or requiring an unjust share of primary goods. Nietzsche goes on to characterize the good of a cultured life as one marked by dissatisfaction with what one is and an aspiration to something "higher and more human," where this does not refer to some other individual or class of individuals but rather to a future

14. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 325.
15. Cavell, *Conditions*, 48.
16. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 325, n.51. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 161-162.
17. Cavell, *Conditions*, *Conditions*, 51.

state of the self concerned.[18] The point of the passage cited above is therefore not that there is some other or class of others for whom one should live but rather some future state of the self that is dissatisfied with itself: "not 'there is a genius such that every self is to live for it' but 'for each self there is a genius.'"[19] In short, the passage from Nietzsche's "Schopenhauer as Educator" cited by Rawls, like the passages from Emerson that Cavell associates with it, does not advocate a life lived for other, higher beings and therefore an inegalitarian distribution of the benefits and burdens of a shared political life. Rather, it recommends a commitment to self-transformation in pursuit of a higher state or form of the self.[20]

Rawls takes Nietzschean perfectionism to imply that the vast majority of ordinary citizens should live for the benefit of a separate class of great human beings. Cavell agrees that this would be an antidemocratic principle but then raises the question: what does give value and significance to individual lives in a democracy? Certainly not living for the majority, and not even living for or in the service of existing cultural values. His response appeals to the idea that in a liberal democracy individuals are free to choose (within limits) what it is that gives value and significance to their lives. Rawls always held the view that citizens of a democratic society must be supposed to have a capacity to acquire, to revise and to pursue a conception of the good, where this includes "a conception of what is valuable in human life."[21] In his later work, he draws an explicit distinction between the moral identity of persons, which is closely related to their conception of the good, and the political identity of persons, which persists across changes in their moral identity. He notes that individual conceptions of the good can and do change more or less radically, sometimes to the point that "we are likely to say that we are no longer the same person."[22] Changes of this kind in a person's moral identity imply the freedom to be critical of the prevail-

18. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations,* 162.

19. Cavell, *Conditions*, 52,

20. Cavell's individualistic reading of Nietzsche's perfectionism is disputed by those who take him to be primarily concerned with the improvement of humanity as a whole. For example, Vanessa Lemm argues that "It is only by consecrating oneself to humanity rather than to any given society that one can, according to Nietzsche, augment the value and deepen the significance of one's individual life" — "Is Nietzsche a Perfectionist?: Rawls, Cavell and the Politics of Culture in Nietzsche's 'Schopenhauer as Educator'," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 34 (2007): 15. Herbert Siemans similarly argues that what is at stake for Nietzsche "is not a few individuals but, in fact, the future of humankind" — "Nietzsche's Critique of Democracy (1870-1886)," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 38 (2009): 30.

21. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 19.

22. Ibid., 31.

ing values of one's culture and one's time. Emerson and Nietzsche both took a strong stand against the prevailing culture of their time. Cavell comments that

> Only within the possibility of democracy is one committed to *living* with, or against, such culture. This may well produce personal tastes and private choices that are, let us say, exclusive, even esoteric. Then my question is whether this exclusiveness might be not just tolerated but treasured by the friends of democracy.[23]

Perfectionism and Democracy according to Cavell

Up to this point, Cavell's argument with the Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* amounts to pointing out that the perfectionism dismissed is not the Emerson-Nietzsche conception of perfectionism, and that there is nothing about the latter that makes it intolerable to "the life of justice in a constitutional democracy."[24] He later considers the objection that Rawls's focus is on social institutions and that his principles of justice are addressed to the basic structure of society rather than to personal conversation between individuals. As a result, it might be argued, the concerns of Nietzsche and Emerson are not those of Rawls. Cavell agrees but also disagrees in saying "This is important, but it does not seem to me enough to say."[25] The more that needs to be said is summed up in his claim that Emersonian perfectionism is not merely consistent with "the life of justice in a constitutional democracy but essential to that life."[26] He argues that *A Theory of Justice* acknowledges the role of an ongoing conversation of justice in a democratic society and that Emersonian perfectionism is a matter of public importance because of the role it plays in this conversation. In order to reconstruct his argument for the public importance of perfectionism, we need to take into account three further elements of his reading of Rawls: the conversation of justice, utopianism and the role of consent.

23. Cavell, *Conditions*, 50.
24. Ibid., 56.
25. Ibid., 102.
26. Ibid., 56.

First, in response to the suggestion that Rawls is concerned only with the basic structure of society and not the personal conversations that take place between individual citizens (or between citizens and themselves), Cavell notes that there is frequent recourse to something that he calls a conversation of justice running through the text of *A Theory of Justice*. By this he means not just a consideration of principles of justice, but a way of embedding those principles in an implicit or imagined conversation between citizens about the justice or injustice of particular institutions, states of affairs or ways of behaving towards one another. This conversation is given explicit form in the introductory chapter where Rawls presents the principles that would be accepted in the original position as enabling citizens to say to one another that they are cooperating as free and equal parties in relations to one another that are fair.[27]

Second, he notes the implicit utopianism of Rawls' theory: "*A Theory of Justice* is a contribution to the theory of constitutional democracy considered as a Utopia."[28] Rawls's theory of justice is utopian by virtue of its reliance on the hypothetical original position to ask what principles of justice would be accepted by rational (and reasonable) citizens in an ideal society. It is important to note that this question is not posed in relation to the societies in which we actually live, societies marked by the effects of colonization, slavery and patriarchy as well as by inequalities in the distribution of wealth and access to equality of opportunity. Because this procedure gives us an ideal theory of justice in relation to which actually existing societies will inevitably fall short, Cavell concludes that it implies that citizens inevitably will be disappointed in actual democratic societies. His criticism of Rawls is that a complete version of his Utopianism should allow a role for perfectionism of the Emersonian – Nietzschean kind: "the full Utopia must give a place to perfectionism in a way Rawls seems not leave open."[29] The suggestion that Rawls allows no place for Emersonian perfectionism is odd in view of the compelling demonstration above that the perfectionism dismissed by Rawls is not the one that Cavell defends. In the absence of further argument to show the incompatibility between Rawls's conception of liberal democratic society and Emersonian perfectionism, how can it be said that Rawls does not allow space for it?

27. Cavell, *Conditions*, 106. See Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 13.
28. Cavell, *Conditions*, 102.
29. Ibid.

Third, he suggests, following Rawls, that perfectionism calls for a life, including a political life, that one consents to with one's own voice. Similarly, *A Theory of Justice* imagines a society, or at least the basic structure of a society, governed in accordance with principles of justice to which members of the society would give their consent. The scene of consent is furnished by Rawls' conception of the original position. Cavell points out that this is a highly abstract version of the social contract envisaged by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. He then asks how this higher level of abstraction affects "the traditional role (or myth) of the social contract in establishing my society, my bond with my society, call it my identification with it?"[30] By way of answer, he canvasses the idea that one might separate consent to "the principles on which society is based" from consent to society itself, but only in order to reject this possibility. Consent, he argues, cannot be proportioned or divided in this way:

> I cannot keep consent focused on the successes or graces of society; it reaches into every corner of society's failure or ugliness. Between a society approaching strict compliance with the principles of justice and one approaching causes of civil disobedience, there is the ground on which existent constitutional democracies circumscribe everyday lives. We know what the original position has prepared us for, what the lifted veil has disclosed: the scene of our lives. The public circumstances in which I live, in which I participate, and from which I profit, are ones I consent to. They are ones with an uncertain measure of injustice, of inequalities of liberty and of goods that are not minimal, of delays in reform that are not inevitable. Consent to society is neither unrestricted nor restricted; its content is part of the conversation of justice.[31]

By saying that consent to society is neither unrestricted nor restricted and that its content is part of the conversation of justice, I take Cavell to be suggesting that one cannot consent to principles of justice independently of consenting, or not, to the society in which these are imperfectly realized. On the one hand, in the absence of consent and therefore commitment to the society, why would we care whether or not it was just? On the other hand, since consent can be for-

30. Cavell, *Conditions*, 107.
31. Ibid., 108.

feited or withdrawn if society falls too far short of the principles of justice, those principles cannot be too far removed from existing institutions. If the principles were those of an unrealistically utopian society, one that stood in no recognizable relation to the society we inhabit or one towards which we could see no plausible path, then what would be the force of agreeing to them? As Cavell says, "how would the principles carry the revolutionary potential of consent, or consent forfeited, if I did not at the same time give my consent to society?"[32] The deeper purpose of this argument is to challenge the suggestion that one can distinguish sharply the conversation about the principles of justice that Rawls assigns to the hypothetical original position and the ongoing conversation about matters of basic justice that is characteristic of the political life of democratic society. Or to put the matter another way, Cavell may be taken to argue that the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory is more complicated than we might at first suppose.

On the basis of these three ideas — conversation of justice, utopianism, consent — we can reconstruct the outlines of Cavell's case for saying that his perfectionism is not merely consistent with democratic social life but essential to it. Cavell summarizes the reasons that perfectionism is essential in suggesting that, for Emerson, perfectionism is

> part of the training for democracy. Not the part that must internalize the principles of justice and practice the role of the democratic citizen — that is clearly required, so obviously that the Emersonian may take offense at the idea that this aspect of things is even difficult [...]. I understand the training and character and friendship Emerson requires for democracy as preparation to withstand not its rigors but its failures, character to keep the democratic hope alive in the face of disappointment with it.[33]

He points out that in *A Theory of Justice* Rawls notes that existing constitutions are bound to fall short of what is just and that, importantly, "the measure of departure

32. Cavell, *Conditions*, 107.
33. Ibid., 56.

from the ideal is left importantly to intuition."[34] Cavell takes this to mean that it is a matter for individual citizens to judge the distance separating actual from (ideally) just society. He takes the inescapable condition of our encountering such distance and being disappointed by the actual democracies in which we live to be a matter of "our being compromised by the democratic demand for consent" so that "the individual meant to be created and preserved by democracy is apt to be undone by it."[35] In the light of his conception of moral perfectionism, it is not clear that being undone is something to be regretted or avoided. Indeed, it is in relation to this condition of disappointment, of being compromised, that perfectionism plays an essential role in a democratic political life.

Cavell's immediate response to this threat to the integrity of the democratic citizen proceeds via his discussion of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which he takes to exemplify the difficulty of explaining or justifying to others the sense of injustice that individuals may come to experience in otherwise liberal and democratic societies. The difficulty relates to the absence of a language of rights and duties adequate to express the perceived injustice in a particular case. The absence of such a language makes it difficult for the case to be assessed in relation to existing principles of justice. On Cavell's view, "the inevitable distance from ideal compliance is not to be accommodated to by imagining an argument of right and wrong that cannot be won and should not be lost."[36] Rather, situations such as the one in which Ibsen's Nora finds herself are better accommodated by the terms of Emersonian or Moral perfectionism. It is a matter of citizens' coming to experience the impersonal shame to which Emerson and Nietzsche draw attention. This is shame at the realization that our social practices do not live up to our ideals, leading to the conclusion that "change is called for and to be striven for, beginning with myself" even though at the same time we consent to the way things are and are compromised by this consent.[37] Cavell contrasts this complex experience of shame, compromise and aspiration to change with Rawls's moral vision of a life lived beyond reproach. The restricted point of view of the citizen who aspires to a life lived beyond reproach is inadequate to the demands of justice, which require the kind of commitment to change, both at a personal and a social level, that is ex-

34. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 246, 360.
35. Cavell, *Conditions*, 57.
36. Ibid., 110.
37. Ibid., 112.

pressed in Cavell's perfectionism. If we imagine a democratic society to be one in which the conversation of justice is ongoing, in which we accept that there may be injustices that we are not currently able to recognize, then something like perfectionism is a necessary component of the moral constitution of citizens.

Perfectionism helps to keep the conversation of justice going in two ways: firstly, by its commitment to the idea of the cultivation of a new mode of being human, where this is not supposed to be something that "comes later than justice but that it is essential in pursuing the justice of sharing one another's fate without reducing that fate, as it were to mitigation [of the burdens of undeserved inequality]."[38] Cavell contrasts his approach to the inevitable disappointments of actually existing democracy to Rawls's idea that the citizen of a well-ordered democracy should aim to live a life that is "above reproach." He denies that looking for a life beyond reproach is sufficient to contain the sense of compromise that is produced by living in a less than just society and suggests that perfectionism, as he understands it, offers a way of dealing with this sense of compromise by keeping alive the democratic hope in the face of disappointment. Secondly, he argues that the conversation over the degree of justice in a society that inevitably falls short of the ideal must take place but also must not be resolved, "because disagreement, and separateness of position, is to be allowed its satisfactions, reached and expressed in particular ways."[39] In this sense, the task of responsibility for or towards justice implies a commitment to responsiveness that is exemplified the perfectionism that Cavell seeks to defend.

Democracy and political perfectionism in the later Rawls

In Rawls's later work the idea and the ideal of public reason comes to occupy the central place in his conception of a well-ordered democratic society, at the expense of the argument from the original position.[40] In this sense, the conversation of justice plays an even more important role in his thought. The idea of public reason specifies the

38. Cavell, *Conditions*, 25.
39. Ibid., 25.
40. In a letter to his editor at Columbia University Press written shortly after Cavell's Carus lectures were delivered (April and July 1988), Rawls describes "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" as his best statement of his conceptions of public reason and political liberalism — *Political Liberalism*, 438.

manner in which citizens should defend their political views on constitutional matters and in addressing fundamental questions of justice such as those involving the basic structure of society. In their public deliberation, citizens in a well-ordered and pluralist society must respect a duty of civility and offer reasons to one another in terms that all can reasonably be expected to endorse. This implies relatively stringent restrictions on the kinds of reasons that citizens can put forward in arguing their case, namely reasons couched in terms of one or other of the available political conceptions of justice. The ideal of public reason is satisfied

> whenever judges, legislators, chief executives, and other government officials, as well as candidates for public office, act from and follow the idea of public reason and explain to other citizens their reasons for supporting fundamental political positions in terms of the political conception of justice they regard as the most reasonable. In this way, they fulfil what I shall call their duty of civility to one another and to other citizens.[41]

Commentators such as Anthony Laden take this to show that Rawls is less concerned to elaborate a philosophical theory of justice to be handed down to citizens as a template against which to judge existing institutions and policies than to outline the kinds of reasons in support of particular principles of justice or particular applications of those principle that might be offered to "fellow reasonable citizens, taken not as stripped-down rational choosers but in all their diversity and complexity."[42] Rawls suggests that this idea of public reason "specifies at the deepest level the basic moral and political values that are to determine a constitutional democratic government's relation to its citizens and their relation to one another. In short, it concerns how the political relation is to be understood."[43]

The idea of public reason at the heart of Rawls's later political philosophy specifies how the conversation of justice among citizens is to be conducted. However, this does not constrain the many forms of conversation among citizens that may take place as part of the background culture, and on the basis of particular moral views.

41. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 444.

42. Anthony Laden, "The House That Jack Built: Thirty Years of Reading Rawls," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 386.

43. Ibid., 441-442.

Cavell's manner of speaking about the identification of citizens with their society as a matter of voice and moral integrity does not acknowledge the unavoidable diversity of comprehensive moral views in democratic societies or the manner in which this imposes the need to distinguish the political conversation of justice, carried out in the terms of public reason, from the many conversations that take place between representatives of different comprehensive moral views. The identification of citizens of a democratic and pluralist society with the basic structure of that society will not imply agreement with or even acceptance of all aspects of the society: consent may well be confined to the principles of justice and their implementation in a constitution and laws relating to questions of basic justice. It may not extend to the beliefs and social practices of particular social or religious communities. To that extent, consent to the "society" as opposed to consent to the basic structure may well be confined or proportioned in precisely the way that Cavell does not allow.

An obvious and significant difference between Cavell's approach to the conversation of justice and that of the later Rawls is that Rawls conceives of it as a political conversation whereas Cavell conceives of it as a moral conversation. This is apparent in his description of *A Theory of Justice* at the outset as the book that has, more than any other in the two decades prior to these lectures, "established the horizon of moral philosophy for the Anglo-American version or tradition of philosophy (at least)."[44] It is apparent in his discussion of a passage from Mill's *On Liberty* that he quotes at the end of the first lecture on "Aversive Thinking."[45] He reads this passage as Mill's statement of moral perfectionism, alongside those already found in Emerson and Nietzsche. It concludes with a question that asks the reader whether they would un-

44. Cavell, *Conditions*, 3.

45. "In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest every one lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual, or the family, do not ask themselves — what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition? or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstances superior to mine? I do not mean that they choose what is customary, in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes: until by dint of not following their own nature, they have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own. Now is this, or is it not, the desirable condition of human nature?" — ibid., 62-63.

der any circumstances desire the life lived under the conditions of social conformity as Mill describes them. This is, Cavell suggests, "Perfectionism's question, its reading of the cry of freedom, for a life of one's own, that one consents to with one's own voice."[46] The implication that he draws from Mill's posing of this question is that individual citizens must each give their answers to this question before they can properly know what it is to which they give their consent. Finally, Cavell's moral conception of the conversation of justice is apparent in the final lecture in his use of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which he describes at one point as representative of "the state and aspiration of the moral life."[47] His discussion of the play is intended to answer questions about the conversation of justice within a democratic and (sufficiently) just form of social life, where it is assumed that these are moral questions.

Throughout these lectures, Cavell treats the political community as a moral community and the relation of individuals to the society in which they live as a moral relationship. By contrast, the later Rawls's conception of a well-ordered society does not envisage this as a moral community or as presupposing agreement on any particular comprehensive moral point of view or way of life. Rather, the point of departure for political liberalism is the fact of "conflicting and even incommensurable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines."[48] The public justification of a conception of justice is possible because of an overlapping consensus achieved on the basis of diverse religious, philosophical and moral views. Overlapping consensus does not mean agreement on particular principles that are already implicit in the diverse comprehensive views present in a given society, nor does it mean compromise between these views. Rather, it refers to the kind of publicly endorsed consensus that occurs when reasonable members of a political society affirm a particular conception of justice that they can each justify in the terms of their respective comprehensive views, and when they are aware that others do likewise. Rawls suggests that only the achievement of such a consensus justifies the legitimate exercise of coercive political power. Achieving such a consensus provides citizens with "the deepest and most reasonable basis of social unity available to us as members of a modern democratic society."[49] This is political unity rather than the unity of a moral community.

46. Cavell, *Conditions*, 63.
47. Ibid., 111.
48. Rawls, *Political Liberalism,* 133.
49. Ibid., 391.

What then becomes of Cavell's argument for the necessity of Emersonian perfectionism under the conditions of just political community as described by Rawls's political liberalism? Moral perfectionism may well be consistent with the conditions of democratic political community especially when we take into account Cavell's description of it as not so much a competing theory of the moral life but rather a dimension of the moral life that concerns the state of one's soul. However, to the extent that Rawls imagines consensus on liberal conceptions of justice to be possible for citizens with divergent moral points of view, it is difficult to see how moral perfectionism can be "essential" for democratic life. There is no reason to assume that those committed to fixed and unchanging conceptions of self will be excluded from the possibility of consensus. As we noted above, Rawls relies on a political conception of persons that supposes them to have a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity to form, revise and pursue a conception of the good. However, a capacity to revise one's conception of the good and to transform oneself does not require that it be exercised and it is not a requirement of the democratic consensus that it should be.

Rawls' understanding of reasonable social unity as political rather than moral has further consequences for the way in which we should understand his conception of a sufficiently just and democratic society, and the nature of the conversation of justice that takes place in such a society. Consider Cavell's suggestion that Rawls's achievement is to give us a means by which "the justice of justice can be assessed."[50] It is true that Rawls always conceived of his conception of justice as a standard against which the justice of existing institutions could be measured. However, the suggestion that he provides a means by which the justice of justice can be assessed is misleading if it is taken to imply that the argument from the original position gives us a fixed and ahistorical template against which the justice of existing institutions can be assessed. In his "Reply to Habermas," Rawls notes that all societies are more or less unjust and agrees with Habermas that the idea of a just society "is a project to be carried out."[51] Recourse to the idea of a hypothetical original position is a device that enables citizens to determine acceptable principles of justice and, on that basis, work out what would be a just constitution under reasonably favourable conditions. If as is generally the case it turns out that a just constitution cannot be fully realized under

50. Cavell, *Conditions*, 25.
51. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 398.

actual historical and political conditions, the theory of justice "sets up the aim of long-term political reform."[52]

The disappointment to which Cavell argues perfectionism provides a response will still be present, at least for some citizens. However, political liberalism provides other resources in order to address this disappointment, not all of which require the particular conception of the moral self associated with Emersonian perfectionism. One of these concerns the scope of the conversation of justice. The idea of a just constitution as an ideal to be worked towards is of course compatible with an a-historical conception of the nature of justice. Against this, I suggest, for the later Rawls, the very standard against which the justice of society is to be measured is itself part of the ongoing conversation of justice. He is explicit that the original position is a "device of representation" that serves as "a means of public reflection and self-clarification."[53] It is open to the present not only because, as Cavell suggests, it permits individual citizens to ask whether the present society, with all its deficiencies in relation to the ideal, is nevertheless worth its burdens, as compared with the burdens that would be encountered in a state of nature, but also because it allows them to ask what principles of justice they would *now* be prepared to accept, subject to the constraints of the veil of ignorance. Moreover, it enables that question to be posed at any point in the history of the society concerned. The political conception of justice in a given society, Rawls insists, "is always subject to being checked by our reflective considered judgments."[54] Citizens are autonomous when they live under a constitution that accords with principles of justice they would choose. When the constitution or laws passed under it are seen to be unjust in particular ways, "citizens with reason strive to become more autonomous by doing what, in their historical and social circumstances, can be reasonably and rationally seen to advance their full autonomy."[55] In the same way that, as Cavell notes, for Kant acting not merely in accordance with the moral law but out of respect for that law is "an unreachable ideal relation to be striven for in relation to the moral law," so is the achievement of a just political regime an ideal and an ongoing task.[56] In other words, the later Rawls agrees with Cavell that the conver-

52. Ibid.
53. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 26.
54. Ibid., 399
55. Ibid., 402.
56. Cavell, *Conditions*, 62.

sation of justice is ongoing, not simply because there is an ideal not yet attained but because the ideal itself is perpetually subject to revision. The conversation of justice bears on the principles of justice as much as their realization in the actual societies to which we consent.

Defenders of Cavell frequently fail to appreciate the significance of Rawls's distinction between the moral and the political dimensions of our social life. For example, Stephen Mulhall explains Cavell's criticism of Rawls by reference to his earlier differences with the understanding of moral life that he takes to inform Rawls's 1955 essay "Two Concepts of Rules."[57] He argues that Rawls's image of morality and moral institutions such as promising as rule governed practices relies on a faulty analogy with other rule governed social practices such as games. Rawls seems to assume, he argues, that every action by a player conforms to a rule of the game, when in reality rules of the game merely provide a framework for permissible actions that should rather be governed by the purpose or strategic imperatives of the game in question. By the same token, efforts to justify not keeping a particular promise are not necessarily an abandonment of the promising game but rather an indication of the fact that morality in general involves the giving and testing of reasons for acting in a particular way, where the rules themselves are not immune from question. Whatever the merits of this way of seeing moral behaviour in general, Mulhall seems not to notice that his alternative reading of the function of game rules corresponds closely to the image of the political sphere of society in Rawls's political liberalism. Given the unavoidable plurality of ways in which individuals live their lives, the political values and principles set out in a political conception of justice provide a framework within which stability and respect for the basic rights of all citizens can be assured even though irresolvable differences remain on many issues of public policy. Rawls's conception of public reason as a mode of argumentation bounded by the values and principles of a political conception of justice is intended to establish the possibility that the conversation of justice can continue without threatening the conditions of stable and civil democratic political society. There is no reason to assume, nor does Rawls claim, that the principles of justice themselves cannot under certain conditions become the object of critical discussion. As he notes in his "Reply to Habermas," there is no reason

57. Stephen Mulhall, "Promising, Consent, and Citizenship: Rawls and Cavell on Morality and Politics," *Political Theory* 25:2 (1997): 171-192.

to suppose that citizens in a democratic society cannot "reignite the radical democratic embers of the original position."[58]

One way in which this can occur involves the relationship between the realization of justice and legitimacy. Political liberalism offers a clear criterion of legitimate government, namely when political power

> is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason.[59]

This principle links the legitimacy of political power closely to the requirements of a well-ordered society: a society is "well-ordered" when it is effectively regulated by a publicly justified conception (or conceptions) of justice. Rawls agrees that legitimacy and justice are different concepts but denies that there can be a conception of procedural legitimacy that is independent of substantive questions. Democratic decisions are legitimate if they are enacted in accordance with legitimate democratic procedures. These procedures may not be just, but they must be "sufficiently just in view of the circumstances and social conditions": even though neither procedures nor the laws which result need be acceptable "by a strict standard of justice," they cannot be "too gravely unjust."[60] At some point, the injustice of the political constitution or the injustice of the outcomes of a legitimate democratic procedure will corrupt the legitimacy of the regime. But at what point? Is the persistence of a constitution that makes no mention of the indigenous inhabitants of a country established by colonization, and in the adoption of which no indigenous citizens were consulted, sufficiently unjust to undermine legitimacy? Rawls does not provide criteria by which we might answer such questions. However, he does provide reasons for thinking that such questions should also be considered part of the conversation of justice.

In *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Rawls is explicit about the utopian dimension of his political liberalism. He identifies a number of purposes served by political philosophy. One of these is the "realistically utopian" task of "probing the limits

58. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 400.
59. Ibid., 137, 393.
60. Ibid., 428,

of practicable political possibility."[61] It is because "our hope for the future of our society rests on the belief that the social world allows at least a decent political order" that political liberalism asks what a just and democratic society would be like, given the "circumstances of justice" that obtain in the actual historical world in which we live, and also what it would be like "under reasonably favorable but still possible historical conditions."[62] This task implies dissatisfaction with the present and openness to future possibilities that make political liberalism a form of political perfectionism that parallels Cavell's moral perfectionism. Rawls also recognizes that there is a question about how we determine what are in fact the conditions of our social world and therefore what might be the limits of the practicable. He notes that these are not simply given by the actual since we can and do change existing social and political institutions, but chooses not to pursue this "deep question."[63] His comments imply that the twin questions of the limits of our social world and the limits of practicable change should be considered part of the conversation of justice. It is in part because this twofold question about the limits of practicable political possibility is deep that the conversation of justice is open-ended and ongoing.

In his last writings, Rawls explicitly acknowledges that public reason is an historical phenomenon. The content of public reason is given by the family of publicly acceptable conceptions of justice that can be objects of overlapping consensus in a given society at a given time. This content will reflect the settled convictions of members of the society as well as the background culture that sustains efforts to systematize and theorize such judgments and that provides conceptions of the nature and business of government. It provides the discursive frameworks within which citizens and public officials can argue in ways that are not beholden to their particular moral, philosophical or religious views and that each can reasonably expect that others could endorse. At any given moment, what can properly be said within the sphere of public reason will be constrained by the norms of the prevailing family of reasonable conceptions of justice. Rawls notes that political conceptions of justice may be revised as a result of their interactions with one another and as a result of the emergence of new groups and different political problems, and that new variations may be proposed

61. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 4.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 5.

from time to time just as older ones may no longer be represented: "It is important that this be so, otherwise the claims of groups or interests arising from social change might be repressed and fail to gain their appropriate political voice."[64] These points are reiterated in the Introduction to the paperback edition of *Political Liberalism*, where he notes that the principles, ideals and standards of argument that make up the content of public reason are those of "a family of reasonable political conceptions of justice *and this family changes over time*."[65] Changes may result from the debates between different reasonable conceptions of justice but also from social changes and the emergence of views raising new questions about issues such as ethnicity, gender and race. In short, "The content of public reason is not fixed, any more than it is defined by any one reasonable political conception."[66] A range of comprehensive moral views with a commitment to something like Emersonian perfectionism may well contribute to changes in the content of public reason over time. For some citizens this might be a welcome feature of a democratic political culture, but for others it might not be welcome. Perfectionism may take unreasonable as well as reasonable forms. The duty of civility that, according to Rawls, reasonable citizens owe to one another raises questions about the place of perfectionism in a democratic political culture that are not answered by Cavell's insistence that it is necessary.

64. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 452. It follows that, as he points out in n.30 at the bottom of this page, Waldron's criticism of political liberalism as not allowing new and changing conceptions of political justice is "incorrect."

65. Ibid., li (emphasis added).

66. Ibid.

Cavellian Meditations[1]

ROBERT SINNERBRINK

1. Film and Philosophy

Stanley Cavell's coming to philosophy was inspired, as he recounts, by the contingent encounter between philosophical and non-philosophical texts. He singles out Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, for example, as one that "staked its teaching on showing that we do not know, or make ourselves forget, what reading is."[2] He also names three films — Bergman's *Sommarnattens leende* (*Smiles of a Summer Night*, 1955), Resnais and Duras' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), and Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) — that suggested to him what philosophy might become should it re-orient itself towards different modes of thought.[3] These three films, for Cavell, not only altered American perceptions of what "foreign" (indeed "Continental") films could do, they also opened up the question of what constitutes "a medium of thought." Indeed, they were films that served "to alter the iconography of intellectual conversation,"[4] not least the possibility that film might be a partner to philosophy, or that some kind of marriage between the two might be possible.

I take Cavell's anecdote to be significant for understanding the possibilities of our philosophical engagement with film. It raises the question of how we should approach film-philosophy, understood as a distinctive way of writing philosophically about film that Cavell, more than most, has made intelligible. By "film-philosophy" I mean aesthetically-receptive writing that develops philosophical insights from our experience of film rather than by applying to film the traditional problems or techni-

1. A longer, modified version of this paper will appear in the journal *Film-Philosophy*, "The Stanley Cavell Issue" (2014). My thanks to Jennifer McMahon for her helpful comments and suggestions, and to the anonymous *Conversations* reviewer for his/her incisive criticisms.

2. Cavell, "The Future of Possibility," in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 28.

3. Ibid., 29.

4. Ibid.

cal concepts of philosophy. A sceptical reader might ask whether such a project is viable, or even makes sense, since it would surely be difficult to find two "media" as disparate, seemingly, as philosophy and cinema. Cavell's response to this question is perhaps what still puts his work, despite enjoying increasing recognition, on the far side of the philosophical mainstream. For film and philosophy, Cavell often remarks, are "made for each other."[5] Indeed, despite philosophy's curious lack of curiosity about film (until recent decades), the arresting and productive encounter between them was, so to speak, destined to happen. This is so, Cavell maintains, despite philosophy's traditional indifference towards cinema, and cinema's seeming distance from the concerns of (academic) philosophy. The question is why this should be so, and what the significance of the film-philosophy encounter could be, especially considering the aloofness that has traditionally characterised philosophy's reception of film.

Cavell takes this difficulty, however, as a deliberate avoidance reflecting an underlying attraction rather than a motivated neglect deriving from a failure of recognition. As Cavell remarks, on the one hand there is philosophy's persistent avoidance of film, as though philosophy were aware of film's power to challenge it;[6] on the other, as remarked, there is the idea that film and philosophy were made for each other, in the sense that they both confront, in different ways, the (cultural-philosophical) problem of scepticism: the difficulty of knowing whether we can relate to the world, to others, and to ourselves, with a sense of conviction or certainty, despite the standing threat to this knowledge posed by radical subjectivism or our existential disconnection from the world. Despite their apparent differences, film and philosophy share, Cavell claims, in this ongoing cultural task of engaging with the problem of scepticism, both philosophical and cultural; the one presenting an audio-visual or "moving image of skepticism" that the other attempts to analyse and dispel through argument.[7] Here again, Cavell's strong stance on the inherent kinship between film and philosophy—both confronting the problem of scepticism, albeit by dif-

5. "Reflections on a Life of Philosophy: Interview with Stanley Cavell," *Harvard Journal of Philosophy* VII (1999): 25.

6. Cavell, "Foreword: On Eyal Peretz's *Becoming Visionary*," in Eryat Peretz, *Becoming Visionary: Brian de Palma's Cinematic Education of the Senses* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), xiv.

7. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film,* 2nd enl. Edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 188-189.

ferent means and with different results — sets him apart from both mainstream philosophers of film as well as film theorists engaging with philosophy. So how to make sense of Cavell's claim that the "marriage" between film and philosophy is grounded in their responses to scepticism? It is not that the one or the other provides a "solution" to the problem so much as they both show different ways in which the problem can be experienced, understood, and thereby "worked through" (though not entirely dissolved). Film and philosophy, audiovisually and conceptually, engage with the sceptical *problématique* in a manner that both enacts and undoes its more pernicious effects, teaching us how to "live with skepticism": to acknowledge its force and persistence, yet not allow ourselves to become debilitated by it. Or put differently, film offers an aesthetically rich way of experiencing and engaging with the kind of scepticism that philosophy conceptualises and attempts to dispel through argument. This gets a bit closer to why Cavell believes that film and philosophy were "made for each other," though it does not clarify in what precise ways their relationship is to be understood. Indeed, the relationship between film and philosophy itself remains a question in Cavell's thinking on (and with) film, one that I shall explore and elaborate in what follows. I want to suggest that film-philosophy, practised in the "Cavellian" manner, offers a philosophical reflection on what film gives us — aesthetically and cinematically — to think, yet one which benefits from having philosophy serve as a mediator or "go-between" translating thought between image and concept.

The difficulty of this kind of mediation between film and philosophy raises a number of questions. Is philosophy required to "explain" what film evokes though moving images but cannot conceptualise by its own means? Does cinema provide a way of sensuously depicting or aesthetically enriching a philosophy that would otherwise seem abstract or alienating? Any attempt to reflect upon Cavell's film-philosophy will be confronted by such questions, which reflect the inherent difficulties posed by the film and philosophy relationship, for this is a relationship that has the potential to alter how we understand and experience each of its terms. Indeed, the encounter between film and philosophy, however ambivalent between avoidance and acknowledgment, should not just mean that philosophy can now rejuvenate itself by appropriating film as an interesting theoretical object. Nor that we can now bolster the intellectual prestige of cinema by expatiating on its conceptual puzzles or intellectual significance. The point, rather, is to show how the opening up of

philosophy to non-philosophy, and of non-philosophy to philosophy, potentially transforms how philosophy and film might be experienced and understood. It expands how we might imagine thinking to occur, revealing film as a medium of thought that accompanies but also questions philosophy, and inviting us to transform our means of philosophical expression in light of what film allows us to feel and to think. Cavell intimates as much in pointing to these three films as having been decisive not only for his own experience as a philosopher but for transforming the possibilities of "intellectual conversation" between different media, not least that *between* philosophy and film.

Cavell's anecdote concerning the encounter of philosophy and film is timely, for it poses the question of understanding and communicating how thinking might happen: the media it may employ, the manner of its expression, and its transformative effects upon us. What happens to philosophy and the way we think, which is to say write, once philosophy opens itself to an encounter with film? What happens to our experience of film once we approach it as a philosophically creative medium of communication? In what follows I offer some fragmentary remarks in response to these questions, suggesting that we can find a more robust and meaningful way of understanding Cavell's claims concerning the kinship between film and philosophy by entertaining the possibility that both stand to be transformed by their mutual engagement.

2. Cavell as Film Philosopher

If film and philosophy share more than an arbitrary or accidental relationship, if they are both ways of engaging with problems of scepticism, then how is their relationship to be understood as one that is genuinely "equal"? The temptation, particularly from the side of philosophy, is to assume that one partner is dominant (more knowledgeable and authoritative) in relation to the other (more passive and less rational). One is the active revealer of knowledge, the other a passive object of theoretical analysis (albeit one that is expressive, yet ignorant of its own nature). This rather stereotypical image of the relationship between philosophy and its other (in this case, film) is well-known, but also open to critical questioning. Must we assume a hierarchy between

philosophy and cinema? What assumptions are in play here concerning the meaning of "philosophy" and "cinema"? How can film and philosophy relate to each other in a more egalitarian, mutually acknowledging, manner?

It turns out that there are many ways of doing so, reflecting not so much the divide between analytic and Continental philosophy as the complicated border — discontinuous, porous, and shifting — between "rationalist" and "romanticist" approaches to film.[8] From this point of view, we can make a useful distinction between two ways of doing "film and philosophy": 1) the more traditional and recognisable *philosophy of film*, a theoretical or explanatory approach to analysing and conceptualising the nature of film and our experience of it (e.g., Noël Carroll's work, contemporary cognitivist approaches, and so on); and 2) *film-philosophy*, a more aesthetic, self-reflective, interpretative approach that puts philosophy in dialogue with film as an alternative way of thinking (Cavell's way of writing on film, for example). In the "philosophy of X" approach, philosophy analyses and theorises its object, precisely because the latter cannot engage in such conceptual self-reflection. Philosophy of film is a traditional philosophical "theory of X" that seeks to provide, variously, a conceptual definition of, empirical investigation into, or philosophical criticism aiming at theories claiming to account for X (where "X" means film, motion pictures, moving images, and so on).

The alternative position, "film-philosophy," questions the common tendency to philosophically privilege conceptual theorisation over film aesthetics. Film-philosophy is a particular way of practising philosophical film theory, one that does not simply apply given philosophical theories to films but stages an encounter between film and philosophy that has the potential to alter how we understand both. We might define the term "film-philosophy" as "a way of thinking at the intersection between film and philosophy, linking the two in a shared enterprise that seeks to illuminate the one by means of the other."[9] Inspired by the work of Cavell and Deleuze, film philosophers claim that film and philosophy are intimately related, sharing problems to which they respond in distinctive ways, and thereby opening up new possibilities of thought. Film-philosophy is a style or "genre" of philosophical film theory

8. See Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

9. Ibid., 207.

that seeks to explore the relationship between philosophy and film in a non-reductive, mutually productive manner, and thus overlaps with, but is not reducible to, more traditional philosophy of film.[10]

Cavell draws a similar distinction in his Preface to Eryat Peretz's *Becoming Visionary* (2007), which offers original philosophical readings of some of Brian de Palma's films. He writes:

> A way to put the difference in what I might like to see become the field of Film and Philosophy, anyway in how I have conceived my writing on film to be motivated philosophically, is that it takes the fact of film itself to become a challenge for philosophy.[11]

"Film and Philosophy," according to Cavell, is distinguished by the manner in which the "fact of film" — not only its cultural existence, or its technical properties, but its artistic potentials and philosophical possibilities — pose a challenge to philosophy's claims to knowledge and self-knowledge. Cavell contrasts this with the more conventional, pedagogically-oriented "Philosophy and Film," which uses films as examples of established problems and arguments, whether from the history of philosophy or from "recent analytical philosophy arranged by topic."[12] Cavell's imagined field of "Film and Philosophy," which his work has helped inspire, shape, and define, takes film to pose questions to philosophy; to challenge philosophy's claims to best articulate what art — or the art of moving images — endeavours to show. Cinema enacts a more vivid disclosure of aspects of experience than philosophy can do by means of argumentative discourse alone. It can disclose the everyday in ways that bring to our attention the unfamiliarity of the familiar, the difficulty of acknowledging others, the problem of our sense of reality, the meaning of being human, the question of scepticism or nihilism, the meaning of love — all things that philosophy has traditionally asked about, and that film has now rediscovered and reanimated in its own ways. It is not that film, like other mature arts, has for that reason begun to explore perennial philosophical themes, or that philosophy, in a kind of intellectual mid-life crisis, has

10. Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film*, 207.
11. Cavell, "Foreword," xiv.
12. Ibid., xiv.

suddenly discovered the rejuvenating powers of the cinema. Rather, film and philosophy begin to intersect and engage as different ways of thinking through issues — aesthetically and conceptually — that concern both philosophers and artists, or indeed any thinking human being. They respond to shared questions and problems that open up a cultural space of engagement that brings together aesthetic experience and conceptual reflection. It is in this sense that Cavell can claim a common ground for cinema and philosophy as different yet complementary ways of confronting skepticism, retrieving the ordinary, re-enchanting the world, and transforming the self, in ways that deploy both aesthetic and conceptual means. As he writes in the Preface to *Contesting Tears*, in a well-known, but not immediately obvious passage:

> to my way of thinking the creation of film was as if meant for philosophy — meant to reorient everything philosophy has said about reality and its representation, about art and imitation, about greatness and conventionality, about judgment and pleasure, about scepticism and transcendence, about language and expression.[13]

This passage is often taken as a statement of Cavell's theoretical "position" on the film-philosophy relationship, as though this encounter were simply an opportunity to renovate philosophy's traditional arsenal of problems and arguments. Cavell means more than this, however, couching his comment about film and philosophy in the hypothetical, as though to indicate the possibility of an idealised relationship between them. Indeed, his suggestion is that some of the received problems of philosophy — above all the problem of skepticism — are transfigured and revealed anew thanks to philosophy's encounter with cinema, provided that philosophy is open to being transformed through this encounter. What is at stake here is a reorientation of philosophy by film, as well as a reorientation of what we understand film to be or be capable of, thanks to philosophy. The invention of film is an event of thought, an audiovisual technology and artistic medium capable of exploring, in its own way, those very problems, questions, and situations that have traditionally preoccupied philosophy. And this reorientation not only concerns how we think but the means of expression or communication in which

13. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*: *The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), xii.

thinking can happen. It implies a reorientation in the way one does or communicates philosophical thought. This is the moral perfectionist aspect, one could say, of an ethics of philosophical writing: striving to attain an unattainable philosophical self, one that seeks to overcome the alienation between image and concept, between film and philosophy, uncovering in the process their elective affinities.

At the same time, Cavell's remarks give an indication of the intimate relationship that exists between film and philosophy. It is a relationship that opens up the question of style: how writing about film prompts philosophers to examine how they write; how this writing may or may not do justice to the kind of experience that film affords; how it might prompt the receptive film-philosopher to alter the register or modulate the dynamics of her theoretical discourse. Far from serving as a reservoir of colourful examples, Cavell draws attention to the importance of his experience of film for the development of his prose style. As he remarks on the occasion of the publication of *La projection du monde*, the French translation of *The World Viewed*:

> the effect of thinking about film on my ambitions for philosophical prose — I have in mind particularly the necessity to become evocative in capturing the moods of faces and motions and settings, in their double existence as transient and as permanent — has proved to leave permanent marks, as I judge it, on the way I write. It was, I believe, more than any other ambition I held, a basis of freedom from the guarded rhythms of philosophy as I had inherited it.[14]

This fascinating comment makes explicit the intimate link between the experience of cinema and question of style in Cavell's philosophical prose. Attending to the evocations of mood, whether of faces, movements, or places, to capture both the transience and permanence of what is depicted on screen, is both a philosophical inspiration and a writerly challenge: how to capture this complexity of experience, this paradoxical condition between transience and permanence that defines the temporal quality of our experience of cinema? How to render it in prose capable of evoking the mood of aesthetic and moral receptivity conducive to original philosophical reflection? And more personally, how might the experience of cinema liberate a philosopher finding

14. Cavell, "Concluding Remarks on *La Projection du monde*," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 282.

his or her way out from the constraining controls, the 'guarded rhythms', of conventional academic prose?

Cavell addresses these questions by taking much the same view of Wittgenstein's style, another exemplary case of philosophical prose in which matter and manner coincide. Discussing a lecture course on the *Investigations* that he co-taught with Hilary Putnam, Cavell describes how his lectures aimed

> to move more systematically towards an articulation of Wittgenstein's manner, the sheer sense of the deliberateness and beauty of his writing, as internal to the sense of his philosophical aims, than I had ever tried before.[15]

Cavell's aim here, of concern throughout his career, was to acknowledge the philosophical significance of the literary qualities of texts like the *Philosophical Investigations*; to move beyond the traditional dismissal of style as merely decorative, "as a kind of ornament of the contemporary, or near contemporary, scene of professional philosophy," hence as something "that no longer demands philosophical accounting."[16] On the contrary, what is a philosopher to do, Cavell asks, if "you do not wish to deny argumentation, or something of the sort, as internal to philosophy," yet want to acknowledge the role of the literariness of certain styles of philosophical prose as integral to their meaning and purpose.[17] Such a dilemma will, of course, make it difficult to accept, but just as difficult to lose, the "demand for some philosophical accounting" of texts that are philosophical and literary at once. And because Cavell can find no standing aesthetic theory that would help us understand the *Investigations*' literariness, he writes of the text's "everyday aesthetics of itself" as a way of capturing the "literary conditions of its philosophical aims," conditions that the text itself enables the attentive reader to understand and appreciate. It is not a question here of seeking an "aesthetics" within the text, but rather an acknowledgement that an 'aesthetic concern of the text" is not "separate from its central work." This coincidence of aesthetic and philosophical concerns, much like "the sense of moral or religious fervor" that pervades the *Investigations*, is one that Cavell will read using Wittgenstein's

15. Cavell, "Epilogue: *The Investigations'* Everyday Aesthetics of Itself," in *The Cavell Reader, ed*. Stephen Mulhall (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 370.
16. Ibid., 376.
17. Ibid.

concept of "perspicuous presentation."[18] Much the same could be said of Cavell's texts, whose style also manifests an "everyday aesthetics of itself": a fusion of aesthetic, moral, and philosophical concerns evident in their "perspicuous presentation," written using a unique voice and singular style that strives to do justice the complexity of the moving images they interpret and reflect.

3. Cavell's Style

As exemplary cases of film-philosophy, Cavell's writings on film combine, in a personal and recursive voice, aesthetic receptivity with philosophical reflection. Whether via close readings of individual films, or essays reflecting specific topics, it is a form of writing always deeply concerned with how style is related to thought in the encounter between philosophy and film. Indeed, film-philosophy, for Cavell, is not simply a matter of framing arguments, undertaking analyses, or debating theoretical claims; it is a matter, rather, of aesthetic experience and its rhetorical presentation, of how philosophical insight is married to literary expression. How can philosophy think (with) film? What happens to philosophy once it opens itself up to being transformed through its encounter with film?

Cavell has addressed such questions as much in his manner of writing as in the claims that his prose makes upon the reader. In an interview with James Conant, for example, he remarks that philosophy without theory implies the need to attend to style; to how one says, that is to say writes, what it is that film gives one to think. Style in philosophical writing becomes particularly important when one eschews the kind of *theoreticist* view of philosophy that currently dominates, for example, mainstream aesthetics and film theory. By this I mean the foregrounding of more or less explanatory forms of theory to analyse and account conceptually for the general features of, or causal processes underlying, the complex aesthetic experience of the cinema. And such theories have proven to be remarkably fruitful in explaining and thus deepening our understanding of film, especially with regard to more traditional problems associated with aesthetics or the philosophy of art. Nonetheless, Cavell eschews

18. Ibid., 377.

such a theoretical approach in favour of a more reflective approach that seeks to provide conceptual and hermeneutic insights that might enable us to make philosophical meaning out of our aesthetic experience of film. This is not to deny the obvious overlap between the "rationalist" explanatory approaches of traditional philosophy of film, and the more "romanticist" critical-hermeneutic approach practised by Cavell. Rather, it is to suggest that the latter complements the former by providing an alternative way of understanding cinema that seeks to open up new ways of thinking with and through it that complement and question the kind of explanatory approaches that prevail in contemporary film theory.

The challenge facing Cavell, however, is to find convincing ways of achieving conviction with this more performative mode of writing. How to persuade a reader when we are not dealing with facts or arguments so much as critical readings of, or philosophical ruminations on, particular films? As Cavell observes, if one gives up

> something like formal argumentation as the route to conviction in philosophy, and you give up the idea that either scientific evidence or poetic persuasion is the way to philosophical conviction, then the question of what achieves philosophical conviction must at all times be on your mind. The obvious answer for me is that it must lie in writing itself. But in *what* about the writing? It isn't that there a rhetorical form, any more than there is an emotional form, in which I expect conviction to happen. But the sense that nothing other than this prose here, as it's passing before our eyes, can carry conviction, is one of the thoughts that drives the shape of what I do. Together with [...] the sense that [...] if there is any place at which the human spirit allows itself to be under its own question, it is in philosophy; that anything, indeed, that allows that questioning to happen *is* philosophy.[19]

Cavell's comment calls for reflection, a meditation on how one should write (philosophically) about film. The most important insight is that it must be one's aesthetic experience of a work that guides the kind of theoretical reflection one undertakes, and that this in turn requires a certain mode of expression in order to do justice to the

19. James Conant, "An Interview with Stanley Cavell," in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 59.

work and to the thought that it both communicates and evokes. It is clear that we are not dealing here with conventional "philosophy of film," which deals precisely with "formal argumentation" and even "scientific evidence" (as in recent analytic-cognitivist approaches). Nor are we dealing with the opposite end of the spectrum, for example in the "cinephilia" movement, where impressionistic "poetic persuasion" may well take the place of more traditional forms of argument. Rather, Cavell points to the possibility of a philosophical writing on film that attempts to steer a course between formal argumentation and lyrical poeticism, achieving philosophical conviction by the combined aesthetic and reflective character of the prose itself. Indeed, philosophy is neither science nor poetry, for Cavell, but exists ambiguously between the two. It involves questioning rather than asserting, reflecting rather than concluding, and does so through a form of philosophical prose that invites the reader to experience and think differently about film rather than providing argumentative reasons to accept or reject particular theoretical views. This is not to say that argumentative reasons are absent, or that one cannot draw upon existing theories, concepts, or debates; it is to emphasise, rather, the manner in which aesthetic experience and philosophical reflection should be grounded in a close engagement with works of art, where the latter are neither passive objects of theoretical analysis nor arbitrary occasions for idiosyncratic philosophical speculation.

As might be obvious this does not quite accord with the orthodox understanding of philosophy. There are many contexts, to be sure, where formal argumentation and scientific evidence play an important role in the enterprise of film theorisation. The impressive development of theoretically articulated philosophies of film in recent decades is a case in point.[20] And while poetic persuasion may capture imagination or arouse our enthusiasm (for a film, an image, an idea), this does not of itself carry "philosophical conviction," by which Cavell presumably means both the philosophical conviction expressed by the prose and that to which it may give rise in the reader. The difficulty of achieving such conviction without relying on formal argumentation or poetic persuasion is that the prose one writes — how one gives voice to thought on film — now takes over the various tasks of engaging, reflecting, persuading, question-

20. See, e.g., Livingston and Plantinga (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* (London: Routledge, 2009).

ing, and acknowledging that we might regard as essential to philosophical conversation at its best.

A further challenge when one is writing on film in this vein is that although aesthetic engagement can play an "argumentative" role, these texts may nonetheless fail to carry conviction. Indeed, aesthetic appreciation of film is not a matter of strict argument, but rather a way of seeing, feeling, and reflecting that requires the work of detailed critical interpretation in order to persuade another of the validity of one's point of view. As Cavell remarks of his own writing on romantic comedies of remarriage, which he rates as serious artistic works capable of sustaining genuine criticism:

> Now we are at the heart of the aesthetic matter. Nothing can show this value to you unless it is discovered in your own experience, in the persistent exercise of your own taste, and thence the willingness to challenge your taste as it stands, to form your own artistic conscience, hence nowhere but in the details of your encounter with specific works.[21]

Aesthetic value is founded in an experience of art, in the formation of one's artistic conscience, which means in the intimate, receptive, and repeated engagement with unique and singular works (in this case, films). It is clear that there must be an aesthetic warrant for any philosophical discussion of film worth having, but this aesthetic justification cannot be "proven" by rational argument or theoretical analysis alone. It relies, rather, on offering persuasive or illuminating interpretations that contribute to a dialogue within a shared community of taste; a hermeneutic context that acknowledges the kind of communicable aesthetic experience or shared cultural conversation within which such discussion, criticism, and appreciation can take place. The difficulty, however, so one might object, is that this does not necessarily provide compelling "reasons" for accepting the validity of a philosophical interpretation of a film. The Cavellian response, we could reply, would be to say that this is bottom an aesthetic or, perhaps, an existential question, rather than one concerning ontology, epistemology, or metaphysics. There are aesthetic experiences that move one to communicate this thinking in ways that might mutually illuminate both film and phi-

21. Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 93.

losophy — and thus broaden or deepen the kinds of experiences and insights these make possible — for a community of those similarly affected or attuned.[22] From this point of view, films that can elicit and sustain artistic criticism will count as works of art; those that can elicit and sustain philosophical criticism will count as philosophically worthwhile. The best "argument" one can offer, from this Cavellian perspective, will consist precisely in the plausibility of the philosophical film theory or criticism that one can produce in dialogue with competing alternatives.

In other words, Cavell proceeds to "collapse" the distinction between theory and criticism that remains definitive of contemporary film theory and philosophy of film. As we know, there are theoretical investigations of recognised problems or debates within the realm of philosophical film theory, and there are canons of critical interpretation concerning the aesthetic value and cultural significance of recognised works of cinematic art. Traditional forms of inquiry maintain a firm boundary between these two methodologically distinct enterprises, even where one might draw on a theoretical discourse in order to interpret a work, or where the interpretation of a work suggests certain philosophical insights. Nonetheless, theoretical claims are understood to require theoretical responses, and aesthetic claims a critical hermeneutic response. Cavell's "method" of aesthetic argumentation, if we want to call it that, is to challenge and undermine this distinction by combining theoretical reflection and critical interpretation, substantiating his broader philosophical claims by way of critical readings of particular films. That this is a risky strategy is borne out by the persistent criticism to which Cavell's "theoretical" as well as "critical" works have been subjected by film theorists and philosophers, the former criticising Cavell's "impressionistic" film readings for remaining at arm's length from scholarly debates, and the latter challenging the philosophical generalities that Cavell seeks to draw from his critical interpretations of particular works. It is in this context, however, that the question of philosophical style becomes important, for it is Cavell's synthesis of "theoretical" and "critical" aspects within one and the same discourse that is supposed to persuade or show the reader how a particular hermeneutic, aesthetic understanding of a film can at the same time have philosophical significance.

22. The motivation for engaging in philosophy, for that matter, is also not a matter of philosophical or argumentative grounding; hence the invocation of wonder, puzzlement, disappointment, alienation, perplexity, desire, love, and other such affective attunements as classical answers to the question of why one philosophises.

It is film-philosophy performed as an interdisciplinary encounter or mutually enhancing dialogue.

From this Cavellian point of view, we can say that aesthetic experience precedes and informs philosophical reflection, rather than the reverse. Such reflection, in turn, illuminates and broadens one's aesthetic experience, which in turn fosters the kind of transformative thinking that calls for novel means of expression. We could describe this as a virtuous hermeneutic-aesthetic circle. This is why Cavell and other (romantic) film-philosophers can write, indeed philosophise, on film without necessarily regarding themselves as doing conventional "philosophy of film." For such writing is less an adversarial intervention designed to refute or retire the flawed efforts of others than an invitation to think for oneself in relation to a community that remains fragmentary or dispersed. Rather than finding in film a useful object of analysis or raw material for theoretical debate, it demands an effort to do justice — in the way we think and write — to the kind of aesthetic (and philosophical) experience that film affords us. And in doing so, such writing, in combining aesthetic understanding with philosophical reflection, or blurring the rigid boundary between theory and criticism, seeks to enrich our experience of film and expand our philosophical horizons.

Whether this kind of writing carries philosophical conviction for the reader, however, depends upon that reader's own aesthetic and philosophical orientation; his or her openness to the kind of self-questioning that is inherent to philosophy, including the questioning of what he or she understands (or has been taught) that philosophy (or film) should be. This attitude of open questioning, moreover, is more likely to persuade the reader to consider the possibility that the kind of aesthetic experience evoked by a film demands novel or exacting means of expression. And here it is both the philosopher's prose and the film, in felicitous concert, that can carry aesthetic and philosophical conviction — that is, for the kind of viewer or reader who is open to such experience, which means open to entertaining a different way of thinking and feeling. It is precisely this openness to questioning, to having our habitual ways of seeing and thinking put into question, which makes film *philosophical* in the deepest sense. What is it that makes "philosophy philosophy"? Cavell writes:

> I understand it as a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human being cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in fantasy, sometimes in a flash across a landscape; such things, for example, as whether we can know the world as it is in itself, or whether others really know the nature of one's own experiences, or whether good and bad are relative, or whether we might not now be dreaming that we are awake, or whether modern tyrannies and weapons and spaces and speeds and art are continuous with the past of the human race or discontinuous, and hence whether the learning of the human race is not irrelevant to the problems it has brought before itself. Such thoughts are instances of that characteristic human willingness to allow questions for itself which it cannot answer with satisfaction.[23]

Philosophy, in other words, is an openness to the world that is also an openness to thinking. It is not divorced or alienated from the world of everyday experience but offers, rather, a more intensive, reflective, and critical way of comprehending the meaning of one's experience. Although philosophy involves reason, argument, and critique, it can also encompass intuition, insight, aesthetic responsiveness as well as intellectual reflection. Above all, it requires questioning; and it is here that film and philosophy may find common ground. As Kant once remarked, it may that the desire for metaphysics is deeply rooted in the human being, and that we cannot help but ask such questions, precisely the ones we cannot answer; yet these are also the ones that may give "directions to answers, ways to think, that are worth the time of your life to discover."[24] And there are no good reasons to think that this kind of questioning can happen only in philosophical discourse rather than via the experientially richer mode of aesthetic engagement that movies can provide. Such is the kind of philosophical thinking that is at stake, for Cavell, in the "the thought of movies." Film's philosophical vocation, ordinarily unobtrusive and elusive, becomes luminous in its disclosure of the familiar as unfamiliar, of the everyday as thought-provoking.

---

23. Cavell, "Thought," 92.
24. Ibid., 92.

Philosophy, from this point of view, is not restricted to serving as an explanatory theoretical enterprise subordinated to the sciences but is reinvented as a humanistic way of thinking that seeks to transform our understanding through aesthetic and conceptual means. Cavell's thought remains true to this ethical conviction, or to what Bernard Williams called the ideal of philosophy as a humanistic discipline.[25] For Cavell, this means that philosophy, including philosophy of film, cannot be reduced to the natural (or human) sciences, remains committed to the importance of argument and analysis, yet pursues these ends while remaining attentive to meaning, expression, and value — to find words adequate to the experience of what matters to us morally, culturally, and aesthetically. Echoing Harry Frankfurt, for Cavell too, there is a third dimension to philosophy in addition to deciding what we should believe and establishing how we should act: namely, "what to care about."[26] And one of the things that Cavell (and not just Cavell) finds worthy of caring about, which means writing thinking and thoughtfully about, is the marriage between philosophy and film.

25. See Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A. W. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 180-199.

26. Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," *Synthese* 53 (1982): 257-272.