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EDITORIAL COMMENT

The publication of *Here and There* has recently made a first encounter with Stanley Cavell's intellectual legacy possible. If you did not hear the bells ringing in celebration, it is probably because you are not part of the community of Cavellian or, perhaps, Wittgensteinian scholars and sympathizers. Of course, there is nothing wrong with preferring other communities. But bells should, at least in principle, be rung for everybody, regardless of whether one would like to listen and respond to their chiming.

Cavell's work has more or less disappeared from the radar in central contemporary, but this fact is not to be mistaken for the *absence* of his (style of) thinking from the current philosophical and, more generally, cultural scene. Some of the philosopher's distinctive ideas have found their way to the present day through adjustments, readjustments, adaptations, camouflages and, sometimes, misreadings. Spurred by the publication of *Here and There*, this Special Issue of *Conversations* proposes to follow this trail of breadcrumbs leading back to where Cavell's thought is at home and, hopefully, to invite old and new students to sit at the fireplace.

With this aim in mind, we have asked some of the leading intellectuals already sitting there in circle to take the floor and guide us through an original exploration of topics, aspects and trends belonging to or departing from Cavell's philosophy, which have particularly drawn their attention and, sometimes, inspired their personal work. Around the fire, we will hear a great variety of voices, some speaking for, some with, some against the philosopher, but all calling upon the listener to find his or her own voice, that is, to examine and critically evaluate Cavell's ideas and arguments, or the ideas and arguments they have contributed to shape. If successful, the essays here collected will lead one to appreciate that the philosopher's thought can be alive, and

well, in contemporary philosophy, across the branches internal to the discipline and beyond the boundaries the discipline purports to draw in order to "know itself," as Cavell used to write.

This Special Issue has two parts, the first of which you are now reading. In both parts, essays are divided into sections corresponding to key themes of Cavell's philosophy. The division is intended to make the consultation by the reader easy: not only do the Cavell's writings lack any such rigid separation, but it is fair to say that they resist any attempt to produce one.

The essays in the first section, "Philosophy and Self-Knwoledge," discuss Cavell's general conception of philosophy as an activity fundamentally aimed at the clarification of thought and, by means of that, at the acquisition or the recovery of self-knowledge. Kelly Dean Jolley travels to the early days of the history of philosophy and examines the structure of Socratic Ignorance. According to Jolley, Socrates finds in himself an ignorance different from that he finds in his interlocutors. The latter is what Jolley calls "*Double Ignorance*," namely an ignoring of their own ignorance of the topics on which Socrates interrogates them. To explain this Double Ignorance, Jolley appeals to Cavell's distinction between *knowing* and *acknowledging* and argues that Double Ignorance involves a failure or refusal of acknowledgment, which is to be understood not as an epistemic but as a personal lack, a spiritual sclerosis or self-deception. The Socratic interpretation of the Delphic motto to know oneself is, then, an invitation to self-acknowledgment and, specifically, an invitation to acknowledge one's ignorance, a condition that Jolley takes to be necessary to philosophise.

In his essay, Duncan Pritchard starts by discussing Cavell's elusive notion of the "truth in scepticism." Pritchard argues that such a claim is not the discovery that scepticism about the external world is true but a claim about human beings' position in the world once such scepticism is shown to be empty. Against widespread conceptions of (Wittgensteinian) quietism, Pritchard explains that the claim in question captures, instead, something deeply disquieting, which Cavell is right to point out. By drawing on *On Certainty*, Pritchard characterises this disquietude as an *epistemic vertigo*. This vertigo is caused by recognising the ultimate groundlessness of our believing, that is, once we become aware, through philosophising and at the expense of

a lack of attunement with our ordinary rational practices (hence the vertigo), of the hinge commitments of our worldview *qua* hinge commitments. Corresponding to this truth in scepticism, concludes Pritchard, there is a truth in the idea that life is meaningless. This second truth identifies the existential *angst* not due to our fundamental values in life being found illegitimate or wrong, but to our realising that such values are not and cannot be up for being grounded.

Eli Friedlander focuses on Cavell's short essay "Hamlet's Burden of Proof," a relatively neglected piece of the philosopher, especially if compared with his other remarkable readings of Shakespeare's plays. According to Friedlander, what is unique to this short essay — both within Cavell's own discussion of Shakespearean tragedy and in the panorama of philosophical interpretations of *Hamlet* — is Cavell's distinctive understanding of the nexus between fate and contingency. After exploring the views on the matter by Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, Friedlander explains that, for Cavell, this nexus turns around the idea of a primal fantasy of origins (i.e., on the fantasy of parental intercourse, constituting the modern appropriation of the myth of an incestuous birth found in ancient tragedy). In the context of Shakespeare's play, Cavell originally takes such a fantasy to bear on the contingency of one's existence and constitution as a subject. Friedlander articulates this reading in detail, suggesting that the fantasy in question calls upon one to enact and re-enact one's existence (as this rather than that individual) in the face of trauma, mere acting and scepticism.

The second section, "Perfectionism and Modernism," contains essays that explore some of Cavell's central concerns in ethics and political philosophy. After a brief personal recollection of Cavell as a teacher, Paul Guyer comments on the place that Kant, the central figure of his scholarly work, occupies in Cavell's thought. While Kant's theoretical philosophy is a significant reference in Cavell's trajectory, the same is not true for Kant's moral philosophy, even though the latter is not entirely absent from the philosopher's interests. Guyer discusses two challenges that we might find in Cavell's late writings, the first about the unrepresentability of Kant's realm of ends and the second about Kant's notion of duty within an ethics for "essentially isolated, friendless people," at odds with the moral register of Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism. About the first challenge, Guyer argues that a close reading of Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* reveals that, though we cannot represent the

particular ends of the realm of ends, we can nonetheless represent its general law. About the second challenge, Guyer notes that in the *Metaphysics of Morals* — a work missing from Cavell's canonical Kant — Kant imagines instead an ethics that acknowledges degrees and forms of friendship and human intimacy, not far from Cavell's perfectionism.

In her essay, Alice Crary draws on Cavell's early essay 'Music Discomposed' and his late talk collected under the title 'Impressions of Revolution' in *Here and There* to discuss the philosopher's signature concept of modernism in the arts in connection to political revolutions. The alignment of artistic and, specifically, musical revolutions with political ones on the grounds that they both establish a new and continuous practice presupposes, in Crary's reading, the possibility of attributing meaning to music. The fact that music can be assigned meaning or, better, that music calls us to negotiate the sense that there is in what we say and think shows, according to Crary's Cavell, that music has political momentum and, as a mature art, can be revolutionary. This momentum is not exclusive to music but might be cultivated in other arts and forms of experience, where our capacity to assign new meaning and to find alternative values can make us, as Crary puts it, "capable of thinking revolution" in times of crisis and injustice.

William Day further explores this Cavellian theme that music implicates the listener and enjoys, thereby, political significance by discussing its relevance for the old and new debate over the relation between jazz and democracy. Day presents two antithetical positions in this debate. On the one hand, the position defended, e.g., by Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch, according to whom jazz is an emblem of democracy; on the other hand, the position endorsed by Benjamin Givan, for whom jazz performances fall short of any sort of democratic ideal. Day claims that both positions are predicated on a limited idea of 'democracy' as a mere top-down system of organisation of society. On the contrary, he appeals to a tradition in political thought (traceable to Plato, Rousseau and Emerson) which conceives of democracy, as it were, from the bottom up, as built on the responsibility of citizens to find their own voice in order to acquire the capacity to self-rule and live together politically. From this perspective, argues Day, the democratic thrust of jazz lies in calling upon the listener to give voice to what she hears 'between the lines' and, in so doing, to find out

whether others share her impressions and a community is formed around them (with the constant risk, nonetheless, that her voice falls instead on deaf ears).

The essays of the third and last section, entitled "Media and Inheritance," follow or spell out the influence of Cavell's thought across various disciplines and cultural phenomena. In her essay, Rachel Malkin claims that Cavell's ideas and themes are more widespread in contemporary literary and Americanist criticism than one might imagine. Malkin carefully situates Cavell's work both within and in distinction to these fields, as well as asking what risks we might run in inheriting Cavell's mid-century philosophical loyalties and anxieties, his concern with America, and his romanticism. Malkin also explains that Cavell's writings enjoy a multi-faceted and complex afterlife, since they have been critically inherited in ways that push them productively beyond his project's parameters.

David LaRocca uses Cavell's reflections on the medium of television to continue a discussion, started in previous work, on the modes of metatelevision that feature in the British TV series *The Crown*. According to LaRocca, TV series like that show us the conditions for acknowledging and for being acknowledged because we are called upon to monitor the monitor, while the latter, in fact, holds us captive. Moreover, the various examples of metatelevision in the series trigger our reflections on how the distinction between form and content is presented, or questioned, by and within the show. To this extent, argues LaRocca, those examples implicate the viewer and invite her to investigate her own relationship with the medium of television.

As we already mentioned above, this Special Issue will have a second part, which will carry on the work the essays here collected started. Further voices will join those that we will soon hear and contribute to making Cavell's themes and suggestions salient (again) within and without the blurred boundaries of philosophical debates. The editors hope that this Special Issue can revive the interest in Cavell's philosophy, convince old and new students that it is very much alive and stimulate reflections that aim at exploring, developing, improving, correcting, clarifying, and even challenging the many paths that the philosopher has opened and travelled. Whether the voices we have singled out will be helping guides or will, instead, result in an ear-piercing cacophony is for the reader to adjudicate. But, if she decides to sit with us around the fireplace, engage with Cavell's ideas and then leave his house with

new conviction in her own voice, or with indications of how to find it, this Special Issue will have accomplished its task.

FRANCESCO GANDELLINI, FILIPPO CASATI AND GORDON BEARN

I. Philosophy and Self-Knowledge

1. Riddle Me This.
Cavell and the Structure of Socratic Ignorance

KELLY DEAN JOLLEY

1. Introduction

I want to talk briefly about the structure of Socratic Ignorance.[1]

I start with Socrates' fateful visit to Delphi. Although I know the story is familiar to many, let's reorient ourselves on it, on the famous *Apology* passage, the passage in which Socrates reveals his ignorance. Socrates' story starts at Delphi, and with Chaerephon, always a headlong Peter to Socrates' Christ, foolishly rushing ahead when the wiser stop and put off the shoes from their feet.

Socrates tells the court about Chaerephon's impetuous question to the Oracle and the Oracle's initially impenetrable answer. Socrates calls the answer *a riddle*.

> Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After a long consideration, I at last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest." Accordingly I went to

1. I am not here concerned with the question of the historical Socrates. I am focused on the Platonic Socrates — as he is presented in Platonic dialogues typically grouped early, middle and late. The Platonic Socrates is likely the historical Socrates, but the Platonic Socrates is the Socrates that has mattered most to history.

one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed to him — his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination — and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself; and I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is — for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I went to another, who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him.

After this I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: but necessity was laid upon me — the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, Go I must to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle. And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear! — for I must tell you the truth — the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that some inferior men were really wiser and better. I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the "Herculean" labors, as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle irrefutable....

This investigation has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies, and I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. And so I go my way, obedient to the god, and

> make inquisition into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and this occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.[2]

So there. Socrates reveals his ignorance — which is also, and paradoxically — his wisdom, and reveals it as embedded in a Delphic context, Apollo presumably stationed watchfully above the Oracle's riddling words.

It's worth stressing the religious context is neither accidental to the nature of Socrates' wrestle with the riddle nor accidental to the nature of Socrates' ignorance. Socrates was a religious man, if perhaps, among Athenians, unorthodox; he was careful of religious observance until the hemlock claimed him. Socrates spent his life on a mission for God.[3]

2. Double Ignorance

Now, what of the ignorance of those with whom Socrates talked and who, though appearing to be wise, were ignorant? How should we think about that ignorance, interlocutory ignorance?

I start with these questions because we can only appreciate the structure of Socrates' ignorance by appreciating the contrasting structure of theirs. Socrates' knowledge of interlocutory ignorance structures his ignorance.

When I am teaching, I often describe the ignorance of Socrates' interlocutors as *Double Ignorance*: they are ignorant (Single Ignorance) of something — but are also ignorant of their ignorance (Double Ignorance). I owe this term, *Double Ignorance,* to the remarkable Platonist and Orthodox nun, Mother Maria. I take it from her masterful book, *The Fool*, and I commend that book to you.[4]

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2. Plato, "Apology," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, 3rd ed. revised and corrected (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892).
3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. J. Wild, J. M. Edie, and J. O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).
4. Mother Maria, *The Fool and Other Writings* (Whitby: The Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Assumption, 1980), 11.

Anyway, I like the term *Double Ignorance* and use it. But, continued reflection on Socrates has led me to realize that though Mother Maria's term is helpful, it can also be confusing.

Mother Maria's term makes it hard to realize that the two ignorances involved in Double Ignorance are not *the same*. Not univocal. There is a duplexity here, yes, and a duplexity of Ignorance, and so we might think her term unproblematic. But the duplexity is not a simple repetition of the same, *one, two*, but at, as it were, with two at a higher level: *one*, ignorance of Socratic topics, as we might call them, *courage*, *piety*, *friendship*, etc., the various values of *X* in Socrates' (in)famous *What is X?-questions?*, and then, moving up, *two*, the self-same ignorance — but this time ignorance of the ignorance of Socratic topics.

The same ignorance, but in the second case taking itself (but about a different object or objects) as its object.

But the ignorances are different, not the same. Equivocal. To understand the difference, we need to distinguish *knowing* from *acknowledging*. Socrates' decisive difference from his interlocutors is in his relationship to the ignorance he shares with them, his *acknowledgment* of ignorance they refuse to acknowledge. Better than saying that Socrates knows what they do not know, we should say that he acknowledges what they will not acknowledge.

I'm borrowing this distinction from Stanley Cavell. He distinguishes what we might call a simple failure to know from a more complicated failure to acknowledge. We can call each a form of ignorance, but they differ from each other. The first is a simple epistemic blankness, a simple *not-knowing,* for which the ignorant person is epistemically blameless.

Consider an example of such simple blankness.

You and I are passing acquaintances. You have a sister. But I do not know you have a sister. I have never had the opportunity to know that you do, and so I do not know her name. My ignorance of her and her name results neither from inattentiveness nor forgetfulness. You have never mentioned your sister to me; she has never been a topic even of momentary conversation. My ignorance is not something for which I could be blamed. My failure to know reveals nothing about me or my character. There's nothing present in me that explains my absence of knowledge. It is my impoverished

circumstances, not my impoverished character, that, as it were, conspires against me. I have simply had no opportunity to know, and my lack of opportunity is involuntary.[5]

But imagine instead that you are in pain, standing next to me, my neighbor, and you groaningly entreat me for help, but I do not react, not even to offer an excuse for being unreactive. — I stare past you, hearing, but unresponsive. I ignore you and your entreaty.

Now my ignorance is other than an epistemic blankness; it is not a failure to *know*, it is a failure to *acknowledge* you and your pain; it is a personal failure on my part. I am not simply epistemically blank, I am personally *lacking*; my failure to acknowledge you and your pain reveals a spiritual sclerosis in me — a lack of availability: call it a dearth of compassion, a hardness of heart. I and my character (or my want of it) are revealed in my ignorance.

So both knowledge and acknowledgment allow for ignorance, but in different ways; they allow for different ignorances. Cavell elaborates on the difference in this way:

> The point [...] is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. (It is the sort of concept Heidegger calls an *existentiale*.)
>
> A "failure to know" might just be a piece of ignorance. A "failure to acknowledge" is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness.[6]

Acknowledgment is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. This is key. Note that in relation to knowledge (distinct from acknowledgment), 'ignorance' functions typically as a noun or adjective; it is something that befalls us, something we *are*. But in the context of acknowl-

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5. Knowledge, typically, is an opportunistic business. We ask "How do you know?" but not "Why do you know?" because when we challenge or query knowledge, we ask, necessarily typically, about *opportunity*. If the opportunity is of the right sort, we normally withdraw the challenge, regarding our challenge met or our query to be answered. (We typically treat competencies and skills as providing opportunities or as forms of opportunity.)

6. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1969), 263-64.

edgment, it functions typically as a *verb*. For the noun to apply, the person to whom it applies must satisfy the verb. It does not befall us, it is not something we are; we *do* it. The person who fails to acknowledge another's pain, as in my example, is *ignoring* something — and there will be a reason or motive for that ignoring, a presence (of something) that explains the failure to acknowledge. It will not be just a piece of ignorance. Socrates' interlocutors, especially the titular Sophists of many of the dialogues, like Euthydemus, but also other non-Sophists, for example, Euthyphro, are not simply ignorant of their ignorance: they ignore their ignorance. We might reckon (many of) the dialogues as investigations of the varietals of failures to acknowledge ignorance, the panoply of different motives or reasons, or the welter of vices, that mask the interlocutors' ignorance from them. They fight — sometimes almost violently — against owning it. They will not avow it.

Proof of their masking is the anger, the enmity, Socrates's elenchtic unmasking typically provokes in his interlocutors, an anger he mentions in the *Apology*. Hatred, he says. The interlocutors are invested in knowing, they regard themselves as knowing. But most of them betray a noticeable uneasiness about their self-regard — it is fragile. Under the steadily mounting pressure of dialogue with Socrates, it cracks and sometimes shatters. Think of Thrasymachus. Socrates relentlessly hounds both Sophistry and self-sophistry.

3. The Oracle

Socrates reckons ignorance of Socratic topics to be epistemically inevitable. Only the gods know the true nature of courage, piety, or friendship. We, humans, are ignorant of their true natures. This is not a *failure* on our part. Success is not a possibility for us. But acknowledgment of our ignorance is a possibility for us, as is failure to do so. But success here requires a humility that challenges us — an acceptance of a finitude, a narrowness, and a vulnerability that we cannot escape or manage. But we rebel against this humility. As Cavell often points out, nothing is more human than the desire to deny your humanity.[7] And the refusal to acknowledge your ignorance is one

7. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 109. Cavell's reminder continues: "or to assert your humanity at the expense of someone else's." Socrates never aims to assert his humanity at the expense of someone else's — that is Calliclean power, not Socratic power. For more, see James Haden "Two Types of Power in Plato's *Gorgias*," *The Classical Journal* 87, no. 4 (1992): 313-26.

form of that denial. Socrates' human wisdom is an achievement not of knowledge but of acknowledged unknowing. He soberly faces his ignorance, owns and avows it. This makes him humanly wise, fully human. It is why his human wisdom counts for so little — but not for nothing, at least not in comparison to others of us, although it is nothing in relation to the gods, to Apollo. Socrates' entire life is an apology. Socrates is an abyss of negative capability.[8]

What does this teach us about the structure of Socratic Ignorance? *That it is not a compounding of single ignorance.* Rather it is a first ignorance, an epistemic blankness, that is topped by a second, *different* ignorance, a failure to acknowledge the first ignorance. Call it a complex of epistemic blankness and personal failure. Blankness compounded by failure. — This is why there is a discernable religious tone to what Socrates does, a tone that drives the dialogical investigation of Socratic topics. The person who is ignorant but will not acknowledge that ignorance is a person who has closed himself or herself from learning, from being taught, from remedying his or her ignorance. Such a person cannot only be said to *not-know*, but can be said willfully to not-acknowledge that not-knowingness. Such a person is invested in not acknowledging that not-knowingness.

Seeing this clarifies the Delphic command, "Know Thyself." We best understand the self-knowledge Socrates valued so highly in terms of acknowledgment. After all, failures of such self-knowledge are not pieces of ignorance, epistemic blankness — simple failures to know. Such failures are ignorings. The opposite, as we might put it, *the opposite of the self-knowledge that Socrates seeks is self-deception.* Socratic self-knowledge is self-acknowledgment.[9] Lacking it is not a simple failure to know, epistemic blankness.

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8. I borrow Keats' term, and the understanding of it on offer in Walter Jackson Bate, *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats* (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2012). Both Socrates' irony and his ignorance are internally related negative capabilities. Plato's dialogue form is best understood as an extension of Socrates' negative capability: the form itself as Plato used it involves an exercise of such a capability. But it is crucial to remember that the irony of Socrates and Plato is (*qua* negative capability) still affirmative and constructive, not pessimistic and nihilistic — a point often lost in discussions of them, and often lost on Socrates' interlocutors in their discussions with him.

9. And this is why self-knowledge is so often bitter. We are called on to acknowledge what we typically would prefer to ignore.

4. Philosophers

Socrates stations philosophers, himself as a philosopher, midway, Janus-like, between his typical interlocutors and the gods. The gods know and acknowledge that they know. They do not pursue wisdom because they possess it, and they acknowledge that possession. Socrates' typical interlocutors (the educated and the educators of Athens and Greece, note) do not know and fail to acknowledge that they do not know. They do not pursue wisdom because they will not acknowledge that they lack it. Philosophers do not know but they acknowledge that they do not know. That acknowledgment creates desire, love — the philosophers do not possess wisdom but love that which they lack, desire it. This makes them philosophers. The acknowledgment of ignorance is necessary to be a philosopher. It is not what he knows or does not know that makes Socrates a philosopher, but what he acknowledges. What he acknowledges both makes Socrates a gadfly to his interlocutors and makes him a chosen son of Apollo. He is the movable Oracle-at-Delphi, a barefoot demand for self-acknowledgment, a Riddle of Self-Respect.

5. Conclusion

Consider this passage of Johann Georg Hamann from his *Socratic Memorabilia*.

> The opinion of Socrates can be summarized in these blunt words, when he said to the Sophists, the learned men of his time, "I know nothing." Therefore these words were a thorn in their eyes and a scourge on their backs. All of Socrates' ideas, which were nothing more than expectorations and secretions of his ignorance, seemed as frightful to them as the hair of Medusa's head, the knob of the Aegis.

Hamann links Socrates' ignorance, Socrates' wisdom, to faith, to its midway, Janus-like character, its already-but-not-yet character.

> For the testimony which Socrates gave of his ignorance, therefore, I know no more honorable seal and at the same time no better key than the oracles of the great teacher of the Gentiles:
>
> > If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him.
>
> — just as Socrates was known by Apollo to be a wise man. But how the grain of all our natural wisdom must decay, must perish in ignorance, and how the life and being of a higher knowledge must spring forth newly created from this death, from this nothing — as far as this the nose of a Sophist does not reach.[10]

In seeking to expose unacknowledged ignorance, and, after exposure, to bring the ignorance to acknowledgment, Socrates attempts to make his interlocutors more disposable, more available, and so *handier*, both to themselves and to others—sometimes, as when talking to Theaetetus, he calls this making the person more "sober, humble and gentle."

> But if, Theaetetus, you should ever conceive afresh, you will be all the better for the present investigation, and if not, you will be soberer and humbler and gentler to other men, and will be too modest to fancy that you know what you do not know. These are the limits of my art; I can no further go, nor do I know aught of the things which great and famous men know or have known in this or former ages...[11]

Ending with the *Theaetetus* seems appropriate. After all, that is the dialogue devoted to both *knowledge and ignorance* (remember the midwifery) — and it ends with Socrates confessing his ignorance and praising Theatetetus for Theaetetus' confession of his. Confession, in this context, is a form of acknowledgment. Early in the dialogue, Socrates notes that Theaetetus resembles him, his bulging eyes, his pug nose, and his

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10. Johann Georg Hamman, *Socratic Memorabilia,* trans. J. C. Flaherty (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 109 and 111.
11. Plato, "Theatetus," *in The Dialogues of Plato*, 210c.

duck-like gait. And indeed, Theaetetus does: but the resemblance is not only skin-deep, as the dialogue reveals by its end.[12] Socrates models sobriety for Theaetetus, a sobriety Theaetetus already has but is still inheriting, mastering — sobriety as Soren Kierkegaard understood it.

> To become sober is to come to oneself in self-knowledge, and before God, as nothing before Him, but infinitely, absolutely, under obligation.[13]

12. The prelude to the *Theaetetus* is set many years after the dialogue between Socrates and the young Theaetetus (who looks like Socrates) reported in it. In the prelude, we are told that Theaetetus, a grown man now and a soldier, has returned seriously wounded and sick from a battle, close to death. His plight reminds the speakers of his past, youthful promise. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates takes his leave from the young Theaetetus, telling him that he is headed to the porch of the King Archon to meet the charges brought by Meletus. — So, for the entire reported dialogue, although revealed in different ways and at different times, both the look-a-likes' lives are in the balance.

13. Soren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself,* trans. H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 104. Sobriety neither demands solemnity nor rules out irony.

2. Epistemic Vertigo and Existential *Angst*

DUNCAN PRITCHARD

1. The Truth in Scepticism

Stanley Cavell famously remarked that there was a "truth in scepticism," where the recognition of this truth was apt to prompt a kind of anxiety. Here is Cavell describing this putative truth:

> An admission of some question as to the mystery of existence, or the being, of the world is a serious bond between the teaching of Wittgenstein and that of Heidegger. The bond is one, in particular, which implies a shared view of what I have called the truth of skepticism, or what I might call the moral of 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.[1]

One natural way of responding to Cavell on this score is that he is simply courting mystery. After all, he takes a distinctly Wittgensteinian line on sceptical problems, and doesn't Wittgenstein show, in a quietistic spirit, that such puzzles are merely the product of faulty philosophical theorizing? If so, then the sceptical puzzle is simply illusory and can hence be summarily dismissed. In particular, there is no truth that it might hold and no moral for us to extract (bar the general one about being wary of philosophical problems). Consequently, there are no legitimate grounds for any kind of anxiety arising in the wake of our resolution of this problem.

I want to resist this natural line of response. On the contrary, I want to suggest that this point about the truth in scepticism, and the anxiety that it generates, is a

1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 241.

deep insight of Cavell's work, and thus that it is imperative that we capture what is at issue here. Relatedly, insofar as Cavell interprets Wittgenstein correctly on this score — as I think he does — then this will be important for our conception of Wittgensteinian quietism, and in particular to appreciating why it is not a straightforward form of philosophical quietism. Moreover, I will be arguing that understanding the source of this anxiety can help us diagnose the existential *angst* that arises when we ponder the question of the meaning of life.

2. Epistemic Vertigo

In order to understand what Cavell means by his remarks about the truth in scepticism, we first need to engage with the 'terror' that he says naturally arises in the context of what is pitched as being a fully adequate *response* to the sceptical problem. Consider this passage, where Cavell's concern is with rule-following scepticism, and thus the issue of projecting meanings into new contexts of use:

> Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation — all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (because it is) terrifying.[2]

The general Wittgensteinian line of response to rule-following scepticism in play here will be familiar. There is nothing beyond the practice itself that can legitimate

2. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 52.

that practice because there could be no such external legitimization. The very philosophical demand that our practices stand in need of such an external legitimation is what needs to be unpacked and resisted, for it rests on a faulty philosophical picture. It is not my concern to defend this line here, but rather to note what Cavell goes onto say in the context of offering this Wittgensteinian anti-sceptical line, which is that the recognition that this is our situation is one that is "difficult," where the difficulty concerns the fact that it makes our situation "terrifying."[3] But why should that be? If we reject the faulty philosophical picture that generates the sceptical puzzle, then shouldn't that be the end of the matter? What would be the source of the terror?

Elsewhere I have followed other commentators in referring to this anxiety not as terror but as *vertigo*, and I will embrace this convention here too. As we will see, this word has useful connotations in this context which make it more fitting anyway. With this new terminology in play, the Cavellian thought is that in dissolving the sceptical problem one gains a recognition of one's philosophical situation that naturally provokes this vertiginous anxiety. The truth in scepticism is not, then, that scepticism is true, but that in discovering that it is false (in the sense of illusory), one gains a new understanding of one's situation that is nonetheless disquieting and thus leads to the vertigo.

In contrast, one might push back against this Cavellian thought by insisting that once the sceptical problem has been dissolved then there can be no truth to recognize nor, thereby, any legitimate grounds for succumbing to the target vertigo. One finds a particularly clear version of this putative debunking of Cavellian vertigo in remarks that John McDowell makes about Cavell. In discussing the quotation from Cavell that we just gave, McDowell offers the following gloss:

> The terror of which Cavell speaks at the end of this marvelous passage is a sort of vertigo, induced by the thought that there is nothing but shared forms of life to keep us, as it were, on the rails. We are inclined to think that that is an in-

3. Cavell makes similar remarks elsewhere in his work about this "terror," so his use of this term is not isolated. See, for example, this passage: "We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations — a thin net over an abyss." (*The Claim of Reason*, 178).

> sufficient foundation for a conviction that when we, say, extend a number series, we really are, at each stage, doing the same thing as before.[4]

Note that for McDowell the terror, or vertigo, that is arising in response to the Wittgensteinian response to rule-following scepticism is thought to be a reflection of the supposed *weakness* of this anti-sceptical line. This is important to understanding why McDowell is ultimately so dismissive of such vertigo. For while he grants that this vertigo might be a natural philosophical response to the Wittgensteinian diagnosis of rule-following scepticism, he contends that it reveals a failure to properly embrace the nature of the solution being offered:

> We cannot be whole-heartedly engaged in the relevant parts of the "whirl of organism," and at the same time achieve the detachment necessary in order to query whether our unreflective view of what we are doing is illusory. The cure for the vertigo, then, is to give up the idea that philosophical thought, about the sorts of practice in question, should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life.[5]

McDowell is suggesting that to feel such an anxiety in response to this resolution to rule-following scepticism is to succumb to the very philosophical picture that was generating the sceptical puzzle, one according to which our practices require an external philosophical validation. If we properly embrace the Wittgensteinian line that no such external valuation is required, then the vertigo will disappear just as the sceptical puzzle itself did. Here is McDowell:

> If we feel the vertigo [...], it is out of distaste for the idea that a manifestation of reason might be recognizable as such only from within the practice whose status is in question. We are inclined to think there ought to be a neutral external standpoint from which the rationality of any genuine exercise of reason could be demonstrated.[6]

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4. John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 339.
5. Ibid., 341.
6. Ibid., 45.

So Cavell was wrong to think that there is any truth in scepticism left once the Wittgensteinian diagnostic story has done its work, and thus wrong to think that there is any cause for the feelings of vertigo that he describes. Instead, we just need to keep our nerve and follow through on the Wittgensteinian dissolution of scepticism.

Where McDowell goes awry in his treatment of Cavellian vertigo is in the initial gloss he gives of Cavell's thinking. McDowell treats the vertigo as arising out of a dissatisfaction with the Wittgensteinian response to scepticism. This entails that the envisaged truth in scepticism is thus a kind of concession to scepticism — i.e., that there is some truth in it, some reason that the sceptic has highlighted for being dissatisfied with our situation in the target domain. But I don't think that captures the source of Cavell's worry at all. Instead, what prompts the vertigo that Cavell has in mind is not the fact that there is nothing external validating our practices, which would suggest the 'dissatisfaction' reading that McDowell offers, but rather the *recognition* of this fact. This distinction can initially seem puzzling, for if there is nothing problematic about our practices lacking an external validation, then why should the recognition of this fact lead to anxiety? Nonetheless, I think there is a distinction to be drawn here and that it is one that Cavell is trying to capture. Moreover, as we will see, it is crucially important to understanding the existential dimension of the later Wittgenstein's thought.

3. Wittgenstein on the Groundlessness of Our Believing

The most straightforward way to elucidate the importance of the distinction just drawn, and its relevance for the later Wittgenstein, is to consider some of Wittgenstein's writings on scepticism that Cavell wasn't engaging with when he made these claims about the truth in scepticism. The writings I have in mind are Wittgenstein's final notebooks devoted to the topics of knowledge, certainty and scepticism, which were published posthumously as *On Certainty*.[7] While there are significant overlaps in the ideas presented in these notebooks and in the other materials that make up

7 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969). Henceforth I will refer to this text as *OC*.

Wittgenstein's later work — especially the *Philosophical Investigations*[8] — there is also a new line of argument that is unique to this text.

This new line of argument is in support of the claim that it is necessary to the structure of rational evaluation — and thus to the very possibility that one is a rational subject at all, someone who occupies the space of reasons — that one has an overarching certainty in one's worldview. It follows from this proposal that this certainty must perforce be arational, since it lies behind all rational evaluations; it is the 'hinge' on which the door of rational evaluation turns.[9] Accordingly, we will call this overarching certainty in one's worldview—roughly, the idea that one's worldview is not fundamentally in error—the *über hinge commitment*.[10] It also follows from this proposal that the very idea of a fully general rational evaluation—of a kind that the radical sceptic attempts to undertake to undermine the rational standing of our beliefs, and of a kind that the traditional *anti*-sceptic attempts to undertake to validate the rational standing of our beliefs—is simply incoherent.

Wittgenstein's defends this claim by highlighting how inculcating a child into a worldview goes hand-in-hand with teaching them rational practices; one cannot have the latter without the former. One's acquisition of a worldview is thus not itself a fully rational process. That is, one might be taught elements of the worldview, and thereby given reasons to accept those elements, but the certainty in the worldview as a whole is not taught but rather 'swallowed down' in what one is taught.[11] Reasons are thereby internal to the worldview rather than directed towards the worldview as a whole. Similarly, certainty in the worldview is required in order to acquire it. As Wittgenstein puts it:

> The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes after belief.[12]

That is, the rational practice of doubt presupposes that the worldview, and the certainty that infuses it, is already in place; there is no route to the acquisition of a

8. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).
9. Wittgenstein, *OC*, §341.
10. I introduce this terminology in *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), part 2.
11. Wittgenstein, *OC*, §143.
12. Ibid., §160.

worldview by being globally circumspect of what one is taught. Indeed, Wittgenstein observes that one's certainty in the worldview is evident in our actions, which reveal our complete conviction. (He approvingly quotes Goethe in this respect: "In the beginning was the deed."[13]). More generally, one does not acquire a worldview, and the certainty that permeates it, by it being made plausible to one, as that would imply that there can be reasons in support of the worldview as a whole. Our über hinge certainty is thus not a grounded certainty at all, but rather something brute: it is "animal," visceral, "primitive."[14] It is neither reasonable nor unreasonable, but simply there "like our life."[15]

Although this presentation of the role of (what we are calling) the über hinge commitment in our practices is novel to *On Certainty*, especially in terms of its epistemological focus, it clearly dovetails with previous themes in Wittgenstein's work, not least the idea that there is nothing external that justifies one's practices as a whole. What is also innovative about *On Certainty* is the way that Wittgenstein describes how the über hinge commitment manifests itself in our ordinary practices.

G. E. Moore[16] famously discussed the special kind of certainty we have in our most mundane everyday commitments.[17] Moore thought that these quotidian certainties amounted to knowledge, but Wittgenstein offers a more radical line in this regard. At least as regards some of the certainties that Moore listed — i.e., the ones that really are features of our commonsense worldview, rather than being, for instance, philosophical claims that Moore smuggles in under this guise — his suggestion is that they are

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13. Ibid., §396.
14. Ibid., §§475 and 359.
15. Ibid., §559.
16. E.g., George Edward Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," in *Contemporary British Philosophy* (2nd series), ed. J. H. Muirhead (London: Allen & Unwin, 1925) and "Proof of an External World," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25 (1939).
17. Moore is often taken to have been the first to identify this particular issue regarding our everyday certainties. As I've argued elsewhere, however, he is in fact responding to a common philosophical theme of his time, one that goes back at least as far as John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979 [1870]). As Newman makes clear, the underlying issue here arises out Locke's epistemology, which demands, quite plausibly, both that our epistemic support should be proportionate to our level of commitment (so optimal certainty demands optimal levels of epistemic support), and that we should be able to make explicit what this epistemic support is and how it performs this role. For discussion, see my "Quasi-Fideism and Virtuous Anti-Evidentialism: Wittgenstein and Newman on Knowledge and Certainty," in *Newman and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. J. Milburn and F. Aquino (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

expressions of the über hinge commitment.[18] That is, our overarching certainty in our worldview — our conviction that this worldview is not in fundamental respects in error — manifests itself in a similarly brutish certainty in particular everyday certainties that are core nodes of that worldview. Our über hinge commitment thus generates *hinge commitments* to specific propositions. Examples include such claims as that (in normal circumstances) one has hands,[19] what one's name is,[20] and the language that one is speaking.[21] These are all propositions where error would call the worldview as a whole into question, such that a doubt here would "drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos."[22] Accordingly, expressions of doubt of these hinge commitments are either to be understood as merely performative (as when a philosopher claims to doubt everything they believe) or as an indication of a severe mental disturbance.[23]

As expressions of the über hinge commitment, our specific hinge commitments inherit the same properties as the über hinge. We might suppose, as Moore does, that these commitments are rationally grounded just as our ordinary beliefs might be, and relatedly that they are propositional attitudes that can be rationally evaluated just like our other beliefs. In fact, however, they play a very different role in our rational practices. In particular, as with our über hinge certainty, their hinge status means that the certainty here is brute and arational; it is rooted in our actions rather than in our reasons.

Similarly, Wittgenstein is not suggesting that it is incidental to our rational practices that they presuppose these arational hinge commitments, any more than it

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18 In keeping with one of the guiding themes of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues in the first notebook that makes up *On Certainty* that philosophical claims, such as "There is an external world," are not (contentful) mundane certainties but rather contentless sentences whereby philosophers attempt to say something profound and end up saying nothing at all. For more on this point about the first notebook, see Michael Williams, "Wittgenstein's Refutation of Idealism," in *Wittgenstein and Scepticism*, ed. D. McManus (London: Routledge, 2004), "Illusions of Doubt: Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Certainty," in *Skepticism: from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. D. Machuca and B. Reed (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) and my *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, part 2. As I argue in "Hinge Commitments and Common Knowledge," *Synthese* 200, no. 3 (2022), Wittgenstein also distinguishes in *On Certainty* between everyday certainties that function like—to use Greco's helpful phrase in his "Common Knowledge," *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 6, no. 2-3 (2016) — background 'common knowledge' and those arational everyday certainties that represent the über hinge commitment. This is important to reading *On Certainty*, since it entails that not every certainty that Wittgenstein discusses is a hinge certainty.

19. E.g., Wittgenstein, *OC*, §1.

20. Ibid., §425.

21. Ibid., §158.

22. Ibid., §613.

23. Ibid., §§71-75.

is incidental to our rational practices that they presuppose the über hinge commitment. Instead, he is quite explicit that the point he is making is one of "logic."[24] That is, it is in the very nature of what it is to have a system of rational evaluation that it presupposes a backdrop of arational certainty in the worldview, and thus in the commonsense nodes of that worldview. This is important to understanding why this proposal is meant to dissolve the radical sceptical problematic.[25]

It can seem as if the radical sceptic is presenting us with a genuine paradox, in the sense of a deep inconsistency in our own natural ways of thinking within this domain. In fact, however, they are trading on a faulty philosophical picture that is completely divorced from our ordinary rational practices; indeed, completely divorced from any plausible conception of what those ordinary rational practices could be. Not only are our ordinary rational practices essentially local in nature, but the very idea of a fully general rational evaluation is simply incoherent, as all rational evaluation presupposes an arational hinge certainty. As a result, there is no paradox here, but merely a puzzle that arises within a faulty philosophical picture, one that we should dispense with.[26] Notice too that on this diagnosis of radical scepticism, traditional forms of *anti*-scepticism that attempt to respond to the sceptical threat by offering a global rational validation of our beliefs are just as problematic as radical scepticism, as they also implicitly buy into the faulty philosophical picture that is generating the illusory paradox.

Such is the distinctive account of the structure of rational evaluations that Wittgenstein offers in *On Certainty*.[27] One might initially think that such a definitive response to radical scepticism would not allow for there to be any 'truth' in scepticism of the kind that Cavell is gesturing toward. In fact, however, in these remarks on our

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24. E.g., ibid., §342.
25. At any rate, that version of the radical sceptical problematic that trades on the coherence of universal rational evaluations. See my *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, part 1, for discussion of a distinct version of the contemporary radical scepticism problematic that trades instead on the supposed 'insularity' of reasons.
26. The conception of contemporary rational scepticism as a putative paradox is usually credited to Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
27. Naturally, this presentation of Wittgenstein's views in this regard is my own—see my *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, *passim* for further defence of these claims. For some of the main alternative readings of *On Certainty*, see Peter Frederick Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), Avrum Stroll, *Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Daniele

hinge commitments Wittgenstein offers the most explicit endorsement of what Cavell has in mind. Consider this remark, which I think is central to understanding Wittgenstein's line of thought in *On Certainty*:

> The difficulty is realising the groundlessness of our believing.[28]

What is significant about this passage is that the difficulty in question does not concern the groundlessness of our believing but rather our recognition of this groundlessness. That is, if we understand Wittgenstein's line on the structure of rational evaluation, then it is clear that our hinge commitments cannot be rationally grounded, and hence must be unknown. This is because there is simply no such thing as a rational basis for one's worldview as a whole, but only for elements within that worldview. Rationality gains no purchase on such global rational evaluations. Taking this point seriously means recognising that in saying one's worldview as a whole is groundless, and thus that one's hinge commitments are unknown, is not to concede anything to the radical sceptic, as if one were granting that the sceptic has identified an important cognitive limitation on our parts. We can see this by realising that while our hinge commitments are unknown, it is not as if we are ignorant of them, as they are simply not in the market for knowledge.[29] Our failure to know our hinge commitments is thus no more a cognitive limitation on our parts than our failure to conceive of a circle-square reveals an imaginative lacuna.[30]

Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's On Certainty* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Crispin Wright, "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (supp. vol.) 78, no. 1 (2004), Annalisa Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein: Scepticism, Certainty, and Common Sense* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *The Illusion of Doubt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a recent survey of this literature, see my "Wittgenstein on Hinge Commitments and Radical Scepticism in *On Certainty*," in *Blackwell Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. H.-J. Glock and J. Hyman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2017).

28. Wittgenstein, *OC*, §166.

29. That one doesn't count as ignorant of a proposition that is not in the market for knowledge reveals that there is more to ignorance than merely a lack of knowledge. For further discussion of this point, including other cases where ignorance comes apart from lack of knowledge, see my "Cavell and Philosophical Vertigo" and "Ignorance and Inquiry," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2021).

30. Despite this point, it is in fact quite common for commentators on *On Certainty* to regard Wittgenstein as highlighting a cognitive limitation on our parts in just this way. See, for example, Crispin Wright, "Hinge Propositions and the Serenity Prayer," in *Knowledge and Belief, Proceedings of the 26th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, ed. W. Loffler and P. Weingartner (Vienna, Austria: Holder-Pickler-Tempsky, 2004) and "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?" I offer an extended critical discussion of such concessive readings in my "Hinge Commitments and Trust," *Synthese* 202, no. 5 (2023).

It is thus not the groundlessness of our believing that is the difficulty, at least provided we properly understand what that claim amounts to. But how then can the recognition of the groundlessness of our believing be problematic? The reason for this lies in how recognising such a truth entails an unnatural perspective on one's ordinary practices, one that by its nature involves a degree of alienation from them. I've noted that our ordinary rational practices essentially involve local rational evaluations. That this is so, however, is not something that is explicit within those practices; all that is explicit is that they, in fact, only concern local rational evaluations, but the necessity of this feature is not made explicit in the practice itself. Indeed, it requires a philosophical investigation to draw this feature up to the surface.

Relatedly, we are not aware of our hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments within our ordinary practices. Indeed, they are in sense hidden from us, albeit in a fashion whereby their disguise consists in being so in front of our view that we don't see them. There is, for example, no ordinary line of inquiry that would raise an issue about our hinge commitments. One simply does not ordinarily even consider the question of whether one has hands. As Wittgenstein puts it, such questions regarding one's hinge commitments "lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry."[31] This is the sense in which our ordinary practices, even if they do not involve universal rational evaluations, do not make explicit the groundlessness of our believing either. This is important, since it means that becoming aware of our hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments does involve learning something new and thereby becoming aware of a truth. This is the truth that scepticism reveals, but which is obscured from view when one is fully attuned to one's ordinary practices, that our believing is ultimately groundless (because our worldview as a whole is groundless). As Cavell puts it in his famous 'truth of scepticism' passage that we quoted above, what we come to realise is that our relationship to the world as a whole is not one of knowing.

It is important to emphasise that this truth is distinct from the truth that the radical sceptic advertises. The putative sceptical truth is a claim about how our beliefs are epistemically problematic because they are ultimately groundless. In contrast, the truth that is revealed by recognising our hinge commitments as hinge commitments is one on which our ordinary practices, and the localised rational support that they

31. Wittgenstein, *OC*, §88.

generate for our beliefs, are perfectly in order as they are. The radical sceptic thus does not succeed in establishing her intended truth. Nonetheless, something new is learned by recognising one's hinge commitments as hinge commitments, as one is not ordinarily aware, when one is fully attuned to one's day-to-day practices, that one's worldview as a whole is groundless. (Which, note, is not to say that when one is fully attuned to one's day-to-day practices that one implicitly supposes that one's worldview as a whole is rationally grounded; rather, the issue simply doesn't arise).

The notion of attunement — Cavell's favoured phrase for our being fully immersed in a practice — is important here. Just as radical sceptical theorising involves a kind of alienation from one's ordinary practices, in that it involves adopting an unnatural perspective on them, so resolving the sceptical problem also involves a kind of estrangement from those practices too.[32] This is crucial to understanding Wittgenstein's brand of philosophical quietism. In dissolving philosophical paradoxes and thereby showing that one's practices do not require an external validation (in this case of a specifically rational kind), one does not simply return to one's ordinary practices as before. Indeed, there is, and can be, no return to Eden. For in resolving the paradox by dissolving it one is nonetheless led to a perspective on those practices which is also unnatural, and thus involves a degree of estrangement from them, even if it is a perspective on which the paradox no longer arises.[33]

This relates to a core theme in Cavell's work, which is the uncanny nature of the ordinary. That is, that which is most ordinary, when one becomes aware of it as such, can strike one as eerie and strange. This is because of the feature of the (most) ordinary that we have noted, in which it is in effect obscured from our vision by being completely in front of us. It thus takes a peculiar kind of inquiry to make it vivid, and in doing so it becomes strange. Recognising our hinge commitments as hinge commitments necessarily involves a degree of alienation from, and thus lack of attunement to, one's ordinary practices. This is why an engagement with radical scepticism,

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32. As Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 161 puts it, the sceptical line of reasoning is neither 'fully natural' nor 'fully unnatural.'

33. For further discussion of Wittgenstein's particular brand of philosophical quietism, see John McDowell, "Wittgenstein's 'Quietism'," *Common Knowledge* 15, no. 3 (2009) and my 'Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* as Pyrrhonism in Action," in *Wittgensteinian (adj.): Looking at Things from the Viewpoint of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*, ed. N. de Costa and S. Wuppuluri, (Dordrecht, Holland: Springer, 2019) and "Pyrrhonism and Wittgensteinian Quietism," in *Ancient Scepticism and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. L. Perissinotto and B. R. Cámara (Milan: Mimesis International, forthcoming).

even of a kind that involves dissolving the putative paradox in play, does not leave things as they were. Here is Cavell:

> The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same.[34]

It is apt to refer to the Cavellian anxiety in the face of scepticism as a form of vertigo, where the word is used in its colloquial (if strictly inaccurate) sense as referring to a fear of heights.[35] It conveys the idea that the anxiety in question is phobic, and thus is in tension with one's beliefs rather than an expression of them. It is, to use Tamar Gendler's terminology, an *alief* rather than a belief.[36] For example, one might know, when high up, that one is perfectly safe and yet feel the fear from being so high regardless. The fearful reaction here is the alief. The same goes for our Cavellian anxiety when we come to recognise the ultimate groundlessness of our believing, for even if we fully endorse the Wittgensteinian diagnosis of why it is incoherent to even expect one's worldview to be rationally grounded we might still be subject to the fearful alief.

The second element of the vertigo metaphor that is useful for our purposes is the connotation that one has ascended, in this case ascended above one's ordinary rational practices in order to view them from an unnatural vantage point. This ascent is only possible at the expense of a lack of full attunement in those practices. Full at-

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34. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 166. For further discussion of Cavell's treatment of the ordinary, see Gordon Bearn, "Wittgenstein and the Uncanny," *Soundings* 76 (1993), Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), David Egan, "The Authenticity of the Ordinary," in *Wittgenstein and Heidegger*, ed. D. Egan, S. Reynolds and A. J. Wendland, (London: Routledge, 2013) and *The Pursuit of an Authentic Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Everyday* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), Peter Stanley Fosl, "Cavell and Hume on Skepticism, Natural Doubt, and the Recovery of the Ordinary," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 3 (2015), and Avner Baz "Stanley Cavell's Argument of the Ordinary," *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 7, no. 2 (2018).
35. The correct term for a fear of heights is acrophobia, but 'epistemic acrophobia' doesn't have quite the same ring to it.
36. In her "Alief and Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 105, no. 10 (2008).

tunement doesn't allow for philosophical anxiety, and that's because such anxiety arises out of a lack of attunement.

Putting these thoughts together, the idea becomes that epistemic vertigo captures a phobic relation — an alief — that we are naturally inclined to form in response to the epistemic ascent that we undertake when we become, through philosophising, estranged from our ordinary rational practices in such a way as to recognise the ultimate groundlessness of our believing.[37] That this captures what Cavell has in mind with the truth of scepticism is brought out in an off-hand remark he makes about this notion in his 1996 APA Presidential Address. He notes that his treatment of the later Wittgenstein's response to scepticism was not as a refutation of it but rather as being concerned with discovering "the causes of philosophy's disparagement of, or its disappointment with, the ordinary, something I have called the truth of skepticism."[38] The problem is thus the ordinary, or at least the conception of the ordinary that one gains from engaging in the sceptical problematic. It is this conception that generates the *angst*.

Cavell claimed that the proper response to scepticism involves acknowledgment rather than knowledge.[39] In particular, what needs to be acknowledged is the sense in which, as he puts it, our relationship to the world as a whole is not one of knowing. As he expresses the point, "skepticism is not the discovery of an incapacity in human knowing but of an insufficiency [*of acknowledgement*]."[40] The truth in scepticism, which we must acknowledge, is a disturbing one, which is why it prompts epistemic vertigo, but it is not a sceptical truth.

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37. I have developed this notion of epistemic vertigo in a number of places. See, for example, *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, part 4, "Wittgensteinian Epistemology, Epistemic Vertigo, and Pyrrhonian Scepticism," in *Epistemology After Sextus Empiricus*, ed. J. Vlasits and K. M. Vogt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), "Epistemic Vertigo," in *The Philosophy and Psychology of Ambivalence: Being of Two Minds*, ed. B. Brogaard and D. Gatzia (London: Routledge, 2020), "Religious Vertigo," in *Religionsphilosophie nach Wittgenstein* (*Philosophy of Religion after Wittgenstein*), ed. E. Ramharter (Stuttgart, Germany: Metzler/Springer, 2024). For further defence of the application of this notion to Cavell, see my "Cavell and Philosophical Vertigo." See also Rico Gutschmidt, "Skepticism, Metaphors and Vertigo: Wittgenstein and Cavell on the Human Condition," *Wittgenstein-Studien* 7, no. 1 (2016).

38. Cavell, "Something out of the Ordinary," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 71, no. 2 (1997): 26.

39. For example, consider this passage: "*The Claim of Reason* suggests the moral of skepticism to be, that the existence of the world and others in it is not a matter to be known, but one to be acknowledged." (*In Quest of the Ordinary*, 109). One might think that Cavell is echoing the following remark from *On Certainty*: "Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment." (Wittgenstein, *OC*, §378). Cavell, "Reply to Four Chapters," in *Wittgenstein and Skepticism*, ed. D. McManus (London: Routledge, 2004), 284 maintains, however, that he developed this approach prior to reading *On Certainty*.

40. Cavell, "Something out of the Ordinary": 26.

4. Existential *Angst*

One might naturally wonder at this juncture what all this has got to do with existential questions about the meaning of life. The explanation lies in a certain way in which the question of life's meaning can seem paradoxical. At root, the problem of the meaning of life is an axiological problem. A meaningful life is a life properly devoted, in fundamental ways, to finally (i.e., non-instrumentally) valuable goods. This is why a life devoted to trivialities, like money or fame, is usually thought to be without meaning, as such goods are not finally valuable.

On this conception of the meaning of life, there are certain external conditions that need to hold for life to be meaningful. For one thing, the goods that we fundamentally and finally value need to in fact be worthy of such valuing. If value nihilism is true, for example, and nothing is valuable, much less finally valuable, then life is meaningless. Moreover, even if there are finally valuable goods, we might be mistaken about what is valuable in this way, and also in error about which of them we should be fundamentally concerned with. Someone who regrets, on their deathbed, spending time at the office at the expense of neglecting their family is presumably coming to recognize, too late, an error of valuing that they made. They fundamentally and finally valued certain goods when they were not worthy of it.

Moreover, most of what we value incorporates certain success conditions. For example, it is plausible that a good life is a life rich in achievements. Roughly, these are successes that are attributable to one's skillful agency.[41] So construed, however, there are numerous ways in which one's achievements can be frustrated. For example, one's successes might be Gettierized, such that luck intervenes to ensure that one's success is not attributable to one's skillful agency. Furthermore, given that a meaningful life depends upon one valuing in a certain way, then anything that is a threat to such valuing would thereby undermine the goodness of one's life. This is the sense in which, for example, having free will is a precondition for a meaningful life.

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41. At any rate, they are successes that are attributable to one's skillful agency where, in addition, there is a higher than normal level of skill on display or one is overcoming significant obstacles to that success. For discussion of this account of achievements, see my "Achievements, Luck and Value," *Think* 9, no. 25 (2010). For further discussion of achievements in general, see Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

There are many other ways in which circumstances can undermine the meaningfulness of one's life, at least on an axiological conception of life's meaning anyway. Such potential barriers are to be expected: the idea that living a meaningful life is guaranteed, whatever one elected to do, does not even seem to be as much as coherent. There is, however, one kind of challenge to the meaning of life that is different from these piecemeal concerns in that it is structural in nature. Indeed, it is structurally akin to the sceptical problems that Wittgenstein engaged with, whether concerned with meaning or knowledge. The idea is that there needs to be an external validation of one's fundamental values, for without such a validation they are merely arbitrary and parochial — mere products of one's particular cultural milieu — and hence without value.

We can find a compelling statement of this existential concern in Thomas Nagel's magisterial treatment of absurdity.[42] Nagel treats the problem of the meaning of life as being one of avoiding the charge of absurdity. For Nagel, the source of absurdity is a discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality. To take one of his examples, imagine that your trousers fall down just as you are being knighted. The particular kind of absurdity that he claims is relevant to the meaning of life concerns the "collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt."[43] It thus becomes important to show that our lives, which we hold to be of utmost importance, are fundamentally different from the pointless existence of someone like Sisyphus, who is condemned to push a boulder up a hill for eternity. For if there is not, then the discrepancy between pretension and reality will kick in and our lives will be absurd (and thus meaningless). Nagel's dramatic claim is that there are always grounds for believing that there is such a discrepancy.

Notice that the problem that Nagel is presenting is essentially epistemological in nature, as he acknowledges.[44] The idea is that there is always a perspective avail-

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42. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1970).
43. Ibid., 718.
44. Indeed, he contends that this problem concerning the meaning of life is structurally analogous to the problem of radical scepticism. See Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," §5. For a critical discussion of Nagel's specific presentation of this analogy, see my "Absurdity, *Angst* and The Meaning of Life," *Monist* 93, no. 1 (2010).

able from which it is reasonable to doubt that the things that we fundamentally value in our lives really are deserving of this value. Consider this passage:

> We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them.[45]

Notice that the concern here isn't that the things that one fundamentally value in one's lives have been shown to be undeserving of being valued in this way, but only that there is a perspective on which it is reasonable to doubt their value and we have no way of settling these doubts. Note too how Nagel characterizes this perspective that generates these doubts, as one that is "outside the particular form of our lives." As he expresses the point, this is a perspective that is 'external' to our form of life; it is a 'universal viewpoint' rather than one's particular viewpoint.[46] In later work, Nagel would famously express this notion in terms of a 'view from nowhere.'[47]

Nagel's presentation of the problem can make it seem compelling. Isn't one important source — if not the overarching source — of our existential *angst* this inability to assuage the doubts we might have about whether what we fundamentally care about warrants this concern? And don't those doubts arise within a peculiarly detached perspective where we step outside of our form of life and attempt to evaluate our deepest values in a detached manner?

Our discussion of Cavell and epistemic vertigo offers us a way of responding to this existential *angst*. Primarily, it does so by presenting us with a diagnosis of what is problematic about the disengaged perspective that Nagel is appealing to. Our fundamental values permeate and structure our worldview. As such, while they can of course change over time, they are not dispensable features of the worldview, still less

45. Nagel, "The Absurd": 719.
46. Ibid., 720 and 725.
47. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

are they incidental to it. To doubt our fundamental values is to doubt the worldview, which is why our über hinge commitment in the worldview manifests itself in a corresponding visceral certainty in our fundamental values. The very manner in which our fundamental values are embedded in the heart of our worldview can make it seem as if the only proper perspective from which one should assess one's fundamental values is from outside of one's worldview, as any justification of them from within it will seem bootstrapping in nature. We are thus led towards the idea that to properly validate one's fundamental values it is necessary to rationally evaluate one's worldview as a whole.

Nagel maintains that when we try to undertake this radical form of rational evaluation, we find that our doubts cannot be resolved, and this leaves us with the existential *angst*. Where Nagel goes wrong is in supposing that the kind of rational evaluation that he is envisaging can be coherently undertaken. As we have previously noted, it can seem harmless to suppose that we can extrapolate from our ordinary rational practices to a kind of purified rational practice that is in principle universal in application. It is this kind of abstraction from our ordinary rational practices that Nagel is attempting when he considers a perspective from which one might rationally evaluate one's worldview as a whole, and thus the fundamental values that permeate that worldview. What Wittgenstein's discussion of the structure of rational evaluation reveals, however, is that this is not a harmless extension of our ordinary rational practices at all but rather incorporates a dubious philosophical picture that ignores the necessity of the über hinge commitment. If that's right, then the appropriate response to the challenge that Nagel raises is not to concede that these radical doubts that arise in the context of the disengaged perspective are unanswerable but to argue that they are not even coherent. There simply is no disengaged perspective from which we can rationally evaluate our worldview as a whole and that means that there is no mechanism for rationally evaluating our fundamental values from such a perspective.

If Nagel's existential *angst* is unwarranted, then does that mean that there is nothing here that could provide genuine intellectual anxiety? That would be the counterpart thought to the McDowellian line we discussed above. Just as the McDowellian line missed something important in Cavell's discussion of radical scepticism, so our Cavellian notion of epistemic vertigo can explain why Nagel's discussion

of absurdity is capturing a genuine philosophical issue, even if Nagel's own rendering of it misdescribes it in fundamental ways. Just as before, the source of the anxiety is not the nature of our epistemic situation but rather our recognition of it. As Nagel's own presentation of the problem indicates, we are not led to sceptical doubts about our fundamental values when we are fully attuned to our ordinary practices; such doubts simply do not arise. This is because of the hinge nature of our fundamental values. Crucially, however, just as we are not aware that our everyday commitment to having hands is an arational hinge certainty — i.e., we are not aware of our hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments — so we are also unaware of the hinge role that our fundamental values play. In particular, from within our ordinary practices we are not aware of the ultimate groundlessness of our worldview, and thus our believing as a whole, and that means that we are not aware of the groundlessness of our hinge commitments, including our axiological hinge commitments.

Just as the recognition of one's hinge commitments in general leads to epistemic vertigo, so the same applies when it comes to recognizing one's specific axiological hinge commitments. If Nagel's proposal were correct, then our inability to answer the doubts about our fundamental values would constitute a cognitive limitation on our parts.[48] If Wittgenstein is right, in contrast, then there is no such cognitive limitation here as our hinge commitments are not even in the market for rational evaluation. Nonetheless, while we are unaware of the groundlessness of our hinge certainty when attuned to our everyday form of life, the kind of philosophical investigation that Nagel entertains can make this groundlessness explicit. It achieves this through a degree of estrangement from one's ordinary practices to a sufficient extent to enable us to recognize features of those practices that are normally hidden from view (albeit in plain sight). Our existential difficulty is not caused by our fundamental values being shown to be illegitimate, still less by our commitment to those values being shown to lack a necessary form of rational support, but by our recognition of the ultimate groundlessness of our worldview.

As Cavell has highlighted, this recognition is a natural source of anxiety, but it is entirely distinct from the anxiety that the radical sceptic — in this case the existen-

48. Indeed, Nagel explicitly casts his point as revealing such a fundamental cognitive limitation — see, for example, his "The Absurd," 727.

tial sceptic — is attempting to demonstrate. Just as Cavell has shown that there is a truth in radical scepticism that is distinct from the truth of radical scepticism, so there is a truth in existential scepticism that is distinct from the truth of existential scepticism. Properly understood, it is not the groundlessness of our fundamental values that is problematic but rather our recognition of this fact. It is this that prompts our existential vertigo, but we should be careful to recognize that taking such vertigo seriously is not thereby to concede anything of substance to the existential sceptic.[49]

49. This paper was written while a Senior Research Associate of the African Centre for Epistemology and Philosophy of Science at the University of Johannesburg.

3. Existence, Contingency and Mourning in Cavell's *Hamlet*

ELI FRIEDLANDER

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has fascinated philosophers, from Hegel to Nietzsche, from Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, and more recently taken up in French thought by Derrida and Deleuze. It is the play that Freud sets as the modern correlate of his interpretation of Oedipus. Cavell's short essay 'Hamlet's Burden of Proof' is far less discussed than his other readings of Shakespeare's plays such as 'The Avoidance of Love in *King Lear*' and "Othello or the Stake of the Other." It centers on the implications to be drawn from the play within the play, performed "to catch the conscience of the King."

1. Play and Fantasy

The first important thing to remark about the play within the play is that it is performed twice, once as a dumb show and once with words. The interpretative problem arising from this repetition is that the king does not react with recognition to the dumb show. Several possible explanations may be ruled out: It is not proof that the King did not murder his brother, since he confesses to it in the church scene. Nor is the King merely distracted or hiding his feelings. So, the lack of recognition turns on the fact that the King did not murder *in the way* that is shown in the dumb show. Since Hamlet is the one who 'directed' the players, this further means that there is something in the play which is the expression of how Hamlet *imagines* the murder of his father to have taken place.

This raises for Cavell the question of what sort of fantasy is being played out by Hamlet's stage directions. Some features of the setting of the play suggest an answer. First, and foremost there is the obscene character of Hamlet's remarks and 'commen-

tary' (while 'interpreting' the play for the king), which is evident in the way he speaks to Ophelia ("I could interpret between you and your love if I could see the puppets dallying").[1] This suggests that precisely something obscene, something that ought to remain behind the scenes is played out and exhibited as Hamlet's 'fantasy' of the murder. We know that the play within the play aims to catch the conscience of the King, but also that it is to test the veracity of the ghost. Or put differently, the King's reaction would serve as a test whether the ghost is real or a figment of Hamlet's imagination. But the sexual character of Hamlet's remarks introduces another figure who becomes central to the laying out of the fantasy, namely Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. Cavell notes how Hamlet speaks of chasing from his imagination foul pictures of Claudius as lover of his mother. But maybe even these are screens for a more fundamental fantasy.

As Cavell draws the connection between this obscene character and the play within the play, he turns to the psychoanalytic conception of the most fundamental fantasy in the constitution of the individual, as it were a fantasy of origins, which following Freud he calls the '*primal scene*': "[I am] proposing to look at the dumb show as Hamlet's invention, let me say his fantasy, and in particular a fantasy that deciphers into the memory of a primal scene, a scene of parental intercourse."[2] In other words, if the play within the play enacts the primal scene, then the main figures are not so much Hamlet's father and his brother Claudius, but rather Hamlet's father and Queen Gertrude, his mother. Cavell quotes Laplanche and Pontalis, who developed after Freud this concept of the primal fantasy: "whatever appears to the subject as something needing an explanation or theory is dramatized as a moment of emergence, the beginning of a history." And he adds: "Laplanche and Pontalis specify the primary fantasies as of "the origin of the individual, of the upsurge of sexuality, and of the difference between the sexes" in sum "of the origin of the subject himself."[3] The primal scene specifically concerns the first of these fantasies, namely the origin of the individual (of the subject as individual).

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1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. J. D. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), III, ii, 245-46.
2. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 182-83. All references to Cavell's essay 'Hamlet's Burden of Proof' in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* are abbreviated as *DK* followed by page numbers.
3. Ibid., 187.

For sure, the staging of the primal fantasy involves certain distortions that hide its true nature, not unlike the kind of reversals that Freud suggests in his discussion of the case of the primal scene of the wolf-man. First, a reversal of gender (the figure supposed to represent Claudius stands for Gertrude in the fantasy). Secondly, a reversal of active and passive: not pouring something into the ear of the father but having something poured into her — the fantasy of intercourse. At first this might sound merely perverse, but recall that the paradigmatic ancient tragedy precisely has to do with the question of incest and murder in the triangular relation of father, mother and son. It is of course important to reflect both on the connection to the Oedipal triangle and on the difference of modern tragedy from ancient tragedy, that is on the way Shakespeare takes on himself the inheritance of the tragic form and the transformation of the primal scene.

An important connection between the primal scene and the form of the tragic is suggested in aligning the former with the character of the mythical: "Like myths, they [these primal fantasies] claim to provide a representation of, and a solution to, the major enigmas which confront the child."[4]

Before further commenting on Cavell's complex account, I would like to make a short detour through the question of myth and tragedy in antiquity as well as the transformation of their relation in modernity.

2. Myth and Tragedy

I will briefly develop the relation between myth and tragedy initially by way of Walter Benjamin's account of the tragic in the first part of his book *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*. As he describes it, tragedy is closely bound to myth or legend, which the performance periodically reshapes. In performing that legend, the community, through its heroic representative, recognizes anew its historical destiny. The dramatic performance is the medium that gathers a community and imparts a fundamental orientation to its existence.

This orientation can further be characterized as the overcoming of the condition of fate, or of a burden of guilt pertaining to unformed life. By gathering and con-

4. Ibid., 186-87.

centrating fate in his person, the tragic hero reveals the contradiction that underlies collective existence. Tragedy 'concentrates' fate and 'reflects' it in the person of the hero so that this very reflection is the arrest of fate's pernicious ambiguity. Tragedy transforms a space ruled by demonic ambiguity into one in which decisive measures can be taken. It involves a *decisive* moment. The state in which, through his terrible suffering, all possibilities end for the tragic hero shows, concentrated in his person, the paradoxical condition of existence of the community. It allows the community to envisage the order that will be raised beyond the violence of unformed life. Thus, Benjamin writes: "[the tragic sacrifice] is the representative action, in which new circumstances in the life of the people are announced."[5]

For Benjamin, the concentration of guilt in the person of the tragic hero is key to recognizing the redeeming character of tragedy, its way of addressing the 'natural guilt' that is part of the very existence in the field of life. The tragic hero makes the contradiction of a form of life visible but does not resolve it in speech. His position is characterized by silence. The tragic hero's silence is correlative with the rejection of the community of the present, and it calls for a future community that will make this yet-unexpressed word heard. It is a silence that Benjamin therefore identifies with the muteness of infancy, of that which does not yet know how to speak what he shows in his own person.

The word belongs to community to come. For the hero, the arrest of ambiguity in mute defiance is his recognition of an inalienable core of solitary existence. The tragic is at the same time a trial of the Olympians by humanity. It marks the emergence of the infinity of morality in which man senses, without being able to express in any other way than defiance, that he is "better than is god." This, for Benjamin, is the "birth of genius in moral speechlessness."[6]

Now, the important question for Benjamin, as well as for Cavell, is what elements of the tragic are retained and how are they transformed in modern Shakespearean tragedy. Specifically, how does this transformation manifest itself in *Hamlet*. Can we still read *Hamlet* according to this paradigm of Greek tragedy, and in what way can the

5. Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. H. Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 100.
6. Benjamin, *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin*, vol. 1, ed. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 203.

recasting of the myth serve the unity of the community in the face of the historically specific circumstances of its present? Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of History into Play* is precisely an attempt to read *Hamlet* along those lines.[7]

The title of Schmitt's book suggests the fundamental contrast he wishes to establish between play and the tragic. The reference to Hecuba alludes to the first interaction of Hamlet with the actors, when they show their talent by playing for him the scene of Hecuba weeping over the death of her husband Priam. This *mere* play, reflected in the 'turning on and off' at will of pathos, is contrasted to the seriousness of the tragic, measured by the way in which tragedy is capable of showing through its constitutive myth, the present historical situation in its most decisive features. In other words, *Hamlet* must be understood, according to Schmitt, as the tragic reworking of a legend for the present of Shakespeare's England. That present decisively illuminated by the tragic myth is that of King James, whose father, Lord Darnley, was murdered and whose mother, Mary Queen of the Scotts, remarried with one suspected of the murder.

How is this reading affecting our understanding of the 'play withing the play' in *Hamlet*? According to Schmitt, the 'Mousetrap' must contain a kernel of the myth as well as a reference to the utterly serious concrete historical situation addressed by *Hamlet*. As Schmitt writes, "the play within the play in Act Three of *Hamlet* is not only no look behind the scenes, but, on the contrary, it is the real play itself repeated *before* the curtains. This presupposes a realistic core of the most intense contemporary significance and timeliness. Otherwise the doubling would simply make the play more playful, more unlikely and artificial –more untrue as a play, until finally it would become a "parody of itself." Only a strong core of reality could stand up the double exposure of the stage upon the stage. It is possible to have a play within a play, but not a tragedy within a tragedy. The play within the play in Act Three is thus a consummate test of the hypothesis that a core of historical actuality and historical presence — the murder of the father of Hamlet — James and the marriage of the mother to the murder — has the power to intensify the play as play without destroying the sense of the tragic."[8]

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7. For a thought provoking analysis of Cavell's reading of *Hamlet* in relation to Benjamin and Schmitt, see Tatjana Jukić, "Cavell's Shakespeare, or the Insufficiency of Tragedy for Modernity," *Bollettino Filosofico* 32 (2017).
8. Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Irruption of History into Play*, trans. D. Pan and J. Rust (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2009), 43-44.

It is in many ways surprising to find Schmitt taking up the figure of Hamlet. For Hamlet appears to be precisely the polar opposite of the figure of the sovereign whose highest virtue is the decision in the state of emergency. Hamlet is utterly incapable of being decisive. Indeed, Schmitt refers to the 'Hamletization' of the sovereign that would result from the attempt to construe the urgency of decision merely upon the events of the present. It is precisely this insufficiency of the contingent that requires the recognition of the organizing character of myth in putting the present in the sharpest light. Tragedy is what can hold both the primal past of myth and the present situation so as to eventuate in a decision. Tragedy is therefore not mere play but borders on the seriousness of history. The problem of Schmitt is how to relate Hamlet on the one hand to the utmost actuality of the historical situation of Shakespeare's time, and on the other hand to the primal or original ground that fills this situation with the highest significance, the ground of myth.[9]

3. Haunting and Play-Acting

These last considerations bring us back to the specificity of Cavell's reading. On the face of it, Cavell also turns to the idea of a mythical core that gives the play within a play its true meaning. But we should note initially two fundamental differences between the way the primal scene functions in Cavell's interpretation and how myth is, according to Schmitt, the tragic kernel of Hamlet. In the first place, the primal or mythical is identified in the constitution of the subject (not the historical community). Indeed, what is at play in the primal fantasy is precisely what one might

9. Schmitt laments how the rhetoric of play has overcome the modern conception of the work of art. He relates this legacy to Friedrich Schiller's elaboration of the play drive in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Keith Tribe (London: Penguin, 2016), itself taking up Kant's account of aesthetic judgment in terms of the free play of the faculties in the "Third Critique." (A related attack on the concept of the play in aesthetics and politics can be found in Schmitt's *Political Romanticism*, trans. G. Oakes, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986). Schmitt understands the aesthetics of play as the conception that art creates an autonomous sphere apart from the struggles and seriousness of authentic historical life, through which humanity can be seemingly fulfilled. In his view: "Art for [Schiller] is a realm of autonomous representation. Only in play does one become human, does one transcend self-alienation and find true dignity. In such philosophy play must become superior to seriousness. Life is serious, and art is jovial; indeed, but the serious reality of the man of action is the ultimately only "miserable reality," and seriousness is always on the verge of becoming an animal brutality." (Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 47). This ideology of play leads, according to Schmitt, to the dissociation of art from history.

call facing the contingency of one's individual existence: "Now I propose, prompted by Hamlet, to take the fantasy of this origin to be represented by the question: Why of all the ones I might have been am I just this one and no other, given this world and no other, possessed of exactly this mother and this father?"[10]

Secondly, it is a fantasy that more than anything shows what is *to be faced* in achieving one's concrete historical individuality. It is not what immediately determines the unity of significance. The fantasy, one might say, expresses the burden against which the proof of one's existence is to be enacted. To clarify, consider the way Cavell relates the fantasy and the burden that is laid on Hamlet to avenge his father. In the triangular relation enacted, we recognize not just the demand to avenge the murder: "The ghost asks initially for revenge for his murder, a task the son evidently accepts as his to perform [...]. But after telling his story of death, what the Ghost asks Hamlet 'not to bear' is something distinctly different — that 'the royal bed of Denmark be/ a couch for luxury and damned incest.' But is this the son's business not to bear?"[11]

In other words, the son is tasked with acting in the face of the impotence of his father. Hamlet the father appears as a ghost, and in that sense is structurally speaking impotent since he cannot act in the world of the living. But the impotence that Hamlet must remedy is of another kind. It is played out in the primal fantasy of his own origins and to be set out not against the threat of castration of the father, but against the sense of the annihilating power of the mother. We do not have here the Oedipal triangle in which the child is threatened by the father to renounce his narcissistic attachment to the mother. Rather, the mother is the one who annihilates the father and the son is hopelessly attempting to act in the face of the father's impotence: "What I claim is rather that Hamlet feels [Gertrude's] power as annihilating of his own [...]. Moreover, my claim is that Hamlet divines that his father experienced Gertrude's annihilating power before him."[12] The play stages a man collapsing upon something being poured into him: this is a reversal of intercourse, which retains the idea of the collapse of the father.

If we take Hamlet to share the kind of impotence of his father which he fantasized in the play within the play, it must be reflected in his own existence. Cavell's

10. Cavell, *DK*, 187.
11. Ibid., 188.
12. Ibid., 185.

reading in effect reinterprets one of the most famous characteristics of Hamlet, namely his incapacity to act. But it receives a completely different meaning in terms of the primal fantasy. If it is a fantasy of origin, then, assuming this impotence would mean that Hamlet refuses to be born, he refuses to enter life. His identification with the impotence of the father can be described therefore as a sense of himself haunting the world: "His bar — his lack of 'advancement' into the world — is expressed in one's sense (my sense) of him as the Ghost of the play that bears his and his father's name, a sense that his refusal of participation in the world is his haunting of the world."[13]

This brings out a further dimension of the play within the play. Hamlet stages his own fantasy, that is, he conceives of himself as an actor, an actor in his own play. Added then, or related to the idea of haunting the world is another characterization of what not *really* acting in the world comes to: it is to play-act. Haunting the world is behaving "as if he is a figure in a play." So that the setting of a play within a play is for Hamlet yet another way of expressing his being in the world as an actor rather than an agent. Indeed, this would suggest that Cavell further reinterprets through this scene one of the recurring questions about Hamlet, whether he is truly mad or play acting. One could say that his madness is not something that should be identified solely in terms of the bouts of what seems to his surrounding as incoherence. But nor is he merely play-acting being mad. If anything, his madness is in assuming in his life the position of an actor.

4. Repetition and Enacting Existence

What would it be to conceive of *Hamlet* as offering not just the vision of the curse but also articulating the character of what it is to redeem existence in these conditions?

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13. Cavell, *DK*, 188. One should conceive of this idea of haunting as a figure of refusing to be born into the world as a characteristic of modern tragedy. Indeed, there are no ghosts in ancient tragedy. For sure, it constitutes a variation on the words of the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus*: "Not to be born is best / when all is reckoned in, but once a man has seen the light / the next best thing, by far, is to go back / where he came from" (1388-91) In modern tragedy haunting is expressing the refusal of entering the world. (Compare to Cavell's reading of Coleridge's "Ballad of the Ancient Mariner," in *In Quest of the Ordinary*: *Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988, chapter 2).

And would that manifest itself as a passage to "real" action? One must take into account the kinds of reversal we find between the active and the passive throughout the play, starting from the reversal of the usual figuration of the feminine as passive and the masculine as active (in the fantasy of the primal scene). This reversal must also characterize the character of the solution. In other words, it is not an overcoming of the passivity of impotence by decisive action, or the emergence from the space of play into 'real' life that is at issue. One must conceive of the work internal to passivity as the transformation of play-acting into what Cavell calls '*enacting*' one's existence.[14]

If acting becomes enacting, then the idea of play would be itself split between what we might call mere play (more or less corresponding to Schmitt's conception) and the enacting of one's existence for which theater serves as a model. If passivity must be transformed, it would be by turning mere impotence into work: the work of suffering, of passivity is not action but mourning. It is these two aspects that are foreclosed by Hamlet's acting out the primal fantasy: "It is the bequest of a beloved father that deprives the son of his identity, of enacting his own existence — it curses, as if spitefully, his being born of this father. Put otherwise, the father's dictation of the way he wishes to be remembered — by having his revenge taken for him — exactly deprives the son, with his powers of mourning, of the right to mourn *him*, to let him pass."[15]

What would it be to 'enact' existence rather than refuse birth? This question leads to a further important theme in Cavell's essay, namely the traumatic character of existence and the deferred character of the trauma. Recall that the primal fantasy is not an event that has been witnessed but rather it is constructed "deferred, read back (*nachträglich*)"[16] as an account of what one could not have witnessed — one's own coming to existence. This duality and the structure of deferment is characteristic of Freud's account of trauma in general. Freud famously begins by seeking a real event of sexual abuse underlying hysteria. He then suggests that it is the witnessing of parental intercourse that is something like a traumatic irruption of sexuality into the mind of the child unable to grasp it, something whose meaning is given retroactively.

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14. For an insightful discussion of the idea of enacting in the context of the broader context of commitment, wittnessing and performative utterance, see David Rudrum, "The Action to the Word, The Word to Action: Reading Hamlet with Cavell and Derrida," *Angelaki* 21, no. 2 (2016). Rudrum brings out how Derrida's reflections on Hamlet that elaborate on his critique of the performative in Austin converge with Cavell's reading of the play.
15. Cavell, *DK*, 187.
16. Ibid., 187.

But this too need not be taken as a real event. Rather, Freud conceives of the retroactive formation of a primal *fantasy* as what answers to the questionable emergence of a human subject into existence.

At issue then is the precise difference between merely being caught in that fantasy (as it were acting it out repeatedly), and the repetition that would count as *enacting* one's existence. Cavell clarifies the dual structure of enacting existence in philosophy by reference to Emerson's recasting of Descartes' *cogito*: "In philosophy I take it to have been expressed in Descartes, a point perfectly understood and deeply elaborated by Emerson, that to exist the human being has the burden of proving that he or she exists, and that this burden is discharged in thinking your existence, which comes in Descartes (though this is controversial) to finding how to say, 'I am, I exist'; not of course to say it just once, but at every instant of your existence; to preserve your existence, originate it. To exist is to take your existence upon you to enact it, as if the basis of human existence is theater, even melodrama. To refuse this burden is to condemn yourself to skepticism — to a denial of the existence, hence of the value, of the world."[17]

Hamlet's famous monologue is reinterpreted by Cavell in these terms. 'To be or not to be' is not a question of whether or not to stay alive or end his life (like Ophelia). It is the question of the affirmation of one's concrete existence in the face of the impotence and annihilating power played out in the original fantasy that blocks one's being (re)born into the world as the concrete existing individual one is: "On this deciphering of the dumb show as primal scene — enciphering young Hamlet's delayed sense of Gertrude's power to annihilate all Hamlet's — I see Hamlet's question whether to be or not to be, as asking first of all not why he stays alive, but first of all how he or anyone lets himself be born as the one he is."[18] The primal fantasy imagines what led to one's birth and also retroactively how it is that I am the one I am.

In reflecting further on the nature of 'enacting' one's existence, we can recognize another important feature of the play within a play. As Cavell argues, a play with-

17. Ibid., 187. Cavell suggests other political and religious contexts that share this same fundamental form (an original state and the necessity of reaffirming one's relation to that origin): "As if human birth, the birth of the human, proposes the question of birth. That human existence has two stages — call these birth and the acceptance of birth — is expressed in religion as baptism, in politics as consent." (Ibid., 187).
18. Ibid., 187.

in a play is also for Shakespeare an occasion to reflect on the power of theater as such. Cavell's interpretation provides a further reading of the duality of pantomime and words. Indeed, the fact that the play within a play has itself a dual structure is reflecting the dual character of enacting existence. It would be as if the pantomime, a scene which is without words, is that fantasy which must be recognized and enacted in meaning, with words. It is that whose meaning is to be retroactively determined by the scene played out in words. Indeed, it suggests that part of the question is that of the relation of action, or drama, to its articulated meaning, which might follow, or even be retroactively determined. We must think here of the relation between showing, which is something that has to do with the dramatic action, and saying, namely recognizing the meaning of the action: "I assume the discussion of theater proposed by [the repetitive dumb show] is of the relation or argument in theater between the eye and the ear, between representation by action and by words, showing and saying."[19]

The idea of a deferred recognition of the meaning of an action characterizes the form of ancient tragedy. Indeed, one cannot conceive of the actions of Oedipus as having their meaning through the conscious intention he has in committing them. It is only retrospectively that Oedipus recognizes his actions as having killed his father and conceived children with his mother. One could say that this is what tragic irony comes to, in which there is much more meaning to articulate in an action than the hero can encompass (until the moment of recognition).

We have discussed this moment in laying out briefly Benjamin's idea of the concentration of fate and its expression through the catastrophe that befalls the tragic hero. But there would still be an important difference between the moment of recognition and the incorporation of fate in ancient tragedy. Even the failure of the play within the play points to that: the King does not recognize his actions in the pantomime and his reaction to the play with words is not what Hamlet has in mind as constituting a decisive proof. For Hamlet's additional 'commentary' and interpretation during the performance amounts practically to a direct accusation. No wonder the King would react to *that*! So that we can say that there is no moment of closure of

19. Ibid., 181. For an analysis of Cavell's understanding of the therapeutic force of tragedy specifically in the context of *Hamlet*, see William Franke, "Acknowledging Unknowing: Stanley Cavell and the Philosophical Criticism of Literature," *Philosophy and Literature* 39, no. 1 (2015).

meaning, no moment of recognition in Hamlet. There is no paradoxical concentration of fate in the figure of a hero that arrests the tragic irony. What then is the form of meaning that enacts existence in the face of the primal fantasy? In order to answer this last question, it is necessary to bring out a further important aspect of modern tragedy, namely the irreducible contingency inherent to the existence depicted in it.

5. Mourning and the Contingency of Existence

Recall that the question that is played out in the primal fantasy is why I am this specific individual with these specific parents, born into this world. This radical contingency of existence is a further distinguishing trait between ancient and modern tragedy. Indeed, with ancient tragedy, the hero is an exemplary individual and everything in his existence receives its meaning out of the necessary outcome, out of the limit of death. But, as Hegel has pointed out in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, contingency rules everywhere in *Hamlet*: "the tragic denouement is also displayed as purely the effect of unfortunate circumstances and external accidents which might have turned out otherwise and produced a happy ending. In this case the sole spectacle offered to us is that the modern individual with the non-universal nature of his character, his circumstances, and the complications in which he is involved, is necessarily surrendered to the fragility of all that is mundane and must endure the fate of finitude. But this mere affliction is empty, and, in particular, we are confronted by a purely horrible external necessity when we see fine minds, noble in themselves, perishing in such a barrel against the misfortune of entirely external circumstances. Such a history may touch us acutely, and yet it seems only dreadful and we feel a pressing demand for a necessary correspondence between the external circumstances and what the inner nature of these fine characters really is. It is only from this point of view that we can feel ourselves reconciled in e.g. the fate of Hamlet or Juliet. Looked at from outside, Hamlet's death seems brought about accidentally owing to the fight with Laertes and the exchange of rapiers. But death lay from the beginning in the background of Hamlet's mind. The sands of time do not content him. In his melancholy and weakness, his worry, his disgust at all the affairs of life, we sense from the start that in all his

terrible surroundings he is a lost man, almost consumed already by inner disgust before death comes to him from outside."[20]

This is to say that the form of necessity internal to ancient tragedy, in which life is as it were gathered and one's identity determined through the catastrophic recognition, is unavailable to the modern form in which contingency rules. Appealing to a primal fantasy to unify that utter contingency is, as we saw, being cursed with haunting the world. But altogether giving up on that dimension of fantasy is just as destructive.

Cavell clarifies what the refusal of fantasy would come to. It is the death of the world, that is the curse of seeing into people, call it the skeletal character of Hamlet's sense of the world. This is expressed by his famous line, "I know not seems." It is also Cavell's interpretation of the grave diggers scene. Not a reflection on the transience of existence, but rather the predicament of one who has foregone the 'veil' of fantasy: "Hamlet is making claim to, or laying hold of, a power of perception that curses him, as Cassandra's cursed her, one that makes him unable to stop at seems, a fate to know nothing but what people are, nothing but the truth of them. His later staring at the skull would accordingly be the occasion not, as traditionally imagined of some special more moment of remembering and meditation, but an emblem of the everyday, skeletal manner in which human beings present themselves to him."[21] Seeing the deadness of the world is a condition in which the world cannot involve you. There emerges a world devoid of hope for the serious realization of any higher purpose. It is the world of Hamlet's melancholy.

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20. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1231-32.

21. Cavell, *DK*, 186. This is in effect Nietzsche's understanding of Hamlet's incapacity to act. He has seen "too deeply into the nature of things." "For the rapture of the Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence contains, while it lasts, a lethargic element in which all personal experiences of the past become immersed. This chasm of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality. But as soon as this everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea: an ascetic, will negating mood is the fruit of these states. In this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; *action requires the veils of illusion*: that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of the Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man." (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010, 59-60, my emphasis).

Melancholy, after Freud, is to be contrasted with the work of mourning. The refusal to be born into existence is the incapacity to mourn.[22] But mourning is also to be characterized as a form of meaning that is correlative with recognizing the concreteness of one's life. It would be understanding the work of concrete individuation as a work of mourning. "Hence the play interprets the taking of one's place in the world as a process of mourning, as if there is a taking up of the world that is humanly a question of giving it up."[23]

What is it that makes mourning the work of contingency? As Freud puts it, it would be the release of one's attachments, as it were one by one. Death as a limit is not incorporated into life as the recognition of a moment of closure to which all living ambiguity leads. The contrast between the concentration of fate on the figure of the hero in ancient tragedy, and the kind of multiplicity that is inherent to the 'completeness' of contingency means that the latter can only be conceived as the completeness of everything passing away, released from the myriad of fixations of the present on the past. Completeness is never positive, but rather only in the passing away of doubt. This multiplicity of detachments is, I take it, figured by the way the final scene rehearses the situation of a play within a play. This time it is supposedly the performance of dueling between Laertes and Hamlet. While in the first performance there was nothing that could be called a tragic closure, here closure means that no one is left, or everyone dies. It is the "summation" of the many deaths of characters already taking place in the play: Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are joined by Claudius, Gertrud, Laertes and Hamlet himself. Fate is not concentrated but dispersed over all characters and through Hamlet's reflection of this court, it disappears, as this whole world passes away, so that "the rest is silence."

22. Note the connection between revenge and melancholy. It is implicit in Freud's essay insofar as the melancholic is bent on attacking the internalized lost object, and it is this aggression (revenge) turned inward that blocks the melancholic from acting in the world.
23. Cavell, *DK*, 189.

II. Perfectionism and Modernism

4. Emersonian Perfectionism and Kantian Ethics

PAUL GUYER

1. Introduction

People have often been surprised when I have told them that I worked with Cavell during my undergraduate and graduate studies at Harvard, from 1965 to 1973 — not just taking Hum 5 with him (and Rogers Albritton), which a couple of thousand Harvard undergraduates would have done in those years, or one or two further courses, but writing both my senior thesis and my doctoral dissertation under his supervision. After all, my work has not looked anything like his — my conventional Kant scholarship, with all the trappings of normal scholarship, has looked nothing like Cavell's personal, often unconventional philosophizing, using as its texts Shakespearean dramas, classic Hollywood movies, and a small group of philosophers that began with Austin and Wittgenstein and grew to include Thoreau and Emerson, although the last chiefly after my time at Harvard. To such surprise I have generally replied with three claims. First, contrary to what some might suppose, Cavell did not demand discipleship. Second, he had a light hand as a supervisor. These two facts together meant that he was perfectly happy to supervise work that did not resemble his own. But third, and perhaps most important, in spite of all the superficial differences between his work and my own, I often thought, or at least saw in hindsight, that a problem I was interested in one of my canonical figures, Kant, of course, but also Locke, Hume, and other classics, was connected to an issue that engaged him in his canonical figures. For example, for a seminar on Locke offered by Charles B. Martin (in those days, more austere than now in some ways but more luxurious than others, the Harvard department had a constant stream of illustrious visiting professors, also including Alfred J. Ayer, Bernard Williams, Keith Donnellan,

Charles Parsons, before he returned to Harvard permanently, and Dieter Henrich, who were usually enlisted to offer a course in the history of philosophy to make up for the gaps in the department's own offerings), I wrote a paper on Locke's philosophy of language, and some years later published a new version of it,[1] in which I argued that Locke's often lampooned view that we refer to objects only through our own ideas of them was actually a good model of the fact that we can never take mutual understanding for granted — certainly a Cavellian theme in retrospect, although to my knowledge Cavell had never talked or written about Locke on language.

However, Kant, who would become the focus of my work, was an important figure for Cavell if not part of his quartet of true philosophical heroes (or quintet if you add Heidegger). Cavell's appeal to Kant's analysis of the judgment of taste as a model for the procedure of ordinary language philosophy, in his early paper "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" (stemming from a presentation to the American Society of Aesthetics in 1962)[2] is well known and continues to be discussed.[3] Here Cavell used Kant's analysis in the special case of aesthetic judgment of basing a judgment on one's own feeling of pleasure but yet claiming to speak with a "universal voice,"[4] that is, claiming that others can and even ought to feel the same pleasure in an object that one finds beautiful that does oneself, as long as one's own judgment is correct, for which however there is no other authority than one's own, as a general model for the way in which competent speakers of a natural language can and must say on no authority other than their own competence in the language what its terms must mean for all speakers of it. This gave authority, pardon the pun, not only to me but to others following me, beginning with Hannah Ginsborg, to appeal to Cavell for supervision of dissertations on Kant's aesthetics, as well as to others for their work on ordinary language philosophy. But the importance of Kant for Cavell

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1. Paul Guyer, "Locke on Language," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. V. C. Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
2. See Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), xi and 73-96.
3. See most recently Eli Friedlander, "Faces of the Ordinary," in *Cavell's* Must We Mean What We Say? *at 50*, ed. G. Chase, J. Floyd, and S. Laugier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), and Arata Hamawaki, "Philosophy and Aesthetic Appeal: Stanley Cavell on the Irreducibility of the First Person in Aesthetics and in Philosophy," in *Cavell's* Must We Mean What We Say? *at 50*; previously Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 93-96.
4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. P. Guyer, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §8, 5:226. Hereforth *CPJ*.

went beyond that. Kant's Copernican revolution, that we must regard the conditions under which our experience is possible as the conditions of the possibility of anything that can count as a world for us (in Kant's words, that the "*subjective conditions of thinking* should have *objective validity*,"[5] or, more technically, that "Every object stands under the necessary conditions of the synthetic unity of the manifold of intuition in a possible experience"),[6] was a central idea for Cavell, perhaps the beginning of modern thought, although Kant's idea of *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experience had eventually to be transformed into Wittgenstein's ideas of grammar and forms of life, and in doing so had to surrender Kant's guarantee of *a priori* knowledge. The post-Kantian individual has to speak for all, at least the relevant all of a particular linguistic community, on his or her own authority but yet without a guarantee, thereby accounting for the peculiar anxiety of the modern condition (or at least contributing to it). However, although Cavell does not say this, Kant himself might be seen as conceding to modern anxiety, if you like the anxiety of Descartes's skepticism in the first *Meditation* when that is deprived of the theological certainty of the third and fifth, when he admits that he actually cannot explain the necessity *of* the forms of intuition and understanding that frame our judgment of necessity *within* the domain of our experience: "But for the peculiarity of our understanding, that it is able to bring about the unity of apperception *a priori* only by means of the categories and only through precisely this kind and number of them, a further ground may be offered just as little as one can be offered for why we have precisely these and no other functions of judgment and for space and time are the sole forms of our possible intuition."[7] Thus Kant can in fact be taken as having framed the general problem of modern philosophy, namely how we can learn to live with the uncertainty involved in speaking for others on our own authority, that would then be explored in many ways and under many guises by Cavell's canonical figures.

In moral philosophy too Kant might be seen as having framed the central challenge for modernity — how in this case too, and particularly without appeal to any divine authority for the moral law, we can nevertheless also speak with a

5. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), A89/B 122. Hereforth *CPR*.
6. Ibid., A 158/B 197.
7. Ibid., B 145-6.

universal voice, in the form of acknowledging that we should act only upon universalizable maxims, that is, ones that we could act upon even if all others chose to do so as well — and, moreover, bring ourselves actually to so act in spite of our often competing desires and inclinations. However, Cavell was perhaps more ambivalent about Kant's moral philosophy than he was about Kant's theoretical philosophy. We learn from *Little Did I Know* that Cavell's first plan for a doctoral dissertation was to tackle the problem of maxims in Kant. He was interested in the question of how we know what maxim it is that anyone, but above all oneself, is proposing to act upon and that thus has to be tested for universalizability when in fact any action, therefore any proposed action, can fall under an indefinite number of descriptions and therefore an indefinite number of potential maxims? He writes,

> As the fall of 1955 opened, I began reading and writing with more orientation toward a dissertation, thinking vaguely to use some new work on the philosophy of mind at Oxford to study the concept of action in Spinoza and Kant. The opening issue for me was how one determined, in Kant's view, what *the* maxim of an action is . . . out of the infinite number of things I can be said to be doing at any moment.[8]

Pouring hot water into a vessel, fixing some coffee, preparing to welcome a visitor; or stirring some liquid in a cup, preparing to poison a visitor; saving a drowning child, any child, or saving *my* drowning child; robbing a bank, or robbing a bank only if it is a Tuesday afternoon and my name is Hildy Flitcraft; and so on. As far as we can tell from the autobiography, this was in fact the dissertation that Cavell was preparing to write when he got thrown for a loop by Austin's visit to Harvard that year.[9] This is not to say that Cavell ever forgot about Kant's moral philosophy; he could hardly have

8. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excepts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 318-19.

9. And, as far as Kant is concerned, it is the thesis that Onora O'Neill (then Onora Nell) would write, under John Rawls, a dozen years later, and publish as *Acting on Principle* in 1975. See O'Neill, *Acting on Principle: An Essay on Kantian Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1, n. 1. The problem of maxims would also become central to Barbara Herman's dissertation, *Morality as Rationality: A Study of Kant's Ethics*, completed in 1976, thus one year after the original publication of O'Neill's book (Barbara Herman, *Morality as Rationality: A Study of Kant's Ethics*, New York: Garland, 1990). I believe that Herman's supervisor was also Cavell, with Rawls only the second reader, as he was for my dissertation. But unlike the case with Kant's aesthetics, I am not aware that Cavell supervised any further dissertations on Kant's moral philosophy.

done so, since a friendly polemic with his colleague John Rawls was a central vehicle for the expression of his own thoughts about moral philosophy in both of his *magna opera*, *The Claim of Reason*[10] and *Cities of Words*.[11] But Kant does not frame Cavell's conception of the challenge for modern moral philosophy in quite the same way as he does Cavell's conception of the challenge for modern theoretical philosophy.

That said, I will not attempt to recount everything Cavell had to say about Kant's moral philosophy. I will mention two points that he made, an overt challenge to Kant and a characterization of his own conception of morality that can be taken as a challenge to Kant, and then argue that on a full interpretation Kant recognized rather than ignoring Cavell's main objection to his ethics.[12]

2. Cavell's Challenge to Kant's Moral Philosophy

Both points to which I want to draw attention are made in essays included in the posthumous volume *Here and There*, although they are anticipated elsewhere, for example in the chapter on Kant in *Cities of Words*. The first point concerns Cavell's interpretation of Kant's culminating formulation of the categorical imperative, the formula of the realm of ends or, as I prefer to call it, the empire of ends, and the criticism of Kant that Cavell makes on the basis of this interpretation. In the essay "Time after Time," Cavell writes that for Kant,

> moral sanity depends on a reasonable hope for future justice, and his necessary positing of the good city as a Realm of Ends — where each of us is

10. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 292-312.
11. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 164-89.
12. For Kant, ethics is not coextensive with morality, or "ethics" is not synonymous with "morality"; ethics is the part of morality that is not coercively enforceable, that is, that it is neither really possible nor morally permissible to enforce with any means other than the agent's own respect for the moral law, though aided, no doubt, by education, exhortation, encouragement, etc. The part of morality that is coercively enforceable is what Kant calls *Recht*, or right in general, which is the enforcement of the individual right to equal freedom with others and the acquired rights of property, contract, and legally recognized personal relationships, by the juridical and penal means of the civil condition, that is, the state. It is a common but regrettable tendency to use "ethics" and "moral philosophy" interchangeably when discussing Kant, a mistake that I do my best to avoid. So when I say "ethics" in this paper, I mean ethics in Kant's sense, not his moral philosophy as a whole.

> legislated for in legislating for all. Unlike Plato's *Republic*, Kant's good city is essentially unrepresentable by philosophy: if we could represent it we could claim to know it, but that would leave room neither for genuine faith in our effectiveness toward a future nor for genuine knowledge of the present.[13]

Cavell is connecting Kant's concept of the realm of ends (*Reich der Zwecke*) to his concept of the highest good, a condition of justice in the sense that the achievement of morality would be accompanied with the realization of happiness, as something that we can only but also must imagine as taking place in an indefinite, or perhaps infinitely postponed, future. But I am interested here only in his characterization of the realm of ends. As many other interpreters have, Cavell interprets this in purely legislative terms, as a condition in which since each member of the realm chooses for herself only universalizable maxims, each may be interpreted as legislating for all and all as legislating for each.[14] And this interpretation, we may suppose, is what leads to Cavell's claim that the realm of ends must be philosophically "unrepresentable" for Kant: because this realm is defined only by its legislation, and very general legislation at that, our representation of it cannot include any particular ends of particular agents, and therefore it is an abstraction, not concrete enough for us actually to imagine, which is to say, picture. It is like a concept without intuitions, which is to say, in Kant's memorable phrase, empty.[15]

But this interpretation and this criticism are based on only half of Kant's description of the realm of ends. Kant's definition of this realm, that is, his explication of its concept, in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, the only text in which he does define and use it, is that it is not just "the systematic union of several rational beings through common laws," but, more fully, "a whole of all ends

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13. Stanley Cavell, *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. N. Bauer, A. Crary, and S. Laugier, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 24. "Republic" should not have been italicized in the reference to Plato, since Cavell is not citing the name of Plato's book but if referring to its content, Plato's concept of the ideal republic.
14. I have provided other examples of purely or primarily legislative interpretations of Kant's concept in my "The Empire of Ends," in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* (Newark, DE: American Philosophical Association, 2022). As I explain there, I prefer the translation "empire of ends" rather than "realm of ends" because the term "empire" connotes the idea of multiple sovereigns under a highest sovereign, in the moral case multiple moral agents legislating their particular maxims but under the supreme sovereignty of the moral law itself. But I will follow Cavell's use of "realm" here.
15. Kant, *CPR*, A 51/B 75.

(of rational beings as ends in themselves, as well as the ends of its own that each of them may set for itself) in systematic connection."[16] I would argue that what Kant has in mind here is something that has to be realized in the natural history of human beings, perhaps in the indefinite future but not in an afterlife, because it is only in nature, i.e., in their ordinary circumstances, that we can conceive of human beings as having particular desires and setting particular ends for themselves, but also that it is just trivially true that we cannot concretely represent what the realm of ends for the whole of the human species would look like, because, even supposing that any of us is clear about what our current ends are (not to be taken for granted), we cannot know concretely what our own future particular ends may be, nor what the particular ends of all others currently existing are or what their future ends may be, let alone what the future ends of future humans may be. Or, more precisely, we can know only in a general way what some of the ends of current and future others, and even ourselves, will typically be, e.g., self-preservation, but we cannot know them either in complete generality or in all their particularity. We *can* know the general form of the *legislation* that is necessary for all of us, namely that we each have to set our own particular ends in ways consistent with treating ourselves and everyone else as ends in themselves, not merely as means to our own particular ends, thus that we have to act only on maxims that others could freely choose to adopt as well; but that is not to say that we can know the particular ends that will be set in an ongoing, both present and future realm of ends, thus we cannot say that the realm of ends is philosophically representable. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it is *only* philosophically representable, that is, we *can* represent about it what philosophy can represent, namely its general laws, or most general law, but that we cannot represent about it what only history, or politics, or even art can represent, namely its particularity.

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16. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: *A German-English Edition*, ed. and trans. M. Gregor and J. Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4:433. The paragraph of the *Groundwork* in which this definition is stated has to be read carefully, for Kant immediately precedes it with the remark that it is possible to conceive of the realm of ends only "if one abstracts from the personal differences among rational beings, and likewise from all content of their private ends." But I take this to mean that no one is to use only their private ends as reasons for endorsing the necessity of setting the realm of ends as their moral goal, i.e., to endorse it only if so doing serves their private ends, whatever they happen to be. Everyone has a moral duty to make the realm of ends their end, but within the realm of ends, particular ends are to be respected and promoted as far as is possible consistent with the first part of the definition, that everyone be treated as an end and not merely as a means.

This focus on the place of particular ends set by particular agents brings me to the second passage in *Here and There* on which I want to comment. This occurs in the essay "The World as Things." Cavell comes to this issue in an essay on collecting by taking up Christine Korsgaard's thought-experiment of "someone who collects pieces of barbed wire" as someone whose end others may find difficult or impossible to understand but whom we must nevertheless respect. Cavell comments on this example:

> A crucial point of moral order is involved for Korsgaard: our respect for other persons must not await our respect for their ends, but on the contrary, respecting their ends must be a function of respecting them as fellow persons. This must be right. But what does "respecting their ends" come to? Given that it cannot require sharing their ends, as the case of the barbed wire is designed to show, it evidently means something like finding the alien end comprehensible, seeing *how* it may be valued. A good society cannot depend upon our approval of each other's desires but it does depend upon our being able, and being willing, to make ourselves comprehensible to one another.[17]

The task or challenge of making ourselves comprehensible to each other is central to Cavell's "Emersonian perfectionism": perfectionist morality begins, as Cavell says at one point in *Cities of Words*, with the challenge of "making comprehensible [...] what human beings are capable of."[18]

My first response to this statement is that, at least from a Kantian point of view, this is too weak an account of morality: understanding what another wants, why another sets a particular end, may be a *necessary* condition for *doing* something about the other's end, for example helping her achieve if one is in a position to do so, although this is what sharing the other's end might be supposed to amount to. But maybe that would not be a fair criticism of Cavell: he does say right at the outset of *Cities of Words* that "moral perfectionism" is "a register of the moral life that precedes, or intervenes in, the specification of moral theories which define the

17. Cavell, *Here and There*, 56.
18. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 289. In the ellipsis, Cavell says that this is what Aristotle meant by "imitating." This might seem a stretch, but it is a plausible interpretation of what Aristotle meant by his claim that poetry is "more philosophic and of graver import" than history (*Poetics*, 9, 1451a5).

particular bases of moral judgments of particular acts or projects or characters as right or wrong, good or bad."[19] Cavell may mean something grander than this, but at the very least it would seem perfectly plausible to suppose that we must understand what someone's ends are before we can do anything to help them realize those ends, and certainly that we have to understand what other's intentions are before we can judge their individual actions or their character more generally as good or bad (and *mutatis mutandis* for advancing our own ends and judging our own actions and character — we have to make ourselves intelligible to ourselves in order to do this).

But perhaps rather than being too weak, any claim that morality begins with making our ends comprehensible to each other (and ourselves) is actually too strong. That is, it may be that one does not actually have to be able to make one's end — one's desire elevated into an intention — comprehensible to another for the other person to have an obligation to respect one's end, because the other has an obligation to respect one as a person, and thus to respect one's right to set one's own ends — as long as that is compatible with equal freedom for everyone else to set their own ends. To be sure, one has to comprehend, or to use Cavell's favored term, acknowledge the other as a person, as one with the ability and the right to set her own ends, subject to the moral condition — but that is not the same as actually comprehending the other's end, if that means understanding why that end is important to the other, why the other has set that end for herself. This is the point of Korsgaard's example of the collector of samples of barbed wire.

Kant points in this direction in the Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue of the *Metaphysics of Morals* when he says that "When it comes to my promoting happiness as an end that is also a duty" — the happiness of others, he argues, controvertibly, since my own happiness is an entirely natural desire and therefore does not present itself to me as a duty — "this must therefore be the happiness of *other* human beings, *whose* (permitted) *end I thus* make *my own end as well*. It is for them to decide what they count as belonging to their happiness," although it is also "open to me to refuse them many things that *they* think will make them happy but that I do not, as long as they have no right to demand them from me as what is theirs," that is, what is already in

19. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 2.

some broad sense their property or their right.[20] Kant's position here is complex. We have a general obligation not merely to acknowledge the right of others to their happiness, but to promote it; thus we clearly owe others more than mere acknowledgement and respect as ends rather than mere means, but some promotion of their own particular ends. This follows from the fact that as rational but finite beings, we must recognize that we ourselves might sometimes need the assistance of others in pursuing our own ends, but the only way *morally* to will a maxim of seeking the help of others is to be prepared to universalize it, that is, to assist others in the pursuit of their ends.[21] There are several important points here. First, we have an obligation to assist others in the realization only of their *permissible* ends, that is, their *morally* permissible ends — we obviously cannot have a moral obligation to realize any immoral end, *a fortiori* to assist anyone else in the realization of an immoral end, which, by our assistance, would in some sense become our own end as well. Second, since happiness is nothing other than the realization of (some coherent, long-term) set of an agent's ends,[22] obviously one cannot promote the happiness of others except by helping them realize *their* ends, their happiness after *their* conception of it, not one's own ends or even one's own conception of what theirs ought to be. But third, and equally obviously, no one can have an obligation to help *everyone* else in the realization of their ends, even their permissible ends, even their most genuine needs — there are simply too many needs in the world for anyone person to help with them all, and since one *cannot* do this, one *need* not (if ought implies can, then cannot implies need not). So anyone will have to use some criteria to limit their assistance of others to what is humanly possible, as well as consistent with their own legitimate right to happiness. Moral

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20. Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. M. J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Includes both *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* [*Groundwork*] and the *Metaphysics of Morals* [*MM*], the first part of which is the "Doctrine of Right" [DR] and the second part of which is the "Doctrine of Virtue" [DV]. The passage is from *MM*, DV, Introduction, section V.B, 6; underlining added. The *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant's last major work in moral philosophy, does not figure in Cavell's account of Kant (as indeed it did not in Rawls's construction of a Kant-inspired political philosophy on the basis of Kant's moral philosophy, although that is precisely what Kant himself had done in the first part of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, the Doctrine of Right). In fact, in Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I* Know, 329, Cavell refers to Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (or *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*) as "old Kant's last major published work" (and also says that the *Religion* was published in 1791, the year of the death of Mozart, when its first Part was actually published as an essay in the *Berlinische* in 1792 and the whole book of four parts in 1793). The *Religion* was very important to Cavell, and it is very important for any thorough interpretation of Kant, but it was not old Kant's last major published work.
21. Kant, *MM*, DV, Introduction, section V.B, 6:387; §27, 6:451.
22. E.g., *Groundwork*, 4:418.

permissibility is one delimitation that one not only can but must use — but that will hardly be enough to limit one's obligation to the practicable, since the world will still contain more permissible ends than any one person can possibly help others realize. Comprehension and approval of others' ends might be another permissible criterion for the limitation of one's efforts. *But it might not be a necessary condition for this*, since there are other grounds of obligation for promoting the realization of the ends and therefore the happiness of others. One is obligation that one might have to others in particular relation to oneself — obligations to parents, to a spouse or partner, to children (all of which Kant explicitly discusses in the Doctrine of Virtue). Another is the obligation of gratitude, an obligation that Kant also explicitly discusses — an obligation that one might have to someone who was once one's benefactor, but who now needs help that one could afford oneself (or whose survivors do, and so on). In these kinds of cases, one still has the obligation to understand the ends of the other well enough to make sure they are permissible, but that does not mean that one has to fully comprehend the end of the other, that is, understand why it is so important. One may just owe them support because of the relationship, whether or not one really comprehends, let alone endorses their ends.

In other words, for Kant the duty to promote the happiness of others — the duty to share their ends in the narrow sense of helping them realize those ends when and how one can — is an imperfect duty, for which comprehensibility may be a typical but is not a strictly necessary connection. But Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, central to the organization of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, does not play a role in Cavell's picture of Kantian morality. Let me now provide some evidence of that, and say a little bit more about Kant's distinction and its importance.

3. Kant's Distinction Between Perfect and Imperfect Duties

For early modern moral philosophers prior to Kant, including Hugo Grotius, Samuel Pufendorf, and Francis Hutcheson but many others as well, the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties (or the corresponding rights) is the distinction between duties (or rights) that may be coercively enforced and those that may not be. For Kant, that is the distinction between duties of right, or juridical duties, and ethical

duties, but the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties precedes and is a necessary condition of that distinction. For him, perfect duties are the prescription or proscription of particular action-types, while imperfect duties prescribe only general ends, in fact the two great ends that are also duties, the perfection of one's own (natural and moral) capacities and the happiness of others. The specificity of perfect duties is a necessary condition for their enforceability, while the generality of imperfect duties (among other factors perhaps) blocks their coercive enforcement, because someone who seems to be failing at fulfilling an imperfect duty can always argue that he does have the requisite end but he is just not acting to advance it in this particular way at this particular moment. But the specificity of perfect duty is not a sufficient condition for its enforceability, for in certain cases no one other than the agent concerned may have the necessary standing to enforce the duty — in Kant's terms, one person's violation of a perfect duty to herself is not (intrinsically) a violation of the freedom of anyone else, and is therefore not subject to coercive enforcement.[23] For example (Kant's example), everyone might have the standing to try to coercively prevent a homicide, but no one may have the standing to try to coercively prevent another from committing suicide. Thus in Kant's scheme the prohibition of suicide is an ethical as contrasted to a juridical duty, because it is not coercively enforceable, although it is not a duty of virtue proper, since it is not a duty to promote one's own perfection or, at least considered in isolation, a duty to promote the happiness of others.[24] (Of course, while considered in the abstract suicide would be a violation only of one's own freedom, in real life it may violate the freedom of others, e.g., dependents, which makes the question of the enforcement of a prohibition of it murkier — what Kant would call a "casuistical" question.)

Now back to Cavell. What concerns me in his view of Kant is summed up in the Kant chapter of *Cities of Words*. Here Cavell writes that the Kantian account of duty, "not dependent or contingent . . but . . . unconditional,"

> is one within which Emersonian perfectionism will not seem a moral outlook at all [...] because its [Emersonian perfectionism's] concerns for others are

23. See the "Universal Principle of Right" in Kant, *MM*, DR, Introduction, §C, 6:230.
24. For the distinction between ethical duties in general and duties of virtue in particular, see Kant, *MM*, DV, Introduction, section II, 6:383.

> characteristically for friends, hence based on attraction not obligation. But the conversations characteristic of moral perfections, as exemplified in [Cavell's] genres of film, concern issues that seem to me morally real, indeed ones which make up the fabric of serious relationships [...]. To exclude such matters from the realm of morality would seem to me to confine morality either to claustrophobic scruples or to parliamentary debates on legislation.[25]

(Here Cavell is thinking of Rawls, but also of Kant's realm of ends, although on his own, purely legislative interpretation of the latter. He continues:)

> I anticipate here my sense that the featured four examples Kant presents after introducing the first formulation of the categorical imperative seem to me fantasies of essentially isolated, friendless people. From this sense, the claim that in Kant duty is shown not to be empty seems prejudicial.[26]

What particularly concerns me is the way in which Cavell lumps together Kant's four examples of duties derivable from the categorical imperative — that is, the duty to refrain from suicide in order to avoid a condition of more pain than pleasure, the duty to refrain from false promises to get out of financial difficulties, the duty to perfect (some of) one's own potential talents, and the duty to assist (some) others in their pursuit of their own happiness.[27] Kant chose these four examples as examples of each of the four general classes of duty, that is, perfect duty to self, perfect duty to others, imperfect duty to self, and imperfect duty to others. More precisely, the first two examples, the duties to refrain from suicide and from false promises, are indeed each instances of a more general class, while the two examples of imperfect duty are in fact the general classes — in Kant's later terminology, the two great ends that are also duties — under which more particular duties may fall. But the point is that perfect and imperfect duties are very different for Kant. Perfect duties are blanket, exceptionless prohibitions, although of course they can be put in prescriptive rather than prohibitive form — "Do make only promises that you

25. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 133.
26. Ibid.
27. Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:422-3, repeated at 429-30.

sincerely intend to keep" gets the point across as well as "Do not make promises that you do not sincerely intend to keep." (Note that the duty is not simply "Keep all your promises," because there can be circumstances in which the most sincerely intended promise cannot or should not be kept, for example when you can keep your promise to meet your friend for coffee only by passing by a drowning child or shooting someone who is in your way.) And the blanket, exceptionless character of perfect duties does indeed mean that they are indifferent to the contingencies of personal relationships: you have as much of an obligation not to harm, e.g., take advantage of, perfect strangers as you do not to harm your loved ones or friends. For Kant, that is a big part of what it is for a duty to be a perfect duty. I don't think we would want it any other way.

But imperfect duties are quite different. I will focus on the imperfect duty to promote the happiness of others first.[28] Here, as I have already suggested, and indicated with my "(some)," it would be impossible for anyone to help everyone in all the ways everyone might need to be helped, so we do have to pick and choose whom we are going to help, and how and when — and here personal but contingent relationships are properly considered, indeed, in Kant's view, such relationships often create special obligations. Thus he is clear that we have obligations to our parents, to our children, to our benefactors (or perhaps their children, if they are now in need and we are now in a position to help in a way in which we were once helped). And indeed Kant discusses friendship — although in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (and his lectures), not in the *Groundwork* — and even argues not just that we have duties within friendship, for example, a duty to help a friend before helping a stranger, but that we actually have a duty to have friends, to enter into the kind of intimate, honest relationship that we can have only with a friend. Kant writes:

> [I]t is readily seen that friendship is only an idea (though a practically necessary one) and unattainable in practice, although striving for friendship

28. Kant divides the duty of self-perfection into two parts, the duty to strive to perfect one's natural capacities, physical and intellectual (*MM*, DV, §§19-20), and the duty to perfect one's moral capacities, foremost among which are self-knowledge and conscience (§§13-15, 21). Kant's discussion of the duty of self-knowledge certainly suggests a Cavellian idea of the moral significance of making oneself comprehensible to oneself, which in turn would be a necessary step toward making oneself comprehensible to others. But for reasons of space I will not pursue that point further here.

> (as a maximum of good disposition toward each other) is a duty set by reason, and no ordinary duty, but an honorable one. For in his relations with his neighbor how can a human being ascertain whether one of the elements requisite to this duty (e.g., benevolence toward each other) is *equal* in the disposition of each of the friends? Or, even more difficult, how can he tell what relation there is in the same person between the feeling from one duty and that from the other (the feeling from benevolence and that from respect) is *equal* in the disposition of each of the friends? Or, even more difficult, how can he tell what relation there is in the same person between the feeling from one duty and that from the other (the feeling from benevolence and that from respect)? And how can he be sure that if the *love* of one is stronger, he may not, just because of this, forfeit something of the other's *respect*, so that it will be difficult for both to bring love and respect subjectively into that equal balance required by friendship?[29]

I have quoted this passage at such length because it raises so many issues. First of all, it suggests that anyone can be friends with only a few others — the translator Mary Gregor has Kant speak of "neighbors," as if one can and should be friends with whomever happens to live next door, but what Kant writes is *Nächsten*, i.e., "intimates," making it clear that one can have this relationship only with a few. So the duty of friendship is imperfect in the sense that one cannot be friends with everyone — and, although Kant does not say this, who one's necessarily few friends are will be based on contingent factors, such as who sat next to one in class after alphabetically-seated class in high school, who was assigned as one's freshman roommate by some unknown college official, who were one's fellow assistant professors in one's first job, and so on. But Kant is also stressing that friendship can only ever be imperfectly realized and therefore the duty to enter into friendship can only be an imperfect duty because it is hard, it requires a balance between love and respect, approach and distance, openness and discretion. This balance is hard to strike at any moment, and hard to maintain because people and their circumstances are constantly changing. And obviously, the duty of friendship will require a duty of

29. Kant, *MM*, DV, §46, 6:469-70.

comprehensibility, that is, a duty to make oneself comprehensible to oneself, comprehensible to the friend, and the friend comprehensible to oneself. Cavell is certainly on to something with his idea of making oneself comprehensible as a "register of the moral life," but this is an aspect of or an element in a duty that Kant very clearly recognizes.

At the same time, Kant also recognizes a more general duty or virtue of "social intercourse," which is more general than friendship but to which more particular friendship may be a helpful means. He writes:

> It is a duty to oneself as well as to others not to *isolate* oneself (*separatistam agere*) but to use one's moral perfections in social intercourse (*officium comercii*, *sociabilitas*). While making oneself a fixed center of one's principles, one ought to regard this circle drawn around one as also forming part of an all-inclusive circle of those who, in their disposition, are citizens of the world — not exactly in order to promote as the end what is best for the world but only to cultivate indirectly what leads to this end: to cultivate a disposition of reciprocity — agreeableness, tolerance, mutual love and respect (affability and propriety, *humanitas aesthetica et decorum*) and to associate the graces with virtue. To bring this about is itself a duty of virtue.[30]

Another remarkable passage, this time beginning with Ciceronian terms and ending with what is surely an acknowledgement of Friedrich Schiller, with whom Kant had argued over the relation between grace and duty several years earlier.[31] Kant is not imagining an ethics for isolated, friendless persons, but showing with some subtlety how friendship fits in among our more general obligations to those who are neither intimate friends nor complete strangers, but fellow citizens of the world, or perhaps of multiple worlds, circles of increasing diameter from neighbors on a block or in a neighborhood association, fellow townspeople, fellows in a state or region, fellow nationals, and so on up to citizens of the world. Tolerance and mutual respect are duties that we owe to everybody, friend and stranger — they fall under the heading of

30. Kant, *MM*, DV, §48, 6:473.
31. Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6:23-4n.

perfect duties, although they may not be coercively enforceable.[32] Agreeableness we owe to anyone we actually encounter, at least unless things take some unfortunate turn. Mutual love — well, that can be universal only in a very attenuated sense, exhausted by the other requirements and the general, imperfect duty to render assistance when possible; love more narrowly conceived is what is reserved for friends and "intimates." But of course, what we can do for friends and intimates is always constrained by what we cannot do to anybody, friend or stranger, as well as by what we may have to do in exigent circumstances — saving the proverbial drowning child.

The general point is that Kant has not in fact written an ethics for isolated, friendless persons, but, at least when we get to his actual ethics, namely the Doctrine of Virtue of the late *Metaphysics of Morals*, an ethics that recognizes the various degrees of human intimacy and relationship. Cavell would have done well to recognize this, indeed he might have seen that the gulf between Kantian ethics and Emersonian perfectionism is not as great as he at least sometimes suggested.

32. Kant includes the specific duties of respect to others, the duties to avoid arrogance, defamation, and ridicule (see *MM*, DV, §§41-4, 6:464-8) among the duties of virtue, although since they are non-coercively enforceable but not duties to promote the happiness but only part of what it is more generally to treat others as ends in themselves and not merely as means, they ought to be classified as ethical duties but not specifically duties of virtue.

5. Cavell and the Art of Revolution

ALICE CRARY

Cavell traced his own philosophical beginnings to his encounter, while a graduate student at Harvard in 1955, with J. L. Austin and to his reading, a few years later, of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.[1] The heart of his inheritance from these two thinkers is an account of language, at odds with then dominant positivism-influenced accounts, on which the referential function of language is subordinate to speakers' feel for what can be meaningfully done with words. In the 1960s, Cavell drew on this legacy in giving an appealing and distinctive interpretation of *aesthetic modernism* that would become one of his philosophical signatures. He argued that the departures from established artistic forms that were modernism's hallmark should be seen as efforts "not to break but to keep faith with tradition."[2] This was not a perverse willingness to count rule-breaking as rule-following. Given the view that understanding draws on our sense for coherent expression and action, it appears that individual procedures' significance may differ in different contexts. So, we can allow not only that artists may encounter crises, in which previously helpful procedures come to obstruct what they most want to express, but also that a decisive break in procedure may enable new expressive freedom and so may be recognizable as the tradition's smoothest and most natural continuation.

Although Cavell was once a virtuoso jazz musician who was accepted at Julliard and intended to devote his life to music, at the time of this Bard presentation he had gone decades without doing much sustained writing on music. But an essay he

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1. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. N. Bauer, A. Crary, and S. Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 101-8; Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 97-114; Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 44-72; Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).
2. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 206; Stanley Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 73-96.

wrote in 1967, "Music Discomposed,"[3] anticipates in key respects his later claim that, for Beethoven, "the [French] political revolution required, as the condition for its musical expression, a revolutionary turn within the art of music."[4] In "Music Discomposed," as elsewhere, Cavell used the term "revolution" to describe conspicuous divergences in artistic traditions animated by a constant spirit. He glossed modernism in the arts as the awareness of "continuous revolution," and he maintained that "modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art."[5] This last suggestion about how older artistic traditions look forward to modernism lays the groundwork for an observation Cavell made in 1967 that partly prepares for his claims about Beethoven at Bard. In a brief passage of the early essay, Cavell situates Beethoven in modernism's pre-history, by representing some of the composer's later works as exercises in musical revolution.[6]

When Cavell returns to these ideas over thirty years later, his focus is newly on the question of whether Beethoven's flouting of tradition can be understood as a historically-specific political gesture — as a "revolution in response to a revolution."[7] Cavell proceeds by arguing that the modern concept "revolution," which was originally a category for particular kinds of political events, is pertinent for "thinking about revolution in the arts."[8] He turns to the account of political revolutions that Hannah Arendt gives in her 1963 book *On Revolution*, underlining Arendt's view that preoccupation with the American, French, and Russian revolutions has led political theorists to erroneously assign violence a necessary role within revolutionary action. Arendt takes this error to be consequential because it tempts theorists to "identify a revolution exclusively with liberation and to neglect the equally essential aim of establishing a realm, or constitution, of freedom."[9] Cavell highlights the stress, in Arendt's account of political revolutions, on how to segue to and perpetuate a new order of freedom because he wants to register the parallel with the accent, in his own account of revolutions in art, on the establishment of a new and continuous aesthetic

3. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," 180-212.
4. Cavell, *Here and There*, 275.
5. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," 189.
6. Ibid., 201-202.
7. Cavell, *Here and There*, 273.
8. Ibid., 270.
9. Ibid.

practice. His aim is in this way to bring out the plausibility of aligning political revolutions with artistic ones.

This leads Cavell to the work of prominent musicologists who hold that in Beethoven revolutions of the latter sort need to be understood as responses to a revolution of the former sort. For instance, Carl Dahlhaus declares that the heroic style of Beethoven's Third Symphony, "Eroica," "cries out to be backdated to 1789"; Reinhold Brinkmann insists that, at the end of its first movement, "Eroica" aims for "the orchestra as an allegory of the Revolution"; Maynard Solomon thinks the Ninth Symphony may be "taken as an emblem of the idealism of Beethoven's youth, when he was enflamed by what he called the 'fever of the Revolution'"; and, in a more ominous spirit, Theodor Adorno tells us that "if we listen to Beethoven and do not hear anything of the revolutionary bourgeoisie — not the echo of its slogans, the need to realize them, the cry for that totality to which reason and freedom are to have their warrant — we understand Beethoven no better than does the listener who cannot follow his pieces' purely musical content."[10] All of these critical claims presuppose, controversially, that "it is sensible to attribute meaning to music." This presupposition is one that Cavell himself makes as far back as his earliest work on aesthetics, specifically in representing the procedures characteristic of music and the other arts as expressive resources, and at Bard he considers the kind of defence it admits.

His comments reflect his belief that a sense for coherent modes of expression and action is anterior to the grasp of the referential dimension of speech. In light of this view, it makes sense to say, to cite a phrase of Walter Benjamin's Cavell admires, "that the spoken word is only afflicted with meaning."[11] It also makes sense to say that we are capable of a kind of understanding without referential meaning. According to Cavell, this is the domain of music. He depicts music as allowing "the achieving of understanding without meaning; that is, without the articulation of individual acts of reference on which intelligibility is classically thought to depend."[12] And he takes this possibility for music to be the key to its power in the realm of politics. Music has political muscle because it invites the "reclamation of experience,"[13] throwing each of us

10. Ibid., 274-275.
11. Ibid., 275.
12. Ibid., 276.
13. Ibid., 260.

back on, and obliging us to negotiate, the sense of what matters that is there in all we say and think. Music can thus be credited with celebrating the fact that we "can intend [our] lives at all"; that our "actions are coherent and effective at all";[14] and that resistance is possible to political systems that threaten to strip us of our individuality and reduce us to a condition of mere conformity. That it is what is at stake, for Cavell, in claiming that the emergence of music as a mature art is revolutionary.

This is not a merely abstract, transhistorical point. For Cavell, the glory and potency of the arts lies in their ability to "show, or remind us, or expand our horizons so that we see, or remember, or learn what truly matter to us,"[15] and his characteristic term for the human proclivity to live cut off from our own sense of these things is "scepticism." In his presentation at Bard, he notes that the works of Shakespeare's that he regards as addressing such scepticism with unique critical force and insight[16] were written in the first decade of the seventeenth century; that opera, which he likewise credits with clear-sightedly taking scepticism as a central critical problematic,[17] originates at this time; and that scepticism receives a central if uncritical expression a generation later in Descartes' *Meditations*, becoming thereafter a leitmotif of modern philosophy.[18] At Bard, Cavell also aligns himself with first generation Frankfurt School thinkers Adorno and Benjamin, opening himself to being interpreted as claiming that, like them, he takes the creeping hegemony of instrumental reason, characteristic of European modernity, and traceable to the growth of capitalism, to be a primary driver of conspicuous modern forms of sceptical self-alienation. And, in one aside he represents his own talk of scepticism as resonant with Marx's talk of commodification.[19] Cavell underlines these historical themes in his closing words, telling us that "the development of music, coinciding roughly with the rise of modern philosophy, as, say, in Descartes and Locke, is in itself more revolutionary than any subsequent change within it or within any political event of which it could be said to form part."[20]

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14. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," 198.
15. Cavell, *Here and There*, 277.
16. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, 2nd expanded ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
17. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
18. Cavell, *Here and There,* 276.
19. Ibid., 277.
20. Ibid., 278.

The right way to honour these critical insights is to take them, not as of scholarly interest only, but as bearing on how we live now. The modern social trends that Cavell identifies as propelling sceptical self-estrangement are largely understandable as caught up with or expressing capitalist logics. These trends are partly constitutive of many of the most grievous injustices of our time, and, with their expansionist imperatives, they are hurtling us toward planetary environmental cataclysm. Uncritical consumers of contemporary political discourse may allow themselves to be lulled into thinking that capitalism itself has the resources to stave off ecocide and that some combination of improved strategies for internalizing (or capitalizing) nature, techno-fixes, and dematerialization processes will ultimately come to the rescue. But, insofar as we retain the capacity for judgment, each of us can find grounds for suspecting that such insouciance is unwarranted. It is available to each of us not only to register ways in which differences between market values and intrinsic values matter to us, but also ways in which institutions that reduce the latter to the former destroy things of importance that we care about. Beyond all thought of pessimism or optimism about the terrible injustices that may be intensified and the menacing political configurations that may emerge in this age of undeniable global ecological crisis, if we are to get in view our circumstances and to have a chance of contributing to a more benign future — or even just a chance of living meaningfully in resistance to pernicious futures — each of us needs, if not through the experience of music then through some other form of experience, what Cavell describes as the revolutionary achievement of a self-relation that, in enabling us to think for ourselves, makes us capable of thinking revolution.

6. Hearing Between the Lines: Impressions of Meaning and Jazz's Democratic Esotericism

WILLIAM DAY

1.

Music is not speech; but like speech, it makes a claim on the listeners, or implicates them, inviting them, inviting or insisting upon their response. Stanley Cavell, in his late writings on music collected in the posthumous volume *Here and There*, arrived at a suggestive formulation to express this peculiar fact about music. His formulation is inspired by the crossing of thoughts of Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Benjamin, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, marks a distinction between music and speech. There he characterizes the spoke word as "*afflicted* by meaning," and he posits that this fact of speech provokes a "mournfulness" that in the seventeenth century sought an outlet in music.[1] Wittgenstein, as if to bring together what Benjamin pushes apart, suggests in the *Investigations* that "understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. [...] Why is just *this* the pattern of variation in intensity and tempo? One would like to say: 'Because I know what it all means.' But what does it mean? I'd not be able to say."[2] If, following Cavell, we join Benjamin's and Wittgenstein's claims, and agree that something can count as "understanding a theme in music" even as music happily

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 209 and 211 (my emphasis); quoted by Cavell in "Impressions of Revolution," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2022), 275. See also Cavell, "Benjamin and Wittgenstein," in *Here and There*, 122-24; "An Understanding with Music," in *Here and There*, 253; "Kivy on *Idomeneo*," in *Here and There*, 258-59.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §527. See Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," 278; Cavell, "An Understanding with Music," 253; "Philosophy and the Unheard," in *Here and There*, 261; and "A Scale of Eternity," in *Here and There*, 280.

fails at being "afflicted by meaning," then Cavell's formulation of our relation to music more or less follows: "Music allows the achieving of understanding without meaning, that is to say, without the articulation of individual acts of reference on which intelligibility is classically thought to depend."[3]

Saying that "music allows the achieving of understanding without meaning" doesn't deny the *relevance* of speaking about musical meaning, or of asking what a passage of music means. Rather, it reveals why the question "What does this music mean?" so often yields contrasting forms of exasperation, as if either the question must have an answer to justify our interest in these sounds, or it shows that one doesn't understand what draws anybody to make music in the first place (what some imagine is music's inherent ineffability). But since we *do* have things to say about how a musical work or performance strikes us, we need another formulation to capture what our descriptions of music do if they don't affix a meaning. Cavell, noting that our accounts of what is interesting in a stretch of music can conflict and yet seem to us equally apt, says that these different accounts "are to be thought of not as discoveries but as *impressions* and *assignments* of meaning." We should think of the claim of music on us, its invitation or insistence that we respond to it, as music's "willingness to accept assignments of meaning and its power to transcend all its assignments." While we might apply this formulation to any of the major arts, Cavell insists (I believe rightly) that this aspect of Western music, beginning roughly in the seventeenth century, "is itself more revolutionary than any subsequent change within it or within any political event of which it could be said to form a part."[4] One is left to ask: Why is music's ability to welcome our individual impressions and assignments of meaning revolutionary? And what makes this feature of music more important politically than any other feature or event of our political life?

In moving from these preliminary thoughts about musical meaning to the political dimension of what we say about improvised music in the tradition known as jazz, let me begin with an anecdote. Some years ago I was at the Jazz Standard in New York City, listening to a late set by Ravi Coltrane's quartet. In the middle of the set, Coltrane announced a tune by his drummer Johnathan Blake called "Clues." He repeated the ti-

3. Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," 276.
4. Ibid., 278.

tle, slowly as if for emphasis, and then they began playing "Clues," a tune I hadn't heard before. After the first several bars, I recognized that it was a kind of quirky paraphrase or variant on Thelonious Monk's "Evidence." Not an obvious variant — not a contrafact[5] of "Evidence" the way that "Evidence" is straightforwardly a contrafact of Jesse Greer's "Just You, Just Me" — but a tune that alluded to "Evidence" not only by its title but in its bar structure and pointillistic melody line. Between sets, Coltrane's bassist Dezron Douglas strolled by to say Hi to someone at the next table. I spoke up to tell him that I enjoyed their sideways adaptation of Monk's "Evidence," and he seemed taken aback; he responded something like, "Oh hey, you caught that! I've got to go tell Johnathan — hardly anybody notices that." This surprised me. I tried to downplay *his* surprise: Well, I said, Ravi did announce it *twice*.

My reason for offering this anecdote will become clear shortly. It's not a perfect anecdote for my purpose: it'd be better if it involved an improvised moment in a jazz performance. And my purpose is not to note something exceptional in how I listen; quite the opposite. But my exchange with Douglas has the virtue of marking the occasion that got me thinking about how listening to improvised jazz, particularly when performed live, exemplifies most fully the feature of musical listening just mentioned — namely, that our listening can pick us out, despite ourselves, and despite our sitting in seeming communion with others. What we hear in a singular, passing, spontaneous musical moment invites us to *notice* that we're hearing it. And noticing something often depends on our giving voice to it, whether we do this in words or similes, or by a gesture, or perhaps by singing or whistling or playing. I will be arguing that it is this feature of a jazz performance that has relevance in the old and new debate over the relation between jazz and democracy, a debate that, in my experience, has been confused and misguided.

2.

The sense that jazz is fundamentally democratic or an emblem of democracy, a claim first essayed almost a century ago in J. A. Rogers' magazine article "Jazz at Home,"

5. In jazz parlance, a contrafact is a musical work based on the chord progression of a prior musical work.

then elaborated and complicated in Ralph Ellison's novels and essays, is as pervasive in discussions of jazz as it is vague — as pervasive and vague as the sense that jazz is fundamentally American or an emblem of America.[6] So it is not surprising that a range of writers, from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, have tried to articulate what it means to say that jazz is democratic — sometimes to assert the connection, at other times to contest it. Let me offer an instance of each, and then raise a question or two about the terms of the debate as well as its coherence. (I put aside for now the broader claim that music-making *of any sort* is somehow emblematic of democracy, whether because of its procedures or because of music's familiar but open structural forms.[7] Much of what I have to say positively below about the connection between jazz and democracy may strike you as equally applicable to other forms of music-making and music-listening. My interest here, nonetheless, is in highlighting differences in how one can, or is invited to, listen to improvised jazz.)

The best-known living proponent of the thought that jazz is an emblem of democracy is likely Wynton Marsalis, but let me turn to his friend the late Stanley Crouch, who offers perhaps a more erudite formulation of it.[8] For Crouch as for Marsalis, the claim is that there are many aspects of a blues-rooted jazz performance that are expressive of (Crouch will say "metaphors" of) an ideal of democracy. He

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6. See J. A. Rogers, "Jazz at Home," *Survey Graphic*, Harlem Number 6, no. 6 (1925): 665-67 and 712: "Moreover jazz with its mocking disregard for formality is a leveler and makes for democracy [...]. Where at present [jazz] vulgarizes, with more wholesome growth in the future it may on the contrary truly democratize." For Ralph Ellison, see *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. R. G. O'Meally (New York: Modern Library, 2001); see also Steve Pinkerton, "Ralph Ellison's Righteous Riffs: Jazz, Democracy, and the Sacred," *African American Review* 44, no. 1/2 (2011): 185-206.

7. For one recent instance, see Alex Ross, "Requiem for a Festival," *The New Yorker*, August 28, 2023, 62: "And he [Louis Langrée, Mostly Mozart's music director] pointedly analyzed Mozart's symphonies in terms of 'musical democracy' and harmonious multiplicity. He singled out a passage in the Andante of Symphony No. 39, in which a quintet of winds takes turns playing a simple pattern of four eighth-note pulses followed by a winding sixteenth-note pattern. The magic of the passage depends on five musicians listening to one another and establishing a collective flow." It's clear enough from the context of Langrée's remarks (made during the last concerts of the Mostly Mozart Festival's final season, before it was to be subsumed into Lincoln Center's Summer for the City series whose programming is decidedly more pop-oriented) that the comment had political, i.e. rhetorical, intent. (Ross: "He threw shade at the powers that be.") One might harbor the suspicion that *every* assertion relating music-making to democracy has merely rhetorical intent. I will try to undermine this suspicion, arguing for a non-rhetorical sense in which attending to exemplary jazz improvisation has political import for a democracy.

8. Twenty-first-century writers in this camp include Kabir Sehgal and Gregory Clark. See Kabir Sehgal, *Jazzocracy: Jazz, Democracy, and the Creation of a New American Mythology* (Mishawaka, IN: Better World Books, 2008), and Gregory Clark, *Civic Jazz: American Music and Kenneth Burke on the Art of Getting Along* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015). See also Stephen A. Crist, "Jazz as Democracy? Dave Brubeck and Cold War Politics," *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (2009): 133-74.

emphasizes the role of improvisation, the practice of "constantly" reinterpreting a tune's "meanings," of challenging sentimentality, and not least "the demands on and the respect for the individual in the jazz band," which "put democracy into aesthetic action."[9] Crouch then extends the metaphoric identification with democracy, from the jazz performers' procedures to the jazz performers themselves. He emphasizes the racial and social mix of personalities joining to make jazz: "That fresh synthesis was the product of a down-home aristocracy of men and women whose origins cut across class and caste [...] but who all had in common the ability to make musical sense during the act of playing." This synthesis, he claims, "actually enhanced our understanding of the music's democratic richness," since "the whole point of democracy itself is that a society is best off [...] when it eliminates all irrational restrictions on talent, dedication, and skill."[10]

This and related views have been broadly criticized recently by Benjamin Givan. He speaks of "a pair of myths" that underlie their origin. One "myth" is the polemical claim that, because jazz's roots are in America, it exemplifies what the U.S. Constitution itself exemplifies, an ideal of democracy in which the freedom to reinterpret and amend the basis of a society is always live. (In Crouch's phrase, this flexibility shows that the U.S. Constitution "values improvisation.") This claim is easily dismissed, Givan says, because the reality of America's form of government is that it is inegalitarian and antidemocratic, much as its founders intended.[11] But the second "myth," as Givan identifies it, is more intimately tied to jazz procedures and so requires from him a more extended rebuttal. It's the idea that jazz is democratic in allowing practitioners to express their own spontaneous musical thoughts in a collective that consequently grants each member a kind of equal autonomy. Givan undermines this view with a lengthy but unremarkable description of "how jazz improvisers ordinarily work together — as musical performers and as human beings, often subject to a bandleader's unilateral dictates." He then argues as follows: If "the music's *actual* performance strategies" are said to model, "in terms of interpersonal dynamics,

9. Stanley Crouch, "Blues to Be Constitutional," in *Democracy & the Arts*, ed. Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 103-16; the quoted excerpts are from 109-11.
10. Ibid., 115-16.
11. Benjamin Givan, "How Democratic Is Jazz?", in *Finding Democracy in Music*, ed. Robert Adlington and Esteban Buch (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 58-79; the quoted excerpt is from 61.

what governments and human communities *ought* to do," then jazz on the bandstand and in the recording studio clearly fails at modeling the democratic ideal. And this is because, as Givan's examples and discussion remind us, "most professional jazz groups don't truly aspire to egalitarianism or inclusivity at all."[12]

3.

I find myself troubled by each of these proposals, specifically by what the effort — either to establish the link between jazz and democracy or to break it — is meant to show. If, say, we grant that the jazz tradition presents us with a metaphor of democracy, as Stanley Crouch puts it, what follows? Is a dedication to democracy instilled, or saved, through its metaphors? Is a dedication to jazz? When Crouch further argues that jazz is not simply about "protesting the social conditions of Afro-Americans" but is a "fresh synthesis," and that consequently it enhances "our understanding of the music's democratic richness," I have no qualms with his defense of jazz's ability to convey "every passion."[13] But how does the music succeed in *expressing* its democratic richness, and how am I to register my understanding of that expression? The claim "Jazz is democratically rich" would seem to raise our prior question of how music can be said to take on assignments of meaning — unless, that is, Crouch imagines that our understanding of the democratic richness of a music is unrelated to our understanding *of that music.*

In Benjamin Givan's repudiation of the link between jazz and democracy, he mostly avoids the question of how music takes on meaning and instead focuses on the real-life interactions among musicians within jazz performance groups and collectives. Here my perplexity is not with Givan's observations about the interpersonal messiness of jazz practice, which I find more or less uncontroversial. But I am struck by what Givan takes democracy to entail or require, and consequently by the aspects of jazz that he sees as pertinent to considering its relevance for democracy. Let me elaborate by noting a crucial difference between Givan's and my understanding of

12. Ibid., 62 and 64.
13. Crouch, "Blues to Be Constitutional," 115-16.

what is essential to democracy, and then a second, consequential difference between his and my interest in a jazz performance.

Givan cites myriad sources — sources he neither interprets nor interrogates — to illustrate the meaning of "democracy," but he appears to settle on the twin characteristics of "liberty and equality" (or sometimes "freedom and equality").[14] And he finds both of these lacking in actual jazz practice as they are in actual American governance. But that's to say that Givan's understanding of democracy is all about how a society is *organized* (and so, democracy from the top down) — in other words, how well a society's distribution of power and opportunities for participation reflect the etymology of "democracy" as "rule by the people."[15] There's nothing explicitly wrong with that view of what matters politically, beyond the fact that (again) it would seem to bear no obvious relation to how anyone understands the sounds being made in any instance of jazz music-making. But in contrast to that view, there is a long tradition in political thought — arguably traceable to Plato, undeniably manifest in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and deepened in America by Ralph Waldo Emerson — that begins its consideration of democracy by asking what must be necessary if "the people" are to acquire the ability to "rule" themselves (and so, its concern is with democracy from the bottom up). The assumption of this line of thinking is that self-rule is not a natural talent (though it may be a latent ability) for human beings living together. For us to rule ourselves, each ruling all, we must each develop an interest first of all in acquiring a self, each its own self. And that is everywhere thwarted, in Emerson's formulation, by the twin enticements of conformity and consistency; or as Rousseau famously puts it (likely alluding to Plato's allegory of the cave): "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Rousseau's solution to this condition is ambiguous as to whether it is to be carried out at the level of the political or the personal. At any rate, it requires that some among us be "forced to be free."[16] Emerson's solution, more practical if less certain of success, is a personal demand on his readers, to pursue and to find what there is for them to think and to say, to find a self worthy of the trust he

14. Givan, "How Democratic Is Jazz?", cf. 62, 69, and 71.
15. Ibid., 62.
16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, in *Rousseau:* The Social Contract *and Other Later Political Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 43 and 55. On Rousseau's solution to human enchainment, see Steven Affeldt, "The Force of Freedom: Rousseau on Forcing to Be Free," *Political Theory* 27, no. 3 (1999): 299-333.

describes in "Self-Reliance" this way: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, — that is genius."[17] For both Rousseau and Emerson, in other words, citizenship in a democracy, however constituted, cannot and does not grant the automatic satisfaction of a given set of demands (including "liberty and equality"). Instead, "citizen of a democracy" names the responsibility and requirement that one pursue and find one's voice in order to realize the only freedom that is possible for human beings living together politically, each speaking exactly and only their own thought.

Here is where my second difference from Givan becomes crucial, a disagreement about which standpoint towards a jazz performance is pertinent to considering its relation to democracy. Givan is all but exclusively concerned with the political or interpersonal interactions in and among members of jazz performance groups. It's good that Givan is looking up at the stage to try to discern what others see as an example of democracy in action. But I'm struck by the fact that, in looking to the stage for democracy enacted, Givan is not at all concerned with the music being played up there. His gaze is directed at whether, for instance, the ensemble has a defined leader, and if so, what "extramusical power hierarchies" exist; or if the band is nominally leaderless, whether there are "ínternécine strains"; and so on.[18]

I want to propose that, in following the intuition of a link between jazz music and democracy, we instead consider the position of the jazz listener. This shift in focus will not exclude the position of the jazz performer on the stage — who is, of course, also listening. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that the exemplary jazz improviser who is receptive and responsive to what they hear is an emblem of what Emerson means by self-trust, which I just identified as a requirement for democratic citizenship.[19] But the jazz audience, no less than the jazz performer, is in a position to hear things. What does the jazz listener hear? And how does what she hears bear on her role as citizen in a democracy (even if that democracy is nascent, ideal, or otherwise merely potential)?

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17. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (from *Essays: First Series*), in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 259.
18. Givan, "How Democratic Is Jazz?", 64-67.
19. William Day, "Knowing As Instancing: Jazz Improvisation and Moral Perfectionism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 (2000): 99-111; "The Ends of Improvisation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010): 291-96.

4.

What she hears will depend, of course, on what she is listening to, and on how well she is listening. So let's imagine that she is in the presence of an exemplary jazz performance — there are probably dozens in progress as you read this — and that consequently her opportunities for hearing things are plentiful. Here are some candidates for what she could be hearing. The jazz soloist's improvisation may contain allusions to other tunes, or a phrase reminiscent of something Bud Powell plays on his famous 1951 recording of "Un Poco Loco." Or she may notice how the shape of the tune differs from the version that she heard played at an earlier set or the night before, or how the underlying changes sound familiar while the tune does not, or how the melody is familiar while the underlying changes are not, or how the tune became clear only after several minutes of what seemed like unstructured group interplay. More generally, there may be striking moments of responsiveness among the players, or a breakdown in communication that, once they got on track again, seemed to amuse them. Or she may notice how the rhythm clicks the way it does on recordings by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, or how the drummer mixes the propulsion of Tony Williams with the messiness of Han Bennink, and so on. Now imagine that she does hear one or more of these features of the performance as she listens and follows where it goes. Is there any *political* significance to these impressions of what she is hearing?

The first thing to note is that what she hears is, to varying degree, necessarily impressionistic and necessarily allusive. There are two causes of this allusiveness. One cause, peculiar if not unique to jazz performance, is that some significant portion of what she hears is of the moment and won't be repeated. The spontaneous allusion, the phrase reminiscent of Bud Powell, this or that bit of responsiveness, the breakdown and resulting amusement among the players — all of these will be missed if one wasn't paying attention when they flew by. The next performance or next set will hold *different* surprises. A second cause of this allusiveness is that what one hears in jazz performances accumulates over time — which is to say that jazz performance is a cultural practice, and that what one hears is directly related to one's embeddedness in the culture. If one doesn't know Thelonious Monk's "Evidence," or that Bud Powell recording,

or this or that melody or set of chord changes, or has never heard Art Blakey or Tony Williams or Han Bennink play the drums, certain things will pass one by.

This "culturally embedded" aspect of jazz listening, I contend, is distinct from what we might call jazz-theoretical knowledge — for instance, the awareness of substitution chords, Coltrane changes, Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept, various extended techniques for achieving unexpected sounds, and the like. The latter sorts of knowledge can also inform one's hearing, but they are akin to the knowledge of, say, a virologist or endodontist; we might characterize these as training-knowledge as distinct from exposure-knowledge. I grant that the distinction isn't sharp and absolute. Still, a feature of the distinction is that, for the little-trained but culturally-embedded listener, there may be no explicit or established ways or set of tools for *demonstrating* what she hears (as one can demonstrate, be trained in or even write a manual about, substitution chords, Coltrane changes, and the like).

For precisely these reasons, I want to propose that jazz performance bears more than a passing resemblance to the historical practice of philosophical esotericism. What I mean by drawing this connection is the following: like philosophical esotericism, jazz performance is a practice of public expression[20] that communicates differently to different audiences; and a not inconsequential part of its communication or expression occurs "between the lines," through hints and allusions, by what is left out as well as by what is included, requiring of the listener a genuine desire and devoted attention to take it in. Arthur Melzer's rich history of esoteric writing, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, details four forms of philosophical esotericism, each corresponding to one of four different motives for writers of the past to adopt the practice of secret writing.[21] The form most emblematic of jazz performance is one Melzer labels "pedagogical esotericism," where the political import of this practice is perhaps most subtle.[22] If a philosophical writer understands the aim of education to be the

20. While jazz performance, as a form of public expression, is typically without words (unlike esoteric writing), still, as is being argued here, there is something that counts as *understanding* the expression.
21. Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), chs. 5-8.
22. As one would expect, Melzer owes much of his understanding and presentation of the history of esoteric writing to Leo Strauss; see, e.g., Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 1988). But among those who either exploit or explain *pedagogical* esotericism, names more and less familiar (besides the most obvious, Plato) include Kierkegaard, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Jacob Klein. For an extended instance by the last named, see Klein's virtuosic *A Commentary on Plato's* Meno (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965, 1989).

development of the free democratic citizen as detailed earlier — one who desires to find her own voice despite the ongoing threats to that project[23] — the writer will typically adopt esoteric practices. The reason that the writer will choose to educate between the lines is because they cannot *give* the reader a self, one who "thinks from out of [her] own care, future, and fate." Instead, the reader must be instructed through allusions, indirection, and so on; she "must start from [her] own personal perplexity, draw upon [her] own lived experience, and make use of the inner activity of [her] own powers…"[24]

As it happens, a form of pedagogical esotericism is also the method of the best jazz instructors. When saxophonist Steve Lacy was asked what he learned "from actually playing with Monk and talking with him," what he relates (as I describe elsewhere) are not explicit instructions — e.g., "Instead of outlining the notes of the chord, substitute the notes of the chord built on the tritone" — but implicit suggestions of an attitude to adopt while improvising: "Let things go by"; "Make the drummer sound good"; "Don't pick up on my things […]. I'm accompanying *you*." And as I say in that earlier piece: "In jazz, the accompaniment — in this case, Monk's playing — is like a text that asks to be read by the soloist, as it were, *between* the lines."[25]

5.

Here, then, is a first aspect of the jazz listener's pertinence to democracy: In learning how to notice what there is to notice in an exemplary jazz performance, fed by her

23. As mentioned, those threats include passivity and subservience, conformity and consistency. "The free democratic citizen" is my name for what I take Strauss to mean when he says (speaking of a liberal education) that what can be achieved in a democratic republic is not a "universal aristocracy" but "an aristocracy within democratic mass society." See Strauss, "What Is Liberal Education?", in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1968, 1989), 4-5. I believe I understand the reason for Strauss's pessimism about a universal aristocracy. I also believe — writing as the world's longest-standing democracy enters the 2024 election season — that there is ample reason to share Strauss's pessimism. But with regard to adopting *pedagogical* esotericism (as opposed to the other three forms with their corresponding motives), such pessimism is neither required nor need be assumed. This difference in attitude marks the crucial difference between Strauss and Emerson concerning what Strauss calls "the literary question." See Day, "Philosophy and 'the Literary Question': Wittgenstein, Emerson, and Strauss on the Community of Knowing" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1999), https://philpapers.org/rec/DAYPAT-2.
24. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, 215.
25. See Day, "Knowing As Instancing," 108-11.

own fascination and powers — or say, in learning how to hear between the lines — she learns what interests her, beginning from *wherever* she begins (perhaps drawn by the polyrhythmic beat, or the look of the musicians on the bandstand, or the harmonic textures, or sounds of ecstasy bordering on disorder) so that she comes by stages to appreciate the same sounds as before but now for different, and likely more fertile, reasons. To paraphrase Cavell, she learns how to take an interest in her own experience, a crucial step on the road to her representative individuality.[26] One may be inclined to identify this as the aim or outcome of aesthetic experience generally. That it is also the aim of democratic experience, of being granted a voice as a citizen among equals, is the central claim of the tradition of political thought outlined above. Or as Emerson puts it:

> The world is awaking to the idea of union, and these experiments show what it is thinking of. It is and will be magic [...]. But this union must be inward, and not one of covenants, and is to be reached by a reverse of the methods they use. The union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated [...]. Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others, is on all sides cramped and diminished of his proportion; and the stricter the union, the smaller and the more pitiful he is. But leave him alone, to recognize in every hour and place the secret soul, he will go up and down doing the works of a true member, and, to the astonishment of all, the work will be done with concert, though no man spoke. Government will be adamantine without any governor. The union must be ideal in actual individualism.[27]

However, and despite this allegory of jazz listening as a hearing between the lines, the second thing to note is that, if she gives voice to one or another of her listening impressions — whether to a friend or to the stranger at the next table — there is nothing that stands in the way of their understanding her, having heard what she heard. They may, in fact, notice the allusion, the similarity, etc., *only because* she mentions it and

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26. See Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 12.
27. Emerson, "New England Reformers" (from *Essays: Second Series*), in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 599.

so redirects their attention to recall or rehear it. That is to say, her observations carry the peculiar epistemological status of a Kantian aesthetic judgment: they are not like the answer to an arithmetic sum (which is not a matter of taste), nor like a preference for Sichuan cuisine (which is *merely* a matter of taste). They are instead observations that rest on subjective experience but are nonetheless "universal," potentially or ideally shareable by everyone. And thus, if our listener voices her impression and if her friend or neighbor at the next table recalls or recognizes or otherwise registers that aspect of the performance that she gives voice to, a small but not insignificant connection is made between them, a community of surprising intimacy is formed. And forming community, needless to say, has political significance — particularly when (as with jazz listeners sharing the discovery and surprise of what they just heard) it reveals the paltriness of most other political communities.

On the other hand, her friend or neighbor may *not* have heard (the significance of) what she heard. Or worse, they may deny that anything of the sort was there and suggest that she is (in a derogatory sense) "hearing things." She knows that this rebuke is a live possibility, given the nature of critical expression, which requires words that are somehow tied to a felt experience that is not guaranteed by the shared sounds of a performance. That live possibility — the possibility that the words we find to describe what we hear will be met with skepticism or ridicule — may constrain us from trying to find words in the first place, perhaps because we don't trust our own experience, or because we ourselves begin to doubt that *it was* as we heard it. If, as Cavell has suggested, "describing one's experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it,"[28] we can now add that the *political risk* in talking about one's experience of art can be like the political risk in making it.

Learning to accept this risk in describing your growing experience of a music of unending richness and complexity is a democratic virtue, one worthy of the best sort of citizen. And taking on this risk is most acute when your experience is of a live jazz performance, where the fleeting allusions and quotations and interactions, because they *are* fleeting, resist every measure of *testing* your experience. (That's why

28. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 193.

my opening anecdote — my identifying Johnathan Blake's "Clues" as an allusion to Monk's "Evidence" — isn't an ideal instance of risk-taking, because I *could* test it, and did, by asking one of the performers.) That brings me to the second aspect of the pertinence to democracy of the jazz listener: her nascent or fully realized virtue, essential to the life of any democracy that is more than a democracy in name only, lies in accepting the risk of voicing what she hears when she finds, to a growing degree, that she can hear jazz between the lines. And what if the conditions of "liberty and equality" — conditions that make possible the development of an art form that continually and to an ever-expanding degree engages one's capacity to discern and give voice to what one hears — are themselves made possible by such experiences of hearing?[29]

29. Formative versions of this essay were read at the 13th International Jazz Research Conference at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Graz, Austria in June 2022, and at the 39th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics — Rocky Mountain Division in Santa Fe, New Mexico in July 2023. I want to express my thanks to the organizers of and participants at these two events.

III. Media and Inheritance

7. Cavell's Critical Afterlives

RACHEL MALKIN

James Helgeson advances that "Cavell can hardly be called a mainstream influence on current literary-critical practice."[1] Yet Cavell is at once a significant and a marginal figure, currently in the ascendant, perennially out of step. Cavell notes the fact that his work is untimely and freshly resonant by turns, observing that he is

> somewhat protected from the sense that all that is happening intellectually, or intellectually happening, is the latest eventuality. Being odd, and staying odd, of course has its pains, but surprisingly, even increasingly, its pleasures, even that of remaining, however precariously, contemporary. When the breakers of canons discover that they have themselves become repetitive in their newer authorities, the older, modified out of their old authority, can have another hearing.[2]

The intellectual "revolutions" referenced in this quotation span a number of movements in literary studies and philosophy since the late 1960s, and I will look further at Cavell's relation to these developments, as well as the question of Cavell's own canon, in the course of this essay. Helgeson's observation could be true if we were thinking strictly about identifying a portable method. But Cavell's ideas have in fact had an extensive effect beyond his own formative discipline of philosophy. This is partly a result of their reception by younger thinkers, artists, and writers who were taught by him. Cavellian impressions can be traced in the work of the film-maker Terence Malick, poets Charles Bernstein and Michael Palmer, the critic Mark Greif, the novelist David Foster Wallace, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, and so on. But

1. James Helgeson, "Reading Notes: David Rudrum on Stanley Cavell," *Paragraph* 39, no. 3 (2016): 360.
2. Cavell, "Responses," in *Contending with Stanley Cavell,* ed. R. B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 176.

his thought also has a more subterranean presence in contemporary literary and Americanist criticism that is more pervasive than we might expect.

While the line of descent that can be traced through Cavell's roles as a teacher and mentor is important, Cavell's imprint is also found beyond his own students, in the work of critics who have developed his ideas, insights, and preoccupations, including those who have extended them into addressing what are arguably his own project's blind spots, compromised attachments, and omissions. Echoes of his voice are thus not confined to the disciplinary corner that has tentatively called itself "ordinary language philosophy and literary studies." In broad terms, Cavell's work allows critics and philosophers to read literary texts as philosophically intentional, and to take account of philosophy's aesthetic expressions. More specifically, Lauren Berlant cites him as an influence on their prose style, Toril Moi on her way of thinking about how literary studies can take cues from Wittgenstein, Sianne Ngai on her idea of aesthetic judgement, and Branka Arsić on inheriting Emerson. Indeed, the formulation of the "other Emerson" — challenging hitherto prevailing interpretations of his writing — owes a debt to Cavell recognised by his coda to the volume of that name, and he is recognised as "a decisive influence in the recovery of transcendentalism as the founding moment of a distinctively American philosophy."[3] Taking this picture as a whole, we can see that Cavell plays a role in informing an American critical scene in ways that might not be obvious at first glance.

Here I would stress a distinction between the literary critical scene as such, and an Americanist critical context, since both Cavell's impacts, and resistance to his work, have distinctive expressions in that milieu. As obituaries began to appear in the Summer of 2018, a group of philosophers, former students of Cavell, wrote in *The New York Times* highlighting the fact that Cavell's commitment to philosophy as a way to 'make sense of the human experience' is ineluctably tied to American commitments. They also observe that this is not often placed in the foreground of his wider reception:

> what hasn't made its way into the tributes is the centrality of the question, woven through virtually everything Cavell wrote in his nearly 50-year career, of

3. Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

> what it means to be a citizen in the contradiction that is the United States of America — a country founded on a sacred commitment to liberty and justice as well as on the genocidal destruction of indigenous communities and the embrace of slavery, practices whose legacies have disgraced us.[4]

The authors of the piece, Bauer, Crary, and Laugier, are right to stress that this concern with American community is not a strand of Cavell's work that can be bracketed away. Cavell's philosophy makes claims about the relation between personal experience and culture as such. But 'culture' also refers to a located phenomenon. Throughout his writings, Cavell stresses the need to identify, rehabilitate, and build on the strands of US traditions that offer a remedy for what he calls the "debased perfectionisms" the culture is prone to celebrate.[5] As Cavell sees it, this imperative involves, among other things, finding ways to acknowledge the value of American cultural production, discerning what it means to call oneself an 'American intellectual' in the apparent absence, at the time of his own intellectual formation, of a heritage equivalent to the European tradition, and finding philosophical significance in (relatively) low places.[6]

My aim is not to propose a reductively contextual frame for understanding Cavell's work, corralling it within a US ambit of influence. Cavell's ideas of course have purchase outside of his status as a North American thinker. But he is importantly recognisable in this designation, which usefully reveals his commitments and responses to events of his times, as well as highlighting problematic aspects of his project. As Susan Neiman, once one of his students, has suggested, identifying and working through the latter elements of the work is an important part of reception.[7] This is a process that does not preclude inheritance, at the same time highlighting dissent, divergence, and ambivalence. Understanding the depth of Cavell's invest-

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4. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary and Sandra Laugier, "Stanley Cavell and the American Contradiction," *The New York Times* 2 July, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/opinion/stanley-cavell-and-the-american-contradiction.html.
5. Cavell, "Introduction," *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 16.
6. There are flashpoints in Cavell's oeuvre where these objectives, as well as their potential pitfalls, are acutely focalised. The role of Hollywood film in his work is such a site, invoking questions of American race politics, gender politics, sentimentality, and the aesthetic and philosophical potentials of mass culture, or the lack of them.
7. Susan Neiman, "What Cavell Made Possible for Philosophy," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. D. LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 102.

ment in the "Americanness" of his work and its reverberations is useful in several ways. It helps us to pick apart the threads that differentiate Cavell from internecine debates in literary studies, although he intersects with that sphere. It gives us ways to look more closely at what might be sedimented in concepts picked up from the orbit of his work. Not least, as well as raising questions about risks his oeuvre runs, it allows us to think about what can be carried forward. Cavell's orientations are conditioned by their historical times and contexts in ways we might wish to understand, given the extent of the influence that I have briefly signalled above. At the same time, his work also anticipates and informs some influential turns of our present moment, beyond such situatedness. Some of the most vibrant aspects of this afterlife are perhaps not the most apparently imitative, taking flight from Cavell in a process of absorption, but also of selection, extension, and even correction.

What Cavell describes as his being and staying 'odd' arises from various aspects of his project. One of these is his eclectic pantheon of influences, and the ways in which he puts them together. Another is the particularity of his style, which contributes to the impression of Cavell's occupying a space adjacent to the different fields he has contributed to. Cavell's conspicuously subjective voice was received as both his strength and Achilles heel throughout his career. The distinctiveness of his voice is not incidental to his philosophical aims, but integral, although as Mark Greif points out, "in laying bare the conditions of his enterprise he repelled as many people as he enchanted."[8] Some of Cavell's sympathetic interlocutors adopt the rhythms, circumlocutions, cadences and confidingness of his prose, more and less consciously, while others aim to divest their own writing of his characteristic gestures.[9] A sense of Cavell as freshly relevant, yet still eccentric, also derives from his relations to questions of critical politics, and to politics in general. As commentators observe, there are sticking points for Cavell's reception in literary and cultural studies: the work's perceived normativity, its humanism, its lack of structural/materialist analysis, its arrogation of a first-person plural voice, its side-lining of theory, a too-simple picture of the social dynamics of gender and race, and the preservation of the term 'America' as a conceptual operator to indicate romantic potentials (a non-exhaustive list). He is seen as in-

8. Mark Greif, "Cavell as Educator," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell*, 73.
9. On the latter, see Lola Seaton, "The Sound Makes All the Difference: Stanley Cavell's Style," *The Point*, October 18, 2022, https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/the-sound-makes-all-the-difference.

sufficiently sceptical, in the colloquial sense of the word, rather than in the philosophical sense that compelled him.[10] More than this, his key terms of art are viewed, in some quarters, as aligned with conservative stances. An important instance of these is the contested terrain of the ordinary, an idea I will return to further in this essay.

For some, what is apprehended as Cavell's restorative drive is, rather than a point of resistance to reception, the source of his work's appeal. Rex Butler writes that "at a time of the questioning of 'theory,' or at least the particular 'French' variant of it that entered the Anglosphere from the late 1970s on, it is almost commensurately Cavell's own reputation that has risen [...] being seen as an alternative to artistic postmodernism with its exhausted emphasis on sceptical 'deconstruction' and cultural studies with its apparent stepping back from all beliefs."[11] Recalling the nature of Richard Rorty's portrait of the 'cultural left' in *Achieving Our Country* (1998), Butler suggests that developments in theory, or their generalised effects, 'might even be said to have led to — or at least partially explain — that disastrous collapse of liberal democratic coalition-building' that led to Donald Trump's election. Butler's comments here capture the sense of an 'alternative' modus that Cavell is sometimes claimed for. They also highlight the fact that the question of a choice of critical tone and approach has been tied up not only with literary-critical positioning, but with matters of American liberal disappointment, commitment, and self-image since the mid-twentieth-century, and especially since the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s.[12]

Cavell argues consistently that the mood of thought is substantive rather than superficial, drawing on both Emerson and Heidegger in support of this position. Mood and tone have been on the wider critical agenda in recent years as part of the contentious set of developments sometimes gathered under the heading of 'the method debates' in literary studies. I will not focus on these debates here, which may already have reached their conclusion. With important caveats in place, I aim to notice the ways that Cavell's themes seem to resonate with aspects of these develop-

10. See the introduction to Richard Eldridge and Bernie Rhie, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism* (New York: Continuum, 2011) for a discussion of this.
11. Rex Butler, *Stanley Cavell and the Arts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 1.
12. Butler is based in Australia, but his remarks here feed into this discussion.

ments, with a view to delineating his angles of difference from them. Cavell's seeming affinities with this turn in literary studies include his embrace of undejected moods, his identification of reading and writing as therapeutic, a refusal to separate the style and content of his thought, the acknowledgment of affective attachments, a stress on subjective experience as a basis for judgement, and an onus on practices of attention. In addition, Cavell's stress on language's effectiveness proposes a relation between reader and text whereby it is possible "to take seriously the dead earnestness" of the linguistic uses of both philosophy and literature.[13] The apparent chiming of Cavell with certain contemporary critical positions stems in part from his role as an influence. It also flows from a broader renewed interest in some of the experiential streams, such as phenomenology and pragmatism, that have fed into his work. Yet while there is evidently some overlap, Cavell's animus is expressive of different anxieties and sources, something not always in view. Cavell's concern with what it is to be an American intellectual (specifically, as opposed to a European one), and the case he makes for the distinctiveness of a North American philosophical genealogy, undergird both his reception of theory, and his positions on critique and polemic.

Critical sallies against 'suspicious' modes of scholarly reading have elicited a number of valid objections. One of these is the fact that as David Kurnick spotlights, a change in mood or disposition on the part of educators cannot act as a panacea for the structural and funding problems that literary studies face in the neoliberal university.[14] On this view, an emphasis on the personal orientation of critics and readers can be seen as a displacement of responsibility. Another objection is the way that this critical conversation tends to centre some aspects of the discipline and not others, in this way laying claim to greater novelty. For example, critics in the fields of ethnic literature studies and race studies have long explored the significance of being personally and affectively implicated in their scholarship. However, these fields do not set personal implications against structural concerns, or against the contexts and histories that surround and direct reading, instead foregrounding their imbrication. It is also worth remarking that there are dimensions of the debate about the tonal regis-

13. Nancy Yousef, *The Aesthetic Commonplace: Wordsworth, Eliot, Wittgenstein and the Language of Every Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 172.
14. See David Kurnick, "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas," *ELH* 87, no. 2 (2020): 349-74.

ters of criticism that run parallel but somewhat adjacent to what is occurring in literary studies more widely, since they are contributions to a located American conversation about whether a hopeful disposition is a discredited facet of the process of imaginatively engaging with the project of expediting national change.

In common with critics like Rita Felski, Cavell rejects the equation of "serious thought with a reflex negativity."[15] However, his dismissal of negation as a place from which to proceed is tied up with the weight he places on writing, and with the connection he makes between writing and both personal and national improvement. Cavell's interpretation of American romanticism is vital to these connections. Cavell's placement of a romantic inheritance at the heart of his work may not alter its fundamental inspiration, but it does affect its expression. For some commentators, his move toward the transcendentalists from his project's wellsprings in ordinary language philosophy is actively problematic. Charles Altieri ruefully remarks, describing his disappointment in Cavell's work following *Must We Mean What We Say* and *The Claim of Reason*: "And then Cavell discovered Emerson." While Cavell's early work had "freed then young literary critics to bring philosophical thematics to the work of close reading," his turn to romanticism meant that "everything in his early work that stressed the ordinary and the communal has to be recast." For Altieri, Emerson's presence in Cavell's pantheon skews it in the direction of "melodramas of self-formation."[16] Altieri regrets the way that the American transcendentalist inheritance bends Cavell's ideas in the direction of self-cultivation, away from the impersonal affordances of ordinary language. For Cavell, the issue is more complex, since the mutual implication of the individual and the collective (and institutions) is unavoidable, a fact to which language is testament. Yet the notion of personal change does matter for his project. The register of conversion in Cavell derives from several sources, including Freud, but Emerson is crucial among them as a source of the idea that the self changes as it learns, since "Emerson always insisted that the truth cannot be obtained by purely cognitive procedures but rather occurs only if the subject who accesses

15. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 186.
16. Charles Altieri, "Cavell's Imperfect Perfectionism," in *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, ed. K. Dauber and W. Jost, with an afterword by Cavell (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 199 and 200.

these procedures changes in the process of coming to know them."[17] This foregrounding of Emerson, and of a self-formation that is conducive to the wider community, draws Cavell's project into American, and Americanist, debates.

Christopher Castiglia suggests that the fundamentally hopeful objectives of critics now working in American literary studies who came of age in the 1960s are conveyed via a cynical effect in the present.[18] In this vein, Castiglia outlines a dispositional stance with which Cavell would likely be in sympathy, at least in regard to the role Emerson plays in its formulation. Castiglia and Cavell highlight an optimistic Emersonian mode that is won in the face of grief, where optimism is a "discipline."[19] For Cavell, the issue of that "Emersonian cheerfulness to which an old European sophistication knows so well how to condescend" is tied up with the distinctiveness of a North American intellectual tradition, as well as with the idea that this mode articulates a precarious and intermittent apprehension that "we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible."[20] For Cavell, the American scholar must "raise and cheer" since "in a democracy, which depends upon a state of willingness to act for the common good, despair is a political emotion, discouraging both participation and patience."[21] As a choice of style and mood, such cheerfulness stands in a reflexive relation to the act of writing: "I suppose Emerson is claiming to know this, as we do, only in liberated moments. Then presumably his writing the thought was one such moment — as if something about such writing tends to such moments. Does reading such writing provide us with further such moments? If — or when — it does not, how could we fail to find Emerson's claims intolerable?"[22]

Cavell's philosophical programme revolves around "declarations and denials of interest" in speech and writing. The aspiration to "further and fuller accounts and enactments of interest" underscores a central point, that there can be no grounds for establishing community outside processes of exchange that both bring us to aware-

17. Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe, "Introduction," in *The Other Emerson*, ed. B. Arsić and C. Wolfe, with an afterword by Cavell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxiv.
18. Christopher Castiglia, "'A Democratic and Fraternal Humanism': The Cant of Pessimism and Newton Arvin's Queer Socialism," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 160. See also "Teaching, Hopefully," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41, no. 2 (2011): 182-192.
19. Castiglia, "The Cant of Pessimism": 162.
20. Cavell, "Time After Time," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. N. Bauer, A. Crary, and S. Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 22.
21. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 18.
22 Cavell, "Time After Time," 23.

ness of and ongoingly determine what we value.[23] However, alongside this larger brief, there is an American dimension to Cavell's characterisations of the search for community that is already present in the earlier work, and which becomes concretised through his turns to Thoreau and then Emerson in the 1970s and 1980s. For Cavell, the combination of ordinary language philosophy and American romanticism is congruent:

> the sense of the ordinary that my work derives from the practice of the later Wittgenstein and from J. L. Austin, in their attention to the language of ordinary or everyday life, is underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau in their devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low [...] I see both developments — ordinary language philosophy and American transcendentalism — as responses to skepticism.[24]

But this combination is not received as apt by all admirers. Altieri laments Cavell's Emersoninian epiphany for the change of direction it presages:

> one can grant Cavell's brilliance and still be bothered by how deeply American Cavell is in his setting the 'I' over against society so that it can represent possibilities for coming to own a self who resists conformity in order to enter what we might call a dialectic of mutual exposure [...] I doubt Wittgenstein would think that the way for philosophy still to know itself is for it to turn to confronting the culture with itself along the lines in which it meets in the philosopher.[25]

The further problem with Emerson's increasing prominence in Cavell's writing, for Altieri, is that Cavell "has to tilt the aesthetic, in life and in art, back to the ethical where he can thematize."[26] The aesthetic and the moral are indeed imbricated in

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23. Richard Eldridge and Bernie Rhie, "Introduction: Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, 11.
24. Cavell, "The Philosopher in American Life," in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 4.
25. Charles Altieri, "Cavell and Wittgenstein on Morality: The Limits of Acknowledgement," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, 63.
26. Ibid., 77.

Cavell. He does not read for wonder, enjoyment, or diversion, although these may be involved, or to understand the complex cultural matrices from which a work has emerged in a literal sense. He sees textual interpretation, and being interpreted by a text, as training. The goal of such interpretation is large: "the pursuit of a transformative self-knowledge," to the benefit of the collective.[27] Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism is thus entwined with the cases he makes for reading texts through their details, sharing aesthetic judgements, and choosing certain writerly moods and tones.

Cavell's work troubles the boundaries between literature, criticism, philosophy, and other kinds of writing. However, he retains a significant concern with metaphilosophical questions, and with what it means to be a philosopher in an American intellectual culture rather than in a European one. These preoccupations also inform his position on critique, and his reception of theory. Cavell stresses the distinctiveness of philosophy as an undertaking, while aiming to increase its purview, and speaks of a "career-long wish for the work [he does] to be answerable to professional philosophy."[28] As Michael Fischer points out, this goal also matters in terms of the kinds of texts (including films) that Cavell returns to:

> The works that interest Cavell show themselves to be steeped in philosophical issues (such as skepticism), committed to philosophical goals (such as liberation from false necessities), and capable of philosophical rigor in their thinking and writing. By calling these works "philosophical," Cavell is claiming that they reward a deep level of attentiveness and seriousness in our approach to them. Instead of giving up on academic philosophy, he wants these works to put pressure on it, and for him that means continuing to call them "philosophical" and persisting in writing "at once inside the profession of philosophy and outside."[29]

Cavell casts himself as defending philosophy from both scientism and theory, rather than as striving for his work to attain the status of cultural criticism or literary theory. Given the era in which he studied, it is perhaps unsurprising that the professional de-

27. Norris, *Becoming Who We Are*, 17.
28. Cavell, "The Wittgensteinian Event," in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 210.
29. Michael Fischer, "Stanley Cavell and Criticizing the University from Within," *Philosophy and Literature* 30, no. 2 (2006): 474.

bates that animate Cavell are not those most current to philosophy now, nor to the broader critical-cultural conversation. Although Cavell anticipated intellectual turns that have become uncontroversial in the intervening years, our expectation that his work should have greater currency still may stem from the fact that his choice of subjects for analysis comprises both films and literary texts, and from the links he makes between domains of culture. Christopher Benfey points out that "Cavell resembled in certain ways his brilliant contemporaries William H. Gass and Susan Sontag. All three were trained in academic philosophy during the 1950s, the heyday of the rivalry between the more humanistic "continental" philosophy (centred in Germany and France) and the more scientific "analytic" philosophy in the US and Great Britain," and all were exposed to ordinary language philosophy.[30] While as Benfey elaborates, the three also brought their philosophical interests into conjunction with more artistic goals, Cavell retains his disciplinary allegiance in important ways. Further, Cavell feared (at least in the 1980s) that literary scholars had misunderstood the importance of Austin's innovations:

> Austin seems to have come under the protection rather of the literary than of the philosophical profession. Whatever the justice here, the cost of this protection — so far — has been, from my angle, exorbitant, because the literary profession takes it — so far — that ordinary language is contrasted in Austin with *literary* language, whereas its contrast and contest is with words as they appear in *philosophy* (if you can spot that).[31]

Writing a little later, in the 1990s, Cavell observes, "[e]veryone recruited into our present academic and cultural wars seems to have an answer to the question of philosophy. Some say that philosophy is literature, some say it is science, some say it is ideology, some say it doesn't matter which of these, if any, it is. For me it matters, as it matters that each of these identifications seems contentious."[32] Cavell can be arch

30. Christopher Benfey, "The Hum of Humanity," *The New York Review of Books*, May 12, 2022, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/05/12/the-hum-of-humanity-stanley-cavell-christopher-benfey.
31. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," in *Here and There*, 107-8.
32. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), vii.

about academic fashion, but his resistance to theory has further dimensions. Developments in theory, most often referenced in Cavell by way of Derrida, are seen by him to have eclipsed incipient American critical modes dating from midcentury, traditions that remain for him somewhat unclaimed. These modes include the writings of those gathered as the New Critics and the New York Intellectuals, as well as those of associated figures such as Paul Goodman and Robert Warshow.[33] Significantly, American and French thinkers are also viewed by Cavell to stand in antithetical relations to their forerunners and to histories of thought: "For Derrida the land of thought is fully occupied, as it were, by the finished edifice of philosophy [...] whereas for an American the question persists whether the land of thought has as yet been discovered."[34] American intellectual time, Cavell says, runs on different tracks to that of Europe: he dates it from Emerson.[35] We can note here that identifying Emerson as the origin of 'thought' in America has consequences for what counts as such thought and for who produces it, and for what might go unsaid, or partially said, in a tradition defined in this way. It is also worth remarking that Cavell's anxiety about the lack of a shared North American intellectual culture would not be framed in his terms in the present, nor US culture placed in this relation to Europe, although these were — to some extent — live questions during the period in which he was trained. If the issue of a shared philosophical corpus bears on Cavell's differentiation of the American situation from the European, the role of the university is another divergence for him. In "The Division of Talent," recently collected in *Here and There*, Cavell contrasts European and US intellectual and university culture, suggesting that "here in North America [...] it is always doubtful [...] whether our voices, without echo, can make it to one another across the smallest fields."[36] Cavell also presents American-French philosophical divergences in expressing key concepts as intimate but weighty differences: "the cultural (or say stylistic) distance between American and French intellectual life sometimes strikes me as maddeningly untraversable; too near to ignore, too far to go."[37] As ever for Cavell, much of substance hinges on style: "differences be-

33. I have addressed this topic in more detail elsewhere.
34. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65.
35. Ibid., 62.
36. Cavell, "The Division of Talent," in *Here and There*, 86.
37. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 67.

tween what I do and what deconstruction does seem to me registered in my speaking of presentness (which is about me and my world) instead of (meaning what?) presence," a manner of speaking in an ordinary — not a metaphysical — voice.[38]

If Cavell's rejection of 'French theory' and its legacies stems from a differently situated set of factors than those that motivate such rejections in literary studies now, his rejections of critique are likewise specific and contextual. Kurnick draws attention to the fact that the portrait of the practitioner of critique presented in recent criticism (such as that of Felski) is often knowingly satirical and heavily bowdlerized. He observes that "this is a caricature not of our actual social or intellectual lives but of our ego-ideals—the miniature Adornos and de Beauvoirs we have perched on our shoulders."[39] Cavell rejects such sources of the critical super-ego, but he does so expressly in light of his quest for the recognition of alternative, North American, avatars of intellectual seriousness. And while he aims to read and write, like Felski, from what Heather Love identifies as "everyday forms of judgment, experience, and feeling," and to undo the sense of the critic as standing in a class apart, for Cavell it is the academic philosopher, in particular, who is an unrepresentative reader.[40] The opposition he draws is not between practiced or skillful reading as such and "naïve" reading. Further, Cavell casts both the act of writing, and the act of interpreting literature, as matters of the highest cultural and personal importance. He places a premium on writerly conviction. If "postcritique" can be seen, in its worries about disciplinary self-definition, audience, and value, to be overshadowed by neoliberal university conditions and the "embattled prestige" of humanistic disciplines, Cavell's stance contrastingly takes shape in a certain amount of confidence about the role of the university as a place in which to think, albeit one with limitations as well as strengths.[41] Cavell credits periodicals with a formative role in the evolution of his intellectual life, but as two scholars who have also become editors — Mark Greif of *N+1* and Jon Baskin of *The Point* — discuss in an interview together, "Cavell never attempted to reach a truly broad audience, or even what we might call a magazine readership."[42]

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38. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 174.
39. Kurnick, "A Few Lies," 354.
40. Heather Love, "Critique is Ordinary," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 365.
41. Kurnick, "A Few Lies," 352.
42. Jon Baskin, "The Man Against Everything," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* January 8, 2017, https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-man-against-everything.

The site from which he explores the boundaries of the popular and the philosophical is a model of a dedicated scholarly life that has become rare, and the university remains for him an indicator of a public good to be prized, even if incompletely realised.

We now stand in a different relation to the significance of popular culture, and to audiences for criticism, to that delineated by Cavell's writing. Although Cavell proposes that some expressions of popular culture merit the utmost attention, it is not a given in his work that such culture in general is deserving of consideration, as his readers have remarked. Critics also notice that "Cavell's literary tastes tend to run toward classics" and that he is not drawn to postmodernism.[43] Lola Seaton describes Cavell's relation to the texts that resonate most strongly for him in quasi-religious terms. "Cavell — who quite often confesses to not knowing, or only recently having become acquainted with, the works of seminal thinkers" is

> an extremely thorough, never-finished, almost exorbitant reader of a narrow personal canon. He chronically revisits fragments from his favorite texts — Wittgenstein's *Investigations*; later, from the Seventies on, Emerson's essays and Thoreau's *Walden* — or rather appears to carry them with him, to unendingly coax new significance from phrases he knows by heart, a little as though these cherished works were scripture, or songs he can't get out of his head.[44]

On one hand, Cavell pursues no defined method of reading, since he is guided by his response to the details of each text and film he chooses to discuss. On the other hand, his manner of reading is overdetermined, as Seaton suggests here, since themes arising from dearly held works — and his own prior writings — reverberate extensively elsewhere.

In addition to the narrowness of Cavell's personal canon, there is the question of the kinds of writers and philosophers included in it. Cavell's orienting move is "to understand philosophy not as a set of problems but as a set of texts."[45] The philoso-

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43. Dmitri Tymoczko, "Dear Stanley," *Journal of Music Theory* 54, no. 1 (2010): 21.
44. Lola Seaton, "The Sound Makes All the Difference: Stanley Cavell's Style," *The Point* October 18, 2022, https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/the-sound-makes-all-the-difference.
45. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3.

pher Robert Gooding-Williams, in his response to Cavell's reading of the film *The Band Wagon*, prompts Cavell to think further about which texts are covered by this designation, and to turn towards the ways African American writers and thinkers — "Douglass, Du Bois, Ellison" — have picked up Emerson's gauntlet and negotiated his legacy: "critically but not deafly."[46] Cavell expresses enthusiasm for the possibility in his reply to Gooding-Williams, yet with the caveat that he is tentative about taking up this thought, as about responding to feminism, without "invitation."[47] The right to participate in such conversations is for him a genuine question. But while Cavell argues for the significance of jazz, for example, as a uniquely American artform, the lack of meaningful engagement with black thought and writing as part of the American philosophical pantheon highlights both the idiosyncrasy and the generational nature of the ways that Cavell's textual touchstones are selected. Michael A. Peters argues that the "whiteness" of American philosophy is an arresting aspect of the tradition, entailing not only an evasion of history as such, but an avoidance of the history of American thought and its genealogies. Peters discusses Cavell alongside Rorty in these terms, highlighting an absence of systematic engagement with the structuring force of America's race politics. "Whiteness" as Peters defines it here comprises both the figures included in the tradition as well as the neglect of the subject of race politics as crucial to the American polity. It is a philosophy for which "whiteness" is normative. Peters' rendering of Cavell's patriotism is a little un-nuanced in this piece, but the attention drawn to the nature of the discipline, and to its history, is helpful. Cavell construes his eclectic personal canon as one formed by the following of intuitions, but questions of milieu, timing, academic subject, and exposure matter in significant ways. [48]

I have been suggesting in the foregoing discussion that when considering Cavell's critical afterlives, it is useful to recognise what his work carries along with it. These entailments include not only particular philosophical loyalties, questions, and citational practices, midcentury debates and anxieties about the status of North

46. Robert Gooding-Williams, "Aesthetics and Receptivity: Kant, Nietzsche, Cavell, and Astaire," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. A. Norris (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 262.
47. Cavell, "The Incessance and the Absence of the Political," in *The Claim to Community*, 301.
48. Michael A. Peters, "White Philosophy in/of America," in *Education, Philosophy and Politics: The Selected Works of Michael A. Peters* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 214-15.

American culture, and American liberal political allegiances. They also involve the complexities of keeping a romantic "America" intellectually in play. Cavell posits what he calls "America's high promise to itself to be something new to the world," alongside associated modes of melancholy, loss and despair.[49] If "America" is, as Colin Koopman puts it, "but a conceptual shadow haunting extant political geographies," only ever a "prospective concept," Cavell has wanted to preserve its ghost.[50] He is scrupulous not to identify "America" with the nation state, acknowledging that the word carries unwelcome freight. But he retains the word to indicate a set of potentials: "The future — call it America, or call it the world that may be — cannot be approached as in a picture of a boat approaching a shore."[51] Cavell finds in the word "America" a way of expressing the fact that self-division is a desirable condition. In his perfectionist and romantic discourse, the name carries connotations of eventual democracy, more prosaically it also "names the place you can be a secular Jew and at home."[52] As heavily qualified and differentiated from official myths and narratives as this concept is in Cavell's work, it is a highly vexed way to express such aspirations. What might remain of Cavell's legacy if those receiving his work were to refocus, moving away from the romantic dimension of his project as that dimension relates to America?

Cavell's project, ranging across ordinary language philosophy, film criticism, Shakespeare studies, modernism, the legacies of Kant, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Nietzsche, and romanticism, is acknowledged to be eclectic, singular, and generative. But, as Russell B. Goodman remarks, it is "work people do not quite know how to use."[53] Indeed, "use" does not seem to be the right framework for describing the relation between this body of work and its inheritors. As Andrew Klevan points out, while he can read closely, Cavell does not primarily do so, instead having a tendency to "generalize, to tell us about meanings rather than build them."[54] Cavell's own reading can be allegorical, it can be

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49. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 189.
50. Colin Koopman, "Pragmatism as a Philosophy of Hope: Emerson, James, Dewey, Rorty," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (2006): 113.
51. Cavell "Time After Time," in *Here and There*, 27.
52. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press), xv.
53. Russell B. Goodman, "Introduction"m in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. R. B. Goodman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.
54. Andrew Klevan, "Cavell at Film Criticism: An Unreadiness to Become Explicit," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell*, 65.

strong reading, it can be inference and association. Further, particular aspects of his work are not easily extractable from other elements without altering them, since the whole has many mutually referring and interwoven parts. As Klevan astutely notices, it is not so much Cavell's practice of reading texts, itself not a method but rather a range of approaches — "sometimes aesthetic, sometimes phenomenological, sometimes moral, sometimes linguistic, sometimes analytic, sometimes continental, sometimes psychoanalytical" — but his thematics, critical attitudes, exemplars, moods, and ethos that have most frequently been taken up by other writers and critics.[55] To some extent, as Lee Wallace elaborates, Cavell also anticipates contemporary experiments in writing that traverse the boundaries of theory and memoir, since "faithfulness to Cavell does not require fidelity to his critical style. Instead it requires adherence to his method of bringing into the space of textual interpretation experiential vectors that may generate unexpected recognitions, these being more widely applicable than the individual films or personal circumstances to which they were initially attached. That is the autotheoretical invitation of his work."[56]

Such experiential vectors notably include the fact of personal attachment. For Cavell, the decision to write philosophically about his disparate intellectual interests is related to "the question of whether I am in possession of my own experience, or instead follow dictation laid down by profession or by fashion or by some more private identification."[57] As such, valences of gratitude, praise, or pleasure may enter into his response to a text or artwork, but (in principle) these do not remain simply personal or immersive for him. Hence, although gratitude to exemplars plays an important role in his writing, Cavell argues that attachment warrants excavation, and that praise can fail in eliciting conviction or agreement from others.[58] Not only is it important that praise can fail, but the distinction between cases (such as activist contexts) where a critical orientation of praise and recognition towards the objects of attention and interpretation might be called for, and those where it is less useful, matter, because as Bruce Robbins points out, "not all objects deserve love equally."[59] The need for reflexivity in interrogating the chosen objects

55. Ibid., 67.
56. Lee Wallace, "Stanley Cavell and the Queer Thought of Movies," *Screen* 63, no. 1 (2022): 115.
57. Cavell, "To Place Wittgenstein," in *Here and There*, 98 (this quotation is drawn from comments on Walter Benjamin).
58. It is an open question whether all of the Hollywood films, for example, to which Cavell is committed, bear up under the claims he makes for them.
59. Bruce Robbins, "Not So Well Attached," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 375.

of our attention and our responses to them returns us to the contested idea of the ordinary, its role in Cavell's work, and the reasons that the term invites opprobrium.

If pursuit of the 'ordinary' sounds conservative to most, Cavell casts it as the opposite: a mode of demystification. In order for both personal and social change to happen, for Cavell, there must be a prior work of examination, which he formulates, among other avenues, through his readings of both Wittgenstein and American romanticism. However, as I mentioned at the outset, the idea of the 'ordinary' is contentious. It conjures accommodation to the status quo, the banal, and the uninspired. Dmitri Tymoczko, a one-time student of Cavell's (who construes him as in some respects a perilous mentor), describes ordinariness as a "sinister" idea, explaining that

> for many of us, "ordinary life" can involve a demeaning job, mediocre achievements, romantic dissatisfaction, uncertain health care, or four hours of daily television, against which we are confronted by the periodic but indisputable irruptions of extraordinariness into human culture — whether those of Bach or Nietzsche or Einstein or Coltrane or Michael Jordan or Cavell himself.[60]

Cavell's own sense of the ordinary is again a matter of philosophy's registers. As Simon Critchley describes it, on this picture "the everyday is not a network of practices or forms of life to which we can return by [...] taking a turn in the street or a job in Woolworths [...] the ordinary is not a ground, but a goal."[61] However, if the ordinary is 'not a ground but a goal' for philosophy, the term has other connotations in (American) literary and cultural studies, which is complicating.

Mark Greif parses Cavell's particular view of the pursuit of the ordinary, where, with a romantic slant, it is a commitment to "an investigation of [...] what sort of condition we are really in, and how else we might be."[62] This investigation of our condition remains, however, something different from decisive collective action. In a frequently cited passage from "The Avoidance of Love," written in the context of the war in Vietnam, Cavell says that America (allegorised in the passage as "the Yankee") could rise to its potential, but "it will take a change of consciousness. So phenome-

60. Tymoczko, "Dear Stanley," 21.
61. Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 139.
62. Mark Greif, "Cavell as Educator," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell*, 81.

nology becomes politics."[63] Political change seems here to be routed through individual sensibility and psychology, with the onus falling on changes in this domain. Neiman wryly comments that this stance is "as American as apple pie."[64] I have mentioned sticking points in Cavell's reception. One of these is the perception of a stress on personal transformation rather than structural change flowing from Emerson's eventual role at the head of Cavell's cast of exemplars, another is the sense that he remains within normative frameworks he might do more to challenge. In the final part of this discussion, I look further at these frameworks and turn toward some of the ways that Cavell is taken up by his inheritors, including modes of inheritance extending beyond his own investments.

Cavell's philosophical politics can be described as romantic as well as psychological, although ordinary language philosophy remains a crucial element in this context. John-Baptiste Oduor argues that Cavell's focus on "the worldview of the individual moral agent" precludes engagement in his work with a political understanding of "relations of power, of the historical development of social institutions, and of the economy."[65] Although such relations were signalled in his writing, Cavell's approach to them was often indirect. Both building on and re-weighting his emphases, philosophers, critics, and theorists varying from those who are in some degree to those in large part influenced by Cavell, have brought more structural, materialist, or experimental understandings together with his constellation of concerns and concepts. In some instances, they also move them away from the thematics of American improvement, and/or American romanticism, and onto a broader canvas. This can mean drawing out implications and applications latent in his work, or taking up what he seems to address incompletely. It can leave elements behind, or involve supplementation and conjunction. Cavell's work thus opens paths that he may not have taken himself.

One of Cavell's most discernible impacts is the way he revives the ordinary language tradition, a precedent that spins off in a number of directions. Cavell consistently argues that Wittgenstein is not a conservative thinker, advancing the view that, as Ben

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63. Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love," in *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 346.
64. Neiman, "What Cavell Made Possible," 102.
65. John-Baptiste Oduor, "The Shadows of Stanley Cavell," *The Nation* October 27, 2022, https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/stanley-cavell-here-now-essays/#:~:text=A%20posthumous%20collection%20of%20essays,project%20of%20ordinary%20language%20philosophy.

Ware puts it "there is nothing in Wittgenstein's view of philosophy [...] which speaks against a transformation of our existing forms of life."[66] In this Cavell anticipates by a wide margin current critical and creative efforts to think through the non-conservative ends that commitment to the ordinary, and to ordinary language, can be enlisted for. Cavell's own project remains relatively abstract — the everyday in his work is never *that* everyday. But it is possible to draw a line from his thought to more textured and detailed explorations of the daily, the micro, and the infra, including those that draw on ordinary language. Cavell and Wittgenstein provide scaffolding for the anthropologist Veena Das' understanding of the ordinary in her ethnographic microhistories and microgeographies. In philosophy, Sandra Laugier brings ordinary language philosophy to feminism, and to the ethics of care "defined as a practical response to specific needs (of vulnerable persons) and a sensitivity to the ordinary details of human life that *matter*."[67] Maggie Nelson's genre-crossing writing is a literary example of new engagements with Wittgenstein, as to some extent is Ben Lerner's concern with language games and public discourse in his novel *The Topeka School.*[68]

Beyond Wittgenstein's example, Cavell's work can be brought into conjunction with other sources of the impetus to consider what lies hidden in plain sight. For Cavell, moral life happens from moment to moment, in ways we might not notice. While moments are of their nature ephemeral, on his view there are resources for their coming into focus. This notion comes into play in Cavell's ideal of criticism. Criticism — of artworks, films, and written texts — is for him a representative way of allowing the significance of the momentary to crystallise, since "we have in any art, the opportunity to find, but always the freedom to miss, the significance of the nothing and the nowhere."[69] As Lloyd Pratt points out, close readings and acts of interpretation can make more plural and nuanced understandings of both where we are now, and where we have been, available, opening onto a "dilatory" present.[70] For Cavell, in addition to the possibilities

66. Ben Ware, "Williams and Wittgenstein," *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism* 9 (2011): 46.
67. Sandra Laugier, "Cavell on Feminism and the Ethics of Care," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 6 (2018): 55.
68. In contemporary film studies, Andrew Klevan turns back to Austin and Wittgenstein to propose Ordinary Language Film Studies as a method of detailed attention to individual films.
69. Cavell, "A Capra Moment," in *Cavell on Film,* ed. W. Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 142.
70. Lloyd Pratt, "Close Reading the Present: Eudora Welty's Queer Politics," in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, ed. E.L McCallum and M. Tuhkanen (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 185.

of the present that we might not see unless looking closely, without the present and its conditions, however less than ideal, there is nothing to work from. The decontextualized world of conventional philosophical questioning is thus cast as slippery ice: no good for walking, and Cavell is fond of Wittgenstein's exhortation "back to the rough ground!"[71] This matters to him philosophically, in terms of method, as well as providing a basis for whatever might happen next politically. The traction offered by the present is cast as a means of establishing where things stand, and a place from which to decide whether they might be otherwise.

As the editors of *Here and There* explain, for Cavell "words spring to life in concrete places and spaces of speech [...] The circumstances of what we say — to whom, from where — matter as much as the meaning of our words."[72] Cavell's work also emphasises "a commitment to responsiveness and conversation."[73] In the notable absence of extensive engagement with black American writing on his own part, Alice Crary argues that it is around such responsiveness that Cavell could find points of convergence with the writings of W. E. B Du Bois, Ta-Nahesi Coates, and Claudia Rankine. As Crary puts it: "Cavell represents us as obliged to continually take seriously the possibility that we might need to reshape our modes of responsiveness with an eye to a more just vision of the social world."[74] For Crary, this means that "Cavell is in a position to welcome into rational democratic conversation, for instance, the sorts of liberating forms of artistic expression that Du Bois was discussing."[75] Rankine writes in her genre-crossing *Just Us: An American Conversation*, "to live only in the archives of conversation is, perhaps, to see what the culture has formed, willingly. Repeatedly? Sure."[76] Cavell shares this sense of the need for an intentional stance towards the conversation that forms a culture and the possibility of intervening in it, not simply instrumentally. Derek Gottlieb argues for the congruity of Cavell's project with a "method of intervening in public space and inviting others to share in one's picture of things, in one's judgments" that stems from African American organising, and that is relevant to understanding the interventions of the Black Lives Matter movement: "The stakes are not restricted to the

71. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §107.
72. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier, "Editors' Introduction," in *Here and There*, 3.
73. Ibid., 2.
74. Alice Crary, "Cavell and Critique," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 6 (2018): 22.
75. Ibid.
76. Claudia Rankine, *Just Us: An American Conversation* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), 219.

next election cycle. As in every confrontation, and with every issue, the conversation reveals the extent to which we do or do not in fact live together, and elucidates the conditions under which we may continue — or begin — to do so." For Gottleib, "Cavell's scene of conversation is [...] dramatically dissimilar from [...] exchanging reasons with an aim of persuasion [...] because *consent* is perpetually at issue, the requested alteration occurs at the deeper level of agreeing in judgments." Thus, in a Cavellian conversation, "a confrontation between interlocutors over a matter of common concern, bodies forth and enacts a certain polity."[77]

Cavell emphasises the ways that philosophy is close to lived life, asking "Why [...] is kicking a hard object more of a definitive 'refutation' of immateriality than, say [...] putting your hand on the arm of a friend."[78] The idea that matters of import can be, and sometimes must be, addressed in embodied, enacted, diurnal ways, is also advanced in other kinds of scholarship. If Cavell omitted or held back from significant engagement with writing by women and by people of colour, Imani Perry brokers a link between Cavellian concepts and these spheres. Where others have picked up responsiveness, acknowledgement, and conversation as notions that can be extended, Perry draws on Cavell's idea of passionate utterance, identifying this in the characterization of Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.[79] As Perry further explains, in her piece in remembrance of Cavell, the humanities need the 'corrective' of critical studies, but what can be taken away and extended from Cavell's work is the "possibility that exists and persists in human encounters," not only as mediated by literature, but in life. This possibility "is key because it means we might move towards more ethical human relations [...] nothing under the sun, no matter how conventional, is static. At each refreshed moment transformation is possible."[80]

In addition to holding out the possibility of such transformation, as commentators note, Cavell's writings could do more to establish an understanding of the starting point. Naomi Scheman highlights the fact that philosophy as a discipline has been slow

77. Derek Gottleib, "Something Must Be Shown: Consent, Conversation, and the End of Reasons," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 5 (2017): 33-34 and 30-31.
78. Cavell, "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting," in *Here and There*, 43.
79. Imani Perry, "The Flowers Are Vexed: Gender Justice, Black Literature, and the Passionate Utterance," in *New Directions in Law and Literature*, ed. E. S. Anker and B. Meyler, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 259-62. See also Perry's *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
80. Perry, "Cavell's Passionate Utterance," *ASAP Journal* July 26, 2018, https://asapjournal.com/cavells-passionate-utterance-imani-perry.

to turn away from normative frameworks. She finds Cavell alert to the power imbalances underlying that normativity, but advances that he could go further. [81] She has reservations about Cavell's gendering of skepticism, while at the same time suggesting new engagements with his themes. In her essay "A Storied World," she presses on the philosophical question latent in the collective pronoun "we" that Cavell so riskily embraces. As she explains, "it is a matter of ethical and political commitment to create a useable *we*," conceiving the "achievement of a *we*" in her own terms as something that "lies beyond a rolling horizon, and part of what moves us toward that horizon is attentiveness to those who are excluded from the *we's* that shape our practices, excluded by our culpable ignorance, indifference, fear, or contempt."[82] What directions might there be for aspects of Cavell's thinking if these were to be pushed beyond the broadly normative nature of philosophy's claims, and beyond the contexts and influences I have highlighted for the ways they condition and inflect his work?

Cavell's stress on the need to identify, examine, and take responsibility for one's attachments, investments, and desires shares ground with ideas of micropolitics that run through a French tradition since Foucault. In this vein, Lauren Berlant bridges the ostensible French theory/American thought divide, formulating a conception of ordinariness that draws on both Cavellian and Deleuzian traditions. Berlant's ordinary takes into account the ways that capitalism intersects with affective life, as well as foregrounding its threats to the development of the self. Others have also brought aspects of Cavell's work into conjunction with elements of theory, cultural studies, and critique, revealing compatibilities, or making links, that he did not pursue. Thomas Dumm takes up the Cavellian ordinary for political science, but also claims poststructuralist influences. Sianne Ngai inherits aspects of both Cavell and Adorno. Ngai pushes the importance of aesthetic judgement, and of the apparently minor, into areas Cavell did not, exfoliating these in relation to commodity culture, retaining his influence alongside others that matter to her. Must those inspired by Cavell's work adopt his enchantments, especially those tied to a particular American historical experience, as well as to romantic national aspirations? Cavell's exemplars, moods, and ethos have been put to work across numerous disciplines, in scholarship that encompasses a perhaps surprising

81. Naomi Scheman, "A Storied World: On Meeting and Being Met," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studie*s, 103.
82. Scheman, "A Storied World," 104.

scope. Those who inherit Cavell the least exactly — throwing him off, as well as taking him on — may be the legatees he would most have wished for, in his repeated suggestion that texts and films can "teach beyond themselves," revealing possibilities their makers did not see. Although his work has sometimes elicited it, Cavell is chary of imitation, returning often to Emerson's maxim, that "Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul." [83]

83. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "An Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, July 15, 1838," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. J. Porte and S. Morris (New York: Norton, 2001), 72. I would like to thank Paul Jenner for reading and responding to an earlier draft of this essay.

8. Watching TV with Stanley Cavell: Further Remarks on *The Crown* as Metatelevision

DAVID LaROCCA

Stanley Cavell's contributions to the study of television as a medium commenced in earnest in the immediate wake of the expanded edition of *The World Viewed*. By the early 1980s, he had occasion to write more directly about how television differs from film and to articulate some of its special features. In a recent stocking-taking on the matter, contributors to the open-access *Television with Stanley Cavell in Mind* probed these and related issues as part of an ongoing investigation into the philosopher's legacy.[1] In that volume, I drew Cavell's reflections on TV into conversation with thoughts on metatelevision as the mode expresses itself in *The Crown* (2016-23, Netflix).[2] As he was by the art of film, Cavell remained intrigued by the special ways in which a medium can call attention to itself – and television, it turns out, manifests its own potentialities. In this special issue of *Conversations*, I pick up where I left off there, continuing an exploration of the meta-traits that are so ably and admirably achieved in Peter Morgan's celebrated, award-winning television series. For those keeping track, the following portion of remarks address the first four seasons of the series.

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If Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh (Tobias Menzies) lobbied to make the interior of Westminster Abbey available to all — entrancing global television audiences while at

1. Available open access at https://tinyurl.com/3yzdpw8b.
2. David LaRocca, "When TV is on TV: Metatelevision and the Art of Watching TV with the Royal Family in *The Crown*," in *Television with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, ed. LaRocca and S. Laugier (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2023), 85-98.

the same time ratifying the reality of his wife's investiture as Queen — the sudden intrusion of BBC documentary cameras in the private residence of the Royal Family became a cause for chagrin. Philip turns away, Elizabeth (Olivia Colman) looks at him worriedly, and then back at the TV set, distractedly, and asks the crew "What do we do now?"[3] Margaret (Helena Bonham Carter) adds plaintively: "Do you expect us to say something?" A reverse shot gives us the black and white television set at the bottom of the frame (displaying images of its own, those new-fangled computers noted above), and a film crew perched above the set, reduced to near-outlines for the brash backlighting. The director replies tentatively "Yes," and Margaret asks in turn: "Did someone prepare something?" Nervously, the director coaches: "I think the general idea is it be unscripted to reflect a normal evening." Of course, we viewers of *The Crown* realize how the entire scene (like the show we are watching) is scripted, that lines have been prepared for our actors whose characters are searching for what to say. "This is nothing like a normal evening," Margaret informs him dryly. "If it was a normal evening, we'd all be on our own in sad isolation in individual palaces. It wouldn't be crowded like this" — and here a gesture to sister and mother, all sitting on the same couch, shot in receding perspective, "This is like some kind of nightmare Christmas." And with that a wide shot, another brilliant tableau, showing everyone seated in large couches and chairs, flanked by studio lights and servants prepared to respond.[4] With Margaret's gloss, the frame suddenly looks like just such a painfully awkward holiday occasion immortalized on a postcard sent to friends and family. At last, something the family can agree on as the wonderfully resolute, Princess Anne (Erin Doherty), shoots Margaret a wide smile of confirmation and commiseration.[5] The scene ends with the two sisters and their mother (the Queen Mother played by Marion Bailey) inadvertently giving the director what he wants — something unrehearsed, "something unscripted to reflect a normal evening" — albeit barbed by the denigration of the medium and its offerings. The director stammers, looks to his left, that is, to Philip, for orientation, then suggests with a stammer: "Uh, perhaps, Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, perhaps you might comment on what's on the television."[6]

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3. *The Crown* (2016-23, Peter Morgan), "Bubbikins" (s3, e4), 00:27:00.
4. Ibid., 00:27:41.
5. Ibid., 00:27:45.
6. Ibid., 00:27:54.

THE QUEEN MOTHER: That'd be easier if there was something remotely amusing to watch.

THE QUEEN: I agree. This is deathly.

MARGARET: Things might improve with a drink.

THE QUEEN MOTHER: Everything improves with a drink.

THE QUEEN: Not everything.

MARGARET: Don't be such a prig. [*snaps her fingers to call a servant*] "And cut," says the director.

The light-hearted, if still devastating, end to the scene of family TV watching is followed immediately by two scenes — one in which Philip's mother, Princess Alice (Jane Lapotaire), stumbles upon the resting film crew in a courtyard, impatiently seeking out a light for her cigarette. When the director is told who she is, he snaps his fingers for the camera crew to roll. Philip happens upon a couple of servants looking studiously out the window and turns his attention in that direction, whereupon he finds his mother responding agreeably on camera to a series of probing questions. Philip turns back to the servants: "For God's sake, somebody stop that … [*then shouts vigorously at them*] Now! Damn it!" Moments later we see a servant in the courtyard interrupting the shot, and thus the filmed conversation, the director obliging but looking around to the walls of surrounding curtained windows as if for an explanation of this abrupt intrusion. Someone, it turns out, is always watching.

The gauzy curtains and distant, invisible intervention of that scene turns to a next scene of unmediated close-ups in shot/reverse-shot, Philip standing at the edge Elizabeth's bed, charged and aggressive, while she sits there in nightclothes, deliberating with him calmly. "It's a nightmare," he declares emphatically, "We have to get her out of here. Somewhere no one will see her." Elizabeth, incredulous, "What?" Philip underscores the apparent motivation for his alarm: "We are in the middle of filming a documentary, which is critical as a public relations exercise. Now, on this occasion, the filmmakers agreed to give up the footage. Next time, they might not be so kind." And here a shift to a wide shot, taking them both in from the side.[7] "Her presence at the palace threatens to derail the entire thing." And then a return to clos-

7. Ibid., 00:30:55.

er shots, as the couple shifts to such suppressed and thus deflected and deferred family issues, in which Elizabeth asks "Why are you so angry with her?" — "I'm not," Philip counters abruptly, as if unintentionally confirming his unresolved anger, admitting — despite himself — that the Queen, his wife, has accurately diagnosed his inner state.

We leave Philip to sort out his troubled feelings about his mother to keep track of his sense of the stakes — and thus implied power — of documentary film, and in turn, its broadcast on television. Philip's reference to the kindness of filmmakers — who have "given up the footage" — calls to mind a parallel scene from an earlier episode ("Pride and Joy," s1, e8), when Elizabeth, newly Queen, had a row with Philip. Upon discovering their argument had been filmed by a documentary crew, she approaches them and, remarkably, they hand over the film (which was destroyed, or at least, never seen).[8] A scene from the origins of paparazzi, perhaps here in a dignified moment, but out of keeping with decidedly more aggressive arc of such clandestine capturing. Turning to another valence of our "Royal watching," such invasive media "coverage" contributed to a signal event in the life of the Crown, namely, the death of Princess Diana; a generation later, we see Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's "stepping back" from duties, motivated, they say, in part by harassment received by the press, creating a kind of lower-stakes, but still boldly salient, echo of King Edward's abdication in 1936, so he could marry twice-divorced Wallis Simpson. Meanwhile, Philip's efforts at controlling the narrative — along with the sounds and motion pictures that define them — place him decidedly at the origins of modern media relations, including the art of the so-called "spin doctor." Unlike most others around him, perhaps even including the documentarians, he is keenly aware of the power of television, the image it creates and conveys, and the pronounced effects such content — whether acquired illicitly or with consent — can have on the life of the family.

In the 1950s and 1960s, journalists, filmmakers, and television producers may have retained a sense of decorum — a clearer sense of what is "fit to print," or broadcast, and what should be held back or even destroyed; indeed, an entire episode, "Vergangenheit" (s2, e6) is devoted to the suppression of information about King

8. *The Crown*, "Pride and Joy" (s1, e8), 00:40:15.

Edward VIII's complicity with the Nazi regime, including a literal cover-up in the forest where the incriminating documents from "the past" (of the eponymous title) were buried. At the end of this episode, written by Peter Morgan and directed by Philippa Lowthorpe, we find a medial move familiar to many "based on a true story" films and shows, namely, the abrupt introduction of bona fide documentary photographs, in this case, a five-image slideshow that features King Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson smiling, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, and shaking hands with none other than Adolph Hitler. The imposition of such evidence, as it is meant to be treated, at the conclusion of a dramatic re-enactment or recreation is fitting, of course, because the images offer a kind of proof of guilt. (For contrast, see how "Fagan" [s4, e5] *begins* with authentic documentary footage in order to prepare the viewer for the re-enactment to come, rather than save the historical connection until the credit sequence — a savvy "pre-script" method set against the more familiar post-script strategy, especially common in so called "biopic" feature films).

These *syuzhet* techniques "set up" the audience for seeing reality *in* the fiction; the order of arrangement contributes to the power of montage, including the mixing of re-enacted scenes and veritable footage or stills. In "Vergangenheit," perhaps it was felt that this genre convention (viz., the late delivery of archival content) was one worth adopting for this particular episode — and its still-volatile topic — since the incrimination is so surprising. Thus, unlike ersatz photographs and film footage (that is, filmed content featuring our actors-in-character rather than the historical persons themselves), the turn to the archive is meant to retrospectively transform the art.[9] If Philip was trying to spin "the people" away from knowledge of his mother, Morgan and Lowthorpe aim to turn us *toward* this morally compromising aspect of King Edward VIII's personal and royal history. Such manipulation — toward and away — is a persistent feature of "historical" films and shows, when fabrication refers to fact, or aims to amplify it anew. In *The Crown*, as in other historically-informed dramatic endeavours, there is no one-size-fits-all methodology, but a case-by-case approach for the treatment of one topic or another. Not to be missed, though, the technology at hand — whether it be photographic camera or home movie camera, television, radio,

9. See my "Memory Translation: Rithy Panh"s Provocations to the Primacy and Virtues of the Documentary Sound/Image Index," in *Everything Has a Soul: The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, ed. L. Barnes and J. Mai (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 188-201.

or other — often seems to give opportunity and license to its implementation or exploitation. Thus, the existence of the King Edward-with-Hitler photographs over-determines their relevance to such an episode, whether they would be theatrically re-enacted or, as they are, simply placed in slideshow fashion, as if without any editorial comment, as if we had not just watched an hour's worth of the creator's case against Edward. The five documentary images — a headline-worthy sentence comprising five bold statements — are animated by all the dramatization that has preceded them.

One of the master terms in Stanley Cavell's television-specific lexicon — "monitoring" — presents itself as especially fecund in the context of television studies more broadly. In his use of the word, we glean at least two striking valences: a literal sense of an actual monitor (the "set" or "tube" as it was known, and now more commonly, the "screen"); and an even more generative figurative incarnation, namely, that of our activity of watching, of addressing our attention to the world-as-we-see-it-represented on the set, on the screen. Drawing these two elements together, we may be said to monitor the monitor. Even so, the tautology resists its claim to gimmick, since it establishes for Cavell the kind of activity we find ourselves involved in as we relate to the medium: in short, not viewing (as with film, and the world *viewed*), but monitoring.[10] Cavell, then, offers us one of the primary, if not the singular, aesthetic stakes for the ontological difference between film and television: where film is understood as "*a succession of automatic world projections*," television is taken to be "*a current of simultaneous event reception*."[11]

A bravura sequence in "Pride and Joy" (s1:e8) draws many of the foregoing lines of thought together, and in masterful composite helps us navigate the experience of watching television and film and also the activity of writing about them, indeed, coming to terms with their ontological deviations and overlaps. As Elizabeth and Philip embark on a tour of Australia, confetti flies — but the film stock has been

10. Cavell, "The Fact of Television," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1984), 252.
11. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971; Enlarged edition, 1979), 72; Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 252 (italics in both originals). See also Garrett Stewart, "'Assertions in Technique': Tracking the Medial 'Thread' in Cavell's Filmic Ontology" (23-40) and Stephen Mulhall, "What a Genre of Film Might Be: Medium, Myth, and Morality" (88-104), both in *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema: Turning Anew to the Ontology of Film a Half-Century after* The World Viewed, ed. David LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

warmed, saturated, and the frame rate slowed.[12] Elizabeth and Philip are in a slow-moving car on parade, the Queen waving and smiling, the Prince watching her. Diegetic sound has been stripped away, leaving only the crash of spent flash bulbs — with a burst of light to bleach the frame. Next, we are shown colour archival film footage from the 1954 procession in Sydney, with frame-lines in place, suggesting we are looking through the lens of the camera itself. From one frame to the next, the image is reduced — and shifted to black and white — as it appears on a television screen halfway around the world, the Queen Mother watching. And there we are — *also* watching (her and the small screen before her). Time and again in *The Crown*, the available media (including in this case historical voiceover narration from the live broadcast) are braided, blended, and otherwise composited to create a formidable, many-layered audio-visual texture. In *The Crown*, film becomes television and then television is filmed at which point it is given back to us as the show, understood itself to be part of today's television landscape.

Moving on, with Cavell's helpful conceptual vocabulary in mind, our experience of *The Crown* is enriched for the nuance of his terminological distinctions. For instance, we would be more accurate in describing what the Queen does when she "watches" TV not as viewing, but as monitoring. There is something manifestly, and even pleasurably, appropriate about such a mode of relation when invoking Elizabeth II — a sense of her power, but also of her distance while imposing it, of "overseeing" (of monitoring) that befits a reigning sovereign, which it appears, TV makes of us all (yet another sense of "royal watchers"). Indeed, in some highly consequential way, the job of the Queen — as defined and delivered by Elizabeth — is precisely to "watch over" her subjects, the Commonwealth, etc., and not to overtly comment or brashly lay claim to one's control. Mainly because of her power, whether exercised explicitly or withheld for a perhaps even greater exhibition of the same, the Queen is always poised not merely to bear witness to "the news," but to manifest it, to become it. Hence, the curious way in which her long life involved or paralleled certain traits of television as taxonomized by Cavell, principally, in the way her days persistently toggled between the ordinary and the eventful. Thus, "serial procedure" as we find it expressed by the medium of television is a suitable syntagma for the Queen's position, as Cavell puts it:

12. *The Crown*, "Pride and Joy" (s1, e8), 00:31:18.

> the establishing of a stable condition punctuated by repeated crises or events that are not developments of the situation requiring a single resolution, but intrusions or emergencies — of humor, or adventure, or talent, or misery — each of which runs a natural course and thereupon rejoins the realm of the uneventful; which is perhaps to say, serial procedure is undialectical.[13]

Such would be the case in an historical glance at the invention of television (and its technological development during her reign) and a look at certain facts of the Queen's temperament, say, her way of inhabiting the role. But it is a further marvel of the medium that *The Crown* has taken up this uncanny imbrication of technology and temperament, and given us a show that so overtly and artfully makes that intimacy an additional feature of its achievements. *The Crown* is a television show that illustrates the "serial procedure" of the medium's format and of the Queen's form of life. Both are, in Cavell's sense, "undialectical" since both offer "a current of simultaneous event reception." TV, like the Queen, is perpetually an audience to the event and the uneventful.

Given our interest in the relationship between form and content in metatelevision, Cavell's use of the word "format" as the analogue for "show" or "series" is telling since the word activates our attunement to the shape or configuration of the medium as we come to know it on screen. Familiarity with his work from *Must We Mean What We Say?* — such as "Knowing and Acknowledging" (so ably giving us *King Lear* anew) — and aware of how "acknowledgment" functions in his reading of *Othello* in Part IV of *The Claim of Reason*, we are prepared to recognize Cavell's quintessential aggregation of diverse texts and topics, his gathering of concepts from myriad discourses and disciplines, and arrive where philosophical skepticism meet television studies, including shifts in diction to suit the occasion (e.g., Cavell, here aware of the latent conceptual potencies of assonance, of pun, trades "succession" for "successful," as earlier we heard the two senses of "current" — meaning present, adjectively, and in noun form meaning something that flows):

> My claim about the aesthetic medium of television can now be put this way: its successful formats are to be understood as revelations (acknowledgments) of

13. Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 258.

> the conditions of monitoring, and by means of a serial-episode procedure of composition, which is to say, by means of an aesthetic procedure in which the basis of a medium is acknowledged primarily by the format rather than primarily by its instantiations.[14]

In other words, television shows show us the conditions for the possibility of acknowledgment. And in a doubleness suited to meta-art, we not only witness such acknowledgment "in" or as we say "on" television (e.g., by characters who interact in a drama; talk show hosts who kibitz with guests; or athletes communicating in the field of play), but through our own individual relationship to the audio-visual display we are said to be monitoring (viz., our TV watching): we "watchers" are situated in a place of near-perpetual demand for acknowledgment by televisual proceedings; we are called upon to monitor these "revelations," yes, but also to realize that such moments hold us captive, call us to respond in kind (or, occasionally, to deny such acknowledgment, to avert our eyes, to turn away, even to turn off the show); we may even be especially hard on a show that was, by all estimations, "made for us" — e.g., as fans of a prior series or a prominent actor — and yet, we demure. Such perversities suggest that we are, indeed, in a relationship (of some sort) with the shows we love, and even the ones we don't.

II.

The foregoing notes find canny expression in "Fagan" (s4:e5), an episode that begins with archival television footage of news anchor Richard Threlkeld reporting, played at fullscreen, and faded in from black: "Finally, from London, under the heading, 'Is Nobody Safe Anymore?' a royal ruckus has started over the man who has had an audience with Queen Elizabeth, uninvited and unannounced, in the Queen's bedroom in the middle of the night." Cut to a BBC News report that includes the salacious claim of "blood stains on the Queen's bed." Then a third report with a helicopter flying over Buckingham Palace. A fourth report shifts to the cover of the *Daily Mail*, but this

14. Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 252.

time with a photograph of the actor, Tom Brooke, who plays the thirty-year old Michael Fagan, including a cut-in close-up of his face. Switch to additional unaltered, time-of documentary footage. The montage continues with yet more news, more newspapers, and then the insertion of faux documentary footage of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, that is, as played by Gillian Anderson. Finally, our camera begins to pan out from the convex glass television set to reveal the Queen (that is, Olivia Colman) in profile watching television, her TV set, set to Channel One. A reverse shot gives us a clearer picture of the Queen's face as she watches the news coverage, which, of course is mainly about her ("For ten minutes, he sat talking six feet from the Queen." "The Queen has carried on performing her duties seemingly unperturbed, despite the unprecedented and severe level of threat that the intruder posed.") A final shot — before the opening credit sequence — a slow zoom-in on the photograph of Tom Brooke (as Michael Fagan) on the Queen's TV screen. When the episode resumes, we are given a lower third: "Three months earlier."

Part of Michael Fagan's sad prehistory to his encounter with the Queen is a televised reprimand of any-and-all such "Fagans" from Margaret Thatcher (again, Anderson, this time in voiceover, as stock footage plays on Fagan's TV set).[15] In the aftermath of the break-in, it will be Thatcher who will be watching TV too, and listening with concern and awkward silence as she and the Home Secretary are themselves reprimanded for their "unprecedented failure" in accounting for the security breach.[16] The episode concludes with the Queen watching TV alone — archival footage of soldiers mixed with Anderson-as-Thatcher waving to the victory parade in the wake of the Falkland Islands War.[17] When Philip enters the room, the TV volume sufficiently audible to be heard below their conversation, Elizabeth offers a take on Thatcher:

> ELIZABETH: I think that woman's getting ahead of herself, and now all this increased security.
>
> PHILIP: Well, she's trying to protect you.

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15. *The Crown*, "Fagan" (s4, e5), 00:12:14. A few years prior to *The Crown*, a Thatcher insertion was made at the outset of *Pride* (2014, dir., Matthew Warchus), where archival television footage of the prime minister is used to illustrate her antagonism to the characters in the diegetic space.
16. Ibid., 00:43:40. The events that inspired the episode "Fagan" also inform the Playhouse Presents (2012-15) episode "Walking the Dogs" (s1, e8), in which Emma Thompson plays the Queen and Eddie Marsan plays "the intruder."
17. *The Crown*, "Fagan," 00:47:15.

ELIZABETH: From what?

PHILIP: From lunatics.

ELIZABETH: Normal people. My subjects.

PHILIP: Come on. That man was clearly a lunatic. And a fool.

ELIZABETH: Yes, but in the best sense, like Lear's fool.

PHILIP: Don't get all . . . Shakespearean with me.

Yes, Philip, that is precisely what the Queen does: she gets Shakespearean, and in the best sense. And while she is not merely being Shakespearean in her awareness of such a figure as "Lear's fool" (a figure fit for a King, or a Queen, who stands in need of being told hard truths by those willing to risk punishment — "whipped for speaking true,"[18] or who stand in such a shadow so as to evade it), the show is also creating a scenario for us to consider the Shakespeareanness of the Queen's royal predicament. Indeed, the television is Elizabeth's fool ("the boob tube"): it speaks to her of the common man; from her solitary space with the set (invaded time and again by husband, family, and servants), she is recurrently, from episode to episode, presented with a country, kingdom, and commonwealth over which she exists as sovereign. More precisely, in the context of Cavell's clever taxonomy, we have in Elizabeth a figure not just built for monitoring (like we all are), but also faced with being monitored (such as she is, as Queen). Given the temporal sweep of her reign, coming into being at the dawn of television and persisting in the aftermath of Philip's death at ninety-nine, nearly seventy-years later, in the age of Twitter, Twitch, and TikTok, one can wonder if she was not among the most consistently monitored — surveyed — humans in the history of *homo sapiens*.

The Queen's emotional perceptiveness — her depth of empathy (as acknowledged and playfully mocked by Philip) — arrives in part from her tuitions *by* television, i.e., her education by the medium, the cumulative force of what she has seen and heard of the world she reigns over and monitors from the privacy of her citadel. Given our temporal proximity to a recent global pandemic that required our own sequestration, we may now better recognize that the Queen has been in quarantine

18. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. S. Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), act I, scene IV.

since the 1950s, a cautious person who makes only occasional, socially-distant forays into the world of others. As a technology of intimacy — a means of, or mode for, bringing near sights and sounds that lie far away — "tele-vision" as well as "tele-hearing" proved a godsend for the Queen's "contact" with humanity, her sense of her subjects, and, not incidentally, her appreciation of her effect on them (on this last measure, consider the outsized impact of her televised tear in the wake of the Aberfan tragedy [s3:e3]).

And turned the other way, as the years pass, she exhibited her proclivity as an increasingly savvy student of media; she had a knack (not a natural one like Philip's, but a deliberately practiced skill) for shaping how she (and her family) were seen (or not seen) by the world (recall again her demand that after its initial airing on television, the documentary, *Royal Family* [1969], a home movie of sorts, should never be broadcast again). Watching "Aberfan" with Morgan's *The Queen* (2006, dir. Stephen Frears), one can appreciate how the film is an extended study in how there is always something new to learn about television, even after decades of tutelage; the difficulty of the medium often offers up — even to the most experienced viewers, and to those who appear viewed on those same screens — another meaning for the "mystery of existence" that television presents to us all: not just how to watch it (in our own homes) but how to be watched by it, monitored, as when one is a global celebrity, or even a figure of international renown, said to be imbued by and sanctioned with divine power.

III.

When Cavell speaks of "our continued attraction by events, our will to understand our lives, or to take interest in them, from their dramas rather than from their stability, from the incident and the accident rather than from the resident, from their themes rather than from their structures — to theatricalize ourselves,"[19] we may recognize a description of how form and content interact in *The Crown*, namely, how the formal nature of the show as television provides what television can provide (e.g., attraction by events, dramas, incident, accident, themes, theatricalization of the self, etc.), and

19. Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 262.

that the series, as assigned to covering the sweep of the Royal Family's history from roughly the reign of King Edward VIII to something like the contemporary era, offers a condition less and less familiar to our up-to-the-minute present (with its social media churn, race and gender reckonings, contested elections, Capitol insurrection, pandemic, climate change, wars, and so on), namely, the *other side* of Cavell's comparison: the stability, the resident, the structures. The "television time" of *The Crown* affords the duration needed to account for "the interminable everyday, passages and abysses of the routine."[20] Again, we are given by Peter Morgan a rare practicum in the comparison of "film time" and "television time," namely, *The Queen* in relation to *The Crown*, in which the former obeys the narrative shape of a dramatic feature film (as it were, contained in its running time), whereas the latter *expects* that its serialization will couple the everyday *and* the eventful, that the eventful is necessary to interrupt the ordinary.

Morgan's brand of metatelevision illuminates the form/content relationship in more than just a recurrent focus on (the) media (e.g., in the familiar shape of the TV set/screen and its living presence among the characters; the allusion to, or inclusion of, archival or fictive television broadcasts, and so on). His historically-minded treatment of narrative also heightens our perception of the show's jostling between an invocation of the (1) Queen as a historical figure and the (2) evocation of the Queen by an actor (in our case, serial inhabitants of the role: Claire Foy, Olivia Colman, and Imelda Staunton, and serial correlates in other roles). Such doubleness or duplicate status points up the familiar and fraught fiction/nonfiction divide,[21] not least because it applies pressure to the (3) historical specificity of the *actor*: in part because of the historical referent Elizabeth II, the embodied presence of these actors is also at issue (much in the spirit of Jacques Rivette's notion that "every film is a documentary of its own making"[22]). Indeed, these valences — viz., of Queen-as-historical-figure, Actor-as-Queen, and Actor-as-historical-figure — are complicated by the need to recognize a fourth propitious, if familiar, category: (4) the Queen-as-fictional-character that can be "played" by a multi-

20. Ibid., 263.
21. See Carl Plantinga, "The Limits of Appropriation: Subjectivist Accounts of the Fiction/Nonfiction Film Distinction," in *The Philosophy of Documentary Film: Image, Sound, Fiction, Truth*, ed. D. LaRocca (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 113-24.
22. See Dennis Lim, "It's Actual Life. No, It's Drama. No It's Both," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/movies/22hybrid.html.

tude of actors (not just those featured in *The Crown*). Diana, Princess of Wales, has her share of iterations as well: *Diana* (played by Naomi Watts, 2013, dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel), *Spencer* (played by Kristen Stewart, 2021, dir. Pablo Larraín), and so on. Still more, the evolving taxonomy invites us to consider yet a fifth incarnation: (5) the historical-Queen-as-character. As expected, a heady *mise en abîme* prevails. Thus, we count (1) Elizabeth Alexandra Mary, b. 1926; (2) Foy/Colman/Staunton in their roles as the character named the Queen; (3) Foy/Colman/Staunton as actors themselves historically situated; (4) Elizabeth II as a type or character to be played by many actors; and (5) a return to the historical Queen while imagining that, in fact, her role is *also* a performance, and yet another kind of character to consider. In a clever bit of identity collapse, Elizabeth chose the name Elizabeth for her royal moniker — her given name as stage name — and so we may have lost touch with the duality, layering, or sense of "ascension" that customarily abide appointments via profound nomination (as when David becomes King Edward VIII). In this respect, Prince Charles followed her model by retaining his Christian when anointed King Charles III.

With film in mind, Cavell has spoken about the uncanny ways that a film actor (or, better, star) predominates over "the kind of character an author creates."[23] "An exemplary screen performance is one in which, at a given time, a star is born."[24] We have been asking, then, how this relationship plays out on television, or at least in *The Crown*, and whether its metatextual and metatelevisual attributes affect our sensibility for what may or may not be a cinematic difference. For instance, when we have spent two seasons — that is, twenty episodes, or roughly twenty hours — with *The Crown*, whom do we feel we have spent time with? The Queen or Claire Foy, or the tertium quid, Foy-as-the-Queen? The fourth category — the historical-Queen-as-character — adds further richness (and some measure of disorientation) to the order of operations, and indeed, to our sensibility for who and what we watch. Consider that having different actors play different ages is not novel, and yet the shift in this case may *reinforce* (not diminish) the actor's prominence over character that Cavell identifies in film. By substituting who plays the Queen after twenty hours, we are forced to contend with the reality of the serially deployed actors — namely, that *they*

23. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 29.
24. Ibid., 28.

change rather than one of them "ages" (e.g., by means of prosthetics[25]). Thus, despite so much time spent with say, Foy-as-the-Queen, we are — at the cleave point of s3:e1 — reminded of the "actor-as" structure of *The Crown*, indeed, of all historically-based, biographically-informed cinema and television. And doubtless, the "actor-as" structure leaks off the frame to have us fathom the dramatic role Elizabeth II played since the early 1950s. The role of a lifetime became a lifetime role.

Given the state of prosthetics and VFX, it is conceivable that Morgan could have retained Foy for the full run of the show — for all six seasons — and doctored her appearance via latex and digital effects to achieve phases of aging. Let me suggest, then, that his choice to cast three actors as he does — e.g., to have them appear serially, in sequence, in equal measure, twenty episodes a piece — is another valence of metatelevision in so far as we are called, yet again, to reflect on form and content, and in this specific case, how the very nature of our embodied actors informs the creation of a fictional presence on screen, the personage we grow used to calling, first with Foy, then with Colman, and lastly with Staunton, "Her Majesty, the Queen." And because of that seriality — that surreality? — we can say that each of them is the Queen, and without being clever but simply beholden to our experience, none of them is the Queen. That tension between faith and doubt, between immersion and alienation, seems very much a piece of a metatelevisual enterprise. Morgan is there to entertain *and* to estrange, to give us a world boldly realized (e.g., the world of Queen Elizabeth II), and also, as if to remind us of the show's aesthetic achievements, to be sure we are aware that it is, at last, art.[26]

Like many films and television series that present themselves as historical fiction or docudrama, the divide or divisions between historical person, actor, and character, are regularly limned, crossed, teased, and otherwise contended with. In the present case, we can say that *The Crown* is a television show purportedly about real people and real events (and related boilerplate one hears about such postulations). But it is first art, of course, and so everything I have been saying about Elizabeth, born in 1926 (just a few months before Stanley Cavell was born in Atlanta), I should

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25. See my "The Performance of Plasticity: Method Acting, Prosthetics, and the Virtuosity of Embodied Transformation," in *Plastics, Environment, Culture, and the Politics of Waste*, ed. T. Konrad (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 216-37.
26. See my "Dueling Conceptions of History," in *Hamilton and Philosophy: Revolutionary Thinking*, ed. A. Rabinowitz and R. Arp (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2017), 217-25.

also attribute to the diegetic character — and her figuration — in the show known as *The Crown*. More especially, I should like to underscore the extent to which Morgan's creative decision to make metatelevision his *modus operandi* gives shape to my claims here, including those that draw on and from Cavell. In short, we can neither establish the extent nor the specifics of how the Queen's reign — and her personal life — were, in fact, informed by the presence of television in her life (e.g., as personal company and as a technology of professional display), though we can say with confidence that, as a tool of his particular work of art, Morgan has deftly used the presence and representation of TV to masterful effect in his television series, that is, to offer a *speculative* history that draws the media (and thus the show) into a persistently reflexive realm, to lavish the *mise-en-scène* with an unapologetic fascination in the recursion made by possible by obsessively featuring television on television.[27] *The Crown* is interested in the Queen — and her experience of and with television — and *The Crown* is also interested in itself as television, that is, as fiction.

While the epistemology of such metatelevision limits us to claims about the role of television in the Queen's life as known to us by *The Crown* (and hence places the show closer to historiography than history), we can nevertheless draw salient lessons from the way the series is predicated on a sense of television's broader, historical presence and influence beyond this fictitious rendering. The *fabula* of *The Crown* (and to a large extent also its TV-centric *syuzhet*), thus, above all, acknowledges the importance of television as a global technological and social phenomenon of supreme cultural importance since at least the early 1950s. In this respect, Morgan and company do not merely represent possible (or even probable) occasions in the life of Elizabeth II and her family, but artistically implicate us — the viewers — in our own habits of relationship to and with the medium known as television. Indeed, we are all — including Her Majesty — subjects with respect to television.

Like us, the Queen uses television to process her experience, including the reality of the outside world, what lies beyond the palace gates, and including, when those gates are opened (or illegally breached) and the world's reality enters of its own accord. TV is a medium, a monitor, and a mediator. Admittedly, we may be unlike the

27. For more on reflexivity in a cinematic context, see David LaRocca, ed., *Metacinema: The Form and Content of Filmic Reference and Reflexivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Queen in our viewing by being more prone to make television viewing count as personal experience — to employ it as a proxy; thus, as we sketch our private journal entries, embodied, in-person events are placed on par with the viewing of specific episodes and seasons.[28] In turn, and by logical extensional, when we meet with friends, family, and even professional colleagues, we are repeatedly reminded that "what we watch" has become a respectable domain of shared, elaborate, indeed, serious social investigation. We move from personal memory to memory of television in a single breath, again letting that weave remain unremarked upon, or even tightening the braid so the distinction is lost altogether (in short, so that TV experience become claimable as one's own genuine experience, however impersonal and indifferent the medium remains to individuals: that a show "feels made for me" is part of TV's special talent, perhaps along with a few shrewd algorithms). Still more, in an age of political fragmentation and polarizing cultural tumult, television shows may be among the few media territories we wish to explore together — not just as a *lingua franca* but also as a *terra firma*. Contested, for sure, but not incontestable.

In a further association that links to Cavell's remarks, television provides the Queen with company — not just the "fool's" commentary that any sovereign should be glad to have at court, but the comfort of being acknowledged and of having an opportunity to acknowledge others; to alternate productively, that is, between response and responsibility. She is, in effect, like all of us, *addressed* — talked to (by the television); in our screening of her watching, we see that she herself is often invoked (by contrast, something exceedingly rare for the plebian); and for her own part, admitting her power, she is also uniquely able to respond, on her own terms, to the way she is monitored by television; as invoked here for good reason, Morgan's *The Queen* should be considered a feature-length meditation on the interaction between Elizabeth and her television audience ("Normal people. My subjects."). For a person walled off on fifty-one acres in the centre of London since the days when Winston Churchill inhabited 10 Downing Street, the television-as-companion is a not an incidental feature of the second Elizabethan consciousness. Cavell speaks to the signifi-

28. I have written of a similar phenomenon with respect to war films, namely, that for many, experience of war films amounts to one's (only) experience of war. See "War Films and the Ineffability of War," in *The Philosophy of War Films*, ed. D. LaRocca (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 1-77. See also my comments in the documentary film, *War Movie: The American Battle in Cinema* (2023, dir. Steven Summers).

cance of the medium for such purposes. For someone who is said to have or receive "an audience" as among the most vaunted aspects of her inherited duties, Cavell's remarks resonate deeply:

> A notable feature of this list [of the formats, or serializations, of television] is the amount of talk that runs across the forms. This is an important reason, no doubt, for the frequent description of television as providing "company." But what does this talk signify, how does it in particular signify that one is not alone, or anyway that being alone is not unbearable?[29]

Again, our recent pandemic lifestyles may provide a fuller reply than at any previous era in our lives — that is, a phase of the world in which more television content was available than ever before in history *and* had more reach than at any prior historical juncture. Still more, many people had or made more time to watch, leaving us to wonder how much TV watching is ideal, or even advisable (some accounts claim that retirees in the United States average fifty hours per week — something like a typical work week pre-retirement). But again, as *The Crown* would have it, the Queen appears to have held close to the television set from the earliest days of her reign, whether alone or in company. As Cavell continues with his own answer to the above question, one informed by lessons from the ontology of television — and its differences from the ontology of cinema:

> Partly, of course, this is a function of the simultaneity of the medium — or of the fact that at any time it might be live and that there is no sensuous distinction between the live and the repeat, or the replay: the others are *there*, if not shut in this room, still caught at this time. One is receiving or monitoring them, like callers; and receiving or monitoring, unlike screening and projection, does not come between their presence to the camera and their presentness to us.[30]

29. Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 253.
30. Ibid., 253.

The notion that one is "called upon" by visitors is an antiquated locution (as is the social structure that supported it), but the phrase splendidly captures the potential for acknowledgment (including response and reception), all in their Cavellian registers and senses of syncopation. For the Queen, "monitoring" one's television visitors "like callers" would feel native to any sense of a job in which the choreography of your interactions with others were formalized, and indeed, monitored for the sake of an ancient nation, an inherited protocol, and the jealously inscribed histories of both. Yet, stepping back to the first sentence of this tandem ("called upon"), there is something uncanny about the observation that "there is no sensuous distinction between the live and the repeat, or the replay" — and thus, as one is "called upon" to watch, to be an audience *for* a television show, one may also call *upon* a show to visit with it — and also to revisit it (as with replay, rerun, re-view, and re-vision[31]). The "simultaneity of the medium" can be felt keenly when "calling up" (as we say now, "on demand," a royal command of a sort) one or more shows from the history of the television archive.[32] Since "the others are *there*, if not shut in this room, still caught at this time," we are made strangely aware of the "presentness" of these others, whether they appear in *The Golden Girls*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Gossip Girl*, *Girls*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, or *New Girl*. One need neither be the Queen nor in quarantine to register these effects, which television makes possible.

More than just becoming yet another instance of the "simultaneity of the medium," Morgan's metatelevision in *The Crown* amplifies Cavell's sense of television as monitoring the everyday (which can, of course, include the extraordinary as we find it in "the news"). Thus, as we must, we watch television in the midst of our everyday (letting it, inviting it to keep us company), while — in the case of *The Crown* — we watch people watching TV, and thereby "enter," or join, their everyday lives, however vaunted, already in progress. The entrée into such realms is one thing when the show depicts the gritty, crass, precarious everyday of the American working class

31. For more on the Cavellian significance of re-viewing, see Cavell on watching and rewatching in "The Advent of Videos," *Artspace* (1988); reprinted in *Cavell on Film*, ed. W. Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 167-73. See also Kate Rennebohm, "Chantal Akerman and Stanley Cavell: Viewing in *La Captive* and Reviewing in Moral Perfectionism," in *Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, ed. D. LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 253-73, and her "Re-Vision: Moving Image Media, The Self, and Ethical Thought in the 20th Century" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2018).

32. For more on the relation of television to cinema, see Byron Davies, "The Specter of the Electronic Screen: Bruno Varela's Reception of Stanley Cavell," in *Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, 72-90.

— as in *The Honeymooners*, *All in the Family*, *The Simpsons*, *Roseanne*, *Married with Children*, or *Kevin Can F**k Himself* — shows that feature a television, or presume one to exist in the proscenium; and it is another thing when we are peering into a rarefied inner sanctum, the private halls of power (where only Royals or dignitaries and vetted staff are permitted). Depending on which scene of encounter you choose, the qualities and implications of televisual voyeurism are augmented; it matters what we monitor because it speaks to our condition. Like Michael Fagan, we are decidedly *not* where we should be; yet for the structure of metatelevision, our presence is not a threat (as Fagan's was taken to be), but unknown or ignored (as the actor dismisses the camera in her midst), as if we were each equipped with a Ring of Gyges. How else to account for our odd (repeated) invitation to the Queen's bedroom, and the discomfiting spectre of seeing her in her nightgown, indeed, watching her sleep? We *are* intruders, interlopers, trespassers. Yet our transgression — in a moment befitting the spiritual exercises of a moral perfectionist — turns us back upon ourselves; metatelevision becomes an aid to metacognition.[33]

33. For further remarks on screen aids to reflection, see my "Contemplating the Sounds of Contemplative Cinema: Stanley Cavell and Kelly Reichardt," in *Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, 274-318.