

The Truth of Skepticism: Philosophy, Tragedy, and Sexual Jealousy

David Girard

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Philosophy Department
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

Abstract

This dissertation is an attempt and, if you will, a temptation to engage with the ‘disturbing’ prospect of the truth of skepticism. All of Stanley Cavell’s works refer to the truth of skepticism, and yet the discourse surrounding this concept is sparse and often engaged minimally. The truth of skepticism is 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 In order to make sense of what he means by what “we think of as knowing” Cavell provides a philosophical framework in which to understand skepticism and what it threatens: through his notion of “criteria” taken from Ludwig Wittgenstein; the concept of the “ordinary” derived from the works of J.L. Austin; and the “search for community” as a problem of “acknowledgement” or “avoidance” as opposed to a problem of knowledge. I argue that the “standard” (Stephen Mulhall’s) reading of Cavell fails to fully account for the truth of skepticism and I propose reading Cavell as a Nietzschean *Versucher* – one who *attempts* and searches endlessly, never fully embracing any particular view. By reading Cavell in this way, I explore how to do genuine philosophy and consider how to address the role of traditional epistemological problems in the face of Cavell’s framework.

Beyond the traditional philosophical questions of skepticism, I address how the theoretical musings of the first half of the dissertation can be used in practice – or one could say how they reflect on the ordinary. Following Cavell, I connect philosophy and art as sister disciplines concerned with similar problems such as epistemological skepticism itself. To show these connections I analyze two plays and three films: Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* and *Othello*, alongside *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), and *Her* (2013). By engaging these pieces with Cavell’s philosophical framework in mind, I show how sexual jealousy is a form of living one’s skepticism in a real context that cannot be so easily dismissed by philosophers who claim that the skeptic’s position is somehow empty, confused, or nonsense. By showing how the threat of skepticism is a part of our ordinary lives, I conclude by considering how we might *recover* from our skepticism.

Skepticism is not the end, it is the beginning.

¹ *The Claim of Reason*, p.241

Contents

Abstract	ii
 Part One: The Coin	
1.0.0 Introduction	1
1.1.0 Criteria	5
1.1.1 Wittgenstein	6
1.1.2 Kripke: Agreement v. Community	10
1.1.3 Austin and the Ordinary	16
1.1.4 The Search for Community	20
1.2.0 Defining Skepticism	30
1.2.1 Cavell's Odd Claim	32
1.2.2 Kinds of Skepticism	36
1.2.3 "Forced upon us"	48
1.2.4 Standard vs. Skeptical: A Matter of Refutation	53
1.3.0 The Nature of Philosophy	64
1.3.1 Anecdotes and Acknowledgment	66
1.3.2 The nature of (genuine) philosophy	69
1.3.3 The role of traditional philosophy	78
1.3.4 "Incipit Tragoedia"	87
 Part Two: Tragedy and Sexual Jealousy	
2.0.0 Introduction	94
2.1.0 Art as Philosophy	98
2.1.1 Organisation and Reorganisation	98
2.1.2 Shakespeare	109
2.1.3 Comedy of Remarriage	113
2.1.4 The New Comedy of Remarriage	123
2.1.5 Memories of Tragedy	133
2.1.6 Living One's Skepticism	139

2.2.0 Jealousy	146
2.2.1 Justifying Jealousy	148
2.2.2 The Dangers of a Jealous Man	158
2.2.3 The Only State-Sanctioned Relationship Structure	165
2.2.4 Recovery	172
3.0.0 Concluding Acknowledgements	182
3.1.0 Formal Conclusion	185
2.2.1 On Part One	186
2.2.2 On Part Two	192
3.2.0 Final Remarks	198
Bibliography	201

1.0.0 Introduction

“If not at the beginning of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, since what starts philosophy is no more to be known at the outset than how to make an end of it; and if not at the opening of Philosophical Investigations, ... How shall we let this book teach us, this or anything?”
– Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p.3.

My aim for this dissertation is no less than an *attempt* at acknowledging the depths at which the truth of skepticism is a part of being human. The truth of skepticism is the idea 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.”² It seems to me that such an endeavour is missing in our philosophical education and that this has grave implications for how we *treat* one another as philosophers and people. Engaging skepticism at this level requires not only an analysis of some of the traditional conceptions of skepticism, but also a sincere engagement of the intellectual tools provided by the late Stanley Cavell. As far as I’m concerned Cavell is one of the few people who have come to terms with the immortality of skepticism, its importance for doing genuine philosophy, as well as living a good life.

For anyone who has read the first sentence of *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, one will likely note, first, that it’s quite a convoluted sentence to start a book with, and second that because he starts in this manner, it should be evident from the outset that philosophical *priority* is at the core of his concerns. Likewise, this dissertation is also concerned with the question of philosophical priority. What makes Cavell’s contribution as interesting as it is important is that unlike many others who would impose some form of priority – i.e. a rigid methodology for coming to answers – Cavell intentionally and explicitly wants to do away with the notion of priority. In other words, for Cavell, and as I hope to show for me, there is no singular “space” in which to begin a philosophical investigation. This lack of priority, while freeing in a sense, also makes it harder to formulate a clear conception of Cavell’s philosophy since, in a sense, we should be able to “begin” anywhere. What this also entails is that there is likewise no clear indication as to where things “end.” This is not so much a problem as it is a challenge.

² Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.241.

Consequently, I have chosen the following structure to present my work. First and foremost, the dissertation is divided into two major “parts” Part I and Part II. Part I is, in many ways, equivalent to a master’s thesis on how I read Cavell where I am establishing both my interpretation of Cavell, as well as engaging the secondary literature to establish my position relative to the “standard.” While interesting, my overarching concerns are *not* about “proving” that my interpretation is correct or attempting to “refute” other views. I may provide plenty of reasons for rejecting some views, but as I hope to show throughout, I don’t think the business of refutation is all that helpful towards achieving understanding between peers. As such, as I formulate ideas through the first two chapters in Part I, I move rather *quickly*. This is not a companion reader to Cavell, as I am not interested in explaining all of his ideas (there are far too many of them and many could take the center of their own dissertation). Instead, I focus primarily on explaining his notion of “criteria,” which he takes from Ludwig Wittgenstein, his understanding of the “ordinary,” which he takes from J.L. Austin, his notion of “searching for community,” and his controversial concept of “the truth of skepticism.” I move through explaining the bulk of these topics in my first chapter (1.1.0 Criteria) in quick succession and take the bulk of the second chapter (1.2.0 Defining Skepticism) to explain the truth of skepticism.

In the second chapter, I highlight key features of our traditional approach of responding to the skeptic: some philosophers rely, more often than not – and justifiably or not – on *ad hominem* attacks against the skeptic. This response from some philosophers, I show, is puzzling, and potentially disheartening. It is not merely that many philosophers reject the skeptical conclusion – there is no harm in rejecting a thesis – my concern is that many philosophers reject the *skeptic*. This comes from various formulations surrounding skepticism: under most circumstances the skeptic is treated with mistrust, but then beyond that we have claims about the skeptic themselves – that they do not make “sense”, that they are “irrational”, that they are attempting to “speak outside language games,” etc. Under the worst case I consider, the skeptic is treated as someone who is incoherent, obscure, and lacking in any substance worth taking seriously.³ My work here is an attempt at addressing this blatant disrespect towards those of us who develop their philosophical ideas under the influence of skepticism. Within this overarching claim, I more explicitly show how Cavell must be understood as taking the truth of skepticism with the utmost

³ See my discussion in 1.2.1.

seriousness. By the end of the second chapter, I show that the “standard” interpretation of Cavell, as championed by Stephen Mulhall, fails to account for the truth of skepticism in Cavell’s work. However, my goal here is not so much to reject Mulhall as it is to explore the depths of skepticism. One of the considerations that Cavell pulls from the depths is that skepticism is “forced upon us.”⁴ If skepticism is thrust upon us against our will, it is discouraging to think that for some it could be so easily dismissed by claiming it is “nonsense” and yet for the individual under the thrall of skepticism this dismissal remains an impossibility.

The third chapter is where I begin a tonal shift from the preceding sections. While up until this point the bulk of my analysis focuses around addressing Cavell and his secondary literature directly, I take a moment to both reflect on my own method, and also on the ways in which Cavell’s work expands far beyond addressing “criteria” and “skepticism.” Ultimately, criteria and skepticism are connected – two sides of the same coin, I suggest – yet this connection also contains an inherent *tension*. According to Cavell, skepticism comes about when our criteria *fail* us and this failure has potentially devastating consequences under the right (or wrong) circumstances. The consequences Cavell is concerned with takes the form of tragedy.

While I give a proper introduction to Part II later, there are a few things I would forewarn. In some ways the remainder of the dissertation can be seen as an exploration of tragedy, although this might be a bit of an over simplification. Where Part I is a lead up from philosophical considerations surrounding criteria and skepticism to the concept of tragedy, Part II takes tragedy as its starting point. This can be seen by the fact that I connect Cavell’s notions of “criteria” and “skepticism” with Alva Noë’s (simpler) ideas of “organization” and “re-organization” as I discuss art as a philosophical practice. However, one should quickly realize (if not based on subject matter alone, then based on the very different *kinds* of examples I consider) that the scope of tragedy is quite vast. For this reason, after my discussion of art, I narrow the scope, first, by examining Cavell’s notion of the “comedy of remarriage” and eventually, a discussion surrounding sexual jealousy.

There are two things I would like to address about Part II before moving on. First, for any readers who are less interested in traditional problems surrounding philosophy of language and epistemology yet have an interest in art, tragedy, cinema, sexual jealousy, or discussions surrounding relationship structures generally, I recommend reading Part II first. This *should*

⁴ *The Claim of Reason*, p.139.

allow for an easier understanding of Part I which is latent with philosophical baggage that might otherwise discourage a reader less comfortable in engaging Cavell directly (like non-philosophers). Second, just as Part I might be difficult to grasp for non-philosophers, I suspect Part II might be just as jarring – or more so – for *philosophers*. I am, quite explicitly, taking a gamble in Part II. One theme that runs throughout this dissertation is the concept of “acknowledgement,” which, roughly speaking, is something we desire in the form of a community; a wish for the acknowledgement *of* a community. In the second half of the thesis, I am putting my own philosophical musings on display; I am seeking community. This personal approach will be jarring to some, but I contend that ultimately it is something we could use far more of in philosophy. What I *attempt* to provide in this dissertation is a path. I do not imagine it is a path all would or should follow, but I offer a path that *can* be followed.

Working on this material through the Covid-19 pandemic has been a taxing endeavour, but with the support of loved ones I have managed to not only develop as a philosopher and writer, but I would like to think as a person. While they often belittle their abilities to engage my work, I want to formally thank three of the most important people in my life at this time: Jessica Wallis, Charlotte Noxon, and Jessica Parant. They helped me maintain my sanity through these difficult times and directly contributed to the development of many ideas found in this dissertation. Without the care, patience, and insights they provided me, this dissertation would not be what it is today – their influence, while often un-citeable, are peppered throughout. I would also like to thank my committee members Vincent Bergeron, Nigel DeSouza, and Charles LeBlanc for taking part in the review of this (I suspect) unusual thesis, with a special shout out to Nigel for being capable of lifting spirits in the darkest of times. Outside those directly involved, I would also like to thank Mitia Rioux-Beaulne whose guidance and kindness throughout my graduate studies were invaluable to me. Of course, I must also thank Patrice Philie for without him, I might never have heard the name “Cavell.” I would especially like to thank Patrice for his patience and diligence on keeping me on the path during my mental health crisis in 2018. Finally, I would like to state a general thank you to all the people who looked at different parts of the thesis and project at various points. From the biggest to the smallest pieces of feedback, all of them are precious to me – they provide the kernels of acknowledgement that I need to keep advancing.

Part One: The Coin

1.1.0 Criteria

Cavell is indebted to two thinkers for his philosophical growth: Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. Both philosophers are taken as key figures in the tradition of “ordinary language philosophy”, but it should be made clear from the outset that Cavell differentiates himself from this tradition and has no interest in maintaining the conclusions often ascribed to that school of thought, namely to the conclusions that epistemological skepticism is nonsense or confused. In fact, his project can be seen as a *response* to some old, but nevertheless still relevant (for my purposes), interpretations of Wittgenstein that contend he attempts to refute skepticism. Cavell claims that “One misses the drive of Wittgenstein if one is not ... sufficiently open to the threat of skepticism (i.e., to the skeptic in oneself); or if one takes Wittgenstein ... to deny the truth of skepticism.”⁵ As such, if neither Cavell nor Wittgenstein is in the business of refuting skepticism, one might naturally ask what it is they are doing. – *But surely, they cannot be supporting epistemological skepticism!* – the equivalent of philosophical suicide, the end of thought (as far as some traditional epistemologists are concerned). This entire project of epistemological skepticism that stipulates that the world must either consist of Truth (certainty) or Nothing, is a fictional dichotomy. What Cavell shows with the help of Wittgenstein is that skepticism is not so much a philosophical position as it is a human experience. The truth of skepticism is a natural part of our lives in the same way that love, doubt, surprise, avoidance, or joy are perfectly natural experiences. I argue that the truth of skepticism is integral to Cavell’s philosophy because it is directly tied to criteria, the very backbone or foundation of our language. It is by discovering the limits of criteria, of our language, of our form(s) of life, that we encounter skepticism: “the fate of criteria, or their limitation, reveals, I should like to say, the truth of skepticism – though of course this may require a reinterpretation of what skepticism is or threatens.”⁶

To seriously understand skepticism then, I must first explain criteria and the role they play so that it can become clear what skepticism is and what it threatens. To do this, I begin by presenting a Cavellian interpretation of some passages from the *Philosophical Investigations*. In

⁵ *The Claim of Reason*, p.47.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.7.

contrast, I consider Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein in order to address some concerns and further elaborate on Cavell's conception of criteria. Subsequently, I consider how Austin fits into the picture as Cavell's stepping stone into the "ordinary." Finally, I address the search for community with all the aforementioned considerations in mind so as to establish how to properly understand the truth of skepticism as being a part of the human condition.

1.1.1 Wittgenstein

Something that is important to note is that logistically I could engage many of these considerations in a different order. The problem with reading Cavell is that before any particular component can be understood, one must also have a grasp of the whole. In isolation, Cavell's remarks on criteria might seem detached or lacking in concrete substance. Once pressed far enough, however, it should become clear that Wittgenstein's criteria are integral to how we view the world.

The simplest and crudest way to understand criteria, I think, is to imagine the case of instruction or teaching (an example I return to frequently). It is a common experience or trope for anyone who spends any time around children to be familiar with a case where a child asks the question "why" incessantly. There is a point at which our answers come to an end where all the instructor can say is "this is just the way things are" or "this is just what we do." Now there are cases where the child may ask the question "why" when we simply don't know: "why do we exist?" The best answer I can think of is there is no *reason*.⁷ Obviously we have *explanations*, but that's a different sort of question. For example, there are questions such as "why do we call a dog a dog?" One might describe cases in which it is correct to identify a quadruped of the genus *Canis* as a dog, but this doesn't answer the question of *why* so much as *how*. This is *how* we identify a dog. *Why* we call dogs "dogs" is because this is what we call them. Again, we can explain *how* we historically came to use the word, but that's not *why*. We could say that the *criteria* for what a dog *is* are these descriptive qualities such as being a quadruped of the genus *Canis*, with such and such characteristics and able to breed in such a way – the answers we give when we no longer have a reason *why*.

⁷ There is of course a biological *explanation* as to *how* humans come to be, but this doesn't tell us *why*. There could be a divine plan. Yet, even in the case there is the point where the child may still ask "but why did God make it so?" to which the instructor can only say "because it is God's will" or "because God knows what is best." One could still push the question further, but theological problems are not my concern.

I find this caricature of criteria is helpful towards understanding Wittgenstein, but the example I used is not of the type he is ultimately interested in. The criteria for identifying an animal will not somehow lead us to skepticism. This is important to note because Cavell notices that there is something “strange and familiar” about the notion of Wittgensteinian criteria. It is familiar in the sense that in order for us to understand what he means by “criteria” it must rely on our regular meaning of the word. If by “criteria” he meant something like “aberration” we would have a hard time understanding him and heavily scrutinize his word choice. Cavell remarks that there is “the trivial fact that the notion of a criterion is an everyday one and the somewhat less trivial fact that Wittgenstein’s account of it, while not exactly the same notion, is dependent on the everyday one.”⁸ Before pressing further, there are two things motivating Cavell’s subsequent moves: 1) he is aiming to answer the question, “What are Wittgensteinian criteria supposed to do?”⁹ and 2) he is responding to, what he calls, the Malcolm-Albritton view. The Malcolm-Albritton is the view that criteria are meant to establish certainty. What is “strange” about Wittgensteinian criteria is that his views about criteria cannot *possibly* lead use to certainty. So bearing this relation to its ordinary use, what kind of criteria is Wittgenstein concerned with?

Cavell’s attempt at a definition of criteria (generally) is the following: “criteria are specifications a given person or group sets up on the basis of which (and by means of, in terms of which) to judge (assess, settle) whether something has a particular status or value.”¹⁰ I take this to be the “ordinary” understanding of criteria that Wittgenstein must rely on. So, trivially, in my example of identifying a dog, we rely on some set of definite descriptions as criteria for determining whether something is a dog. However, what is more interesting (and important) is determining the ways in which Wittgenstein’s use diverges. Particularly, Cavell remarks that Wittgenstein’s use of criteria only involves cases in which no *standard* is involved:

In no case in which [Wittgenstein] appeals to the application of criteria is there a separate stage at which one might, explicitly or implicitly, appeal to the application of standards. To have criteria, in his sense, for something’s being so is to know whether, in an individual case, the criteria do or do not apply.¹¹

The examples where Wittgenstein applies the term “criteria” are cases where we cannot appeal to an authority or a set of rules. In other words, Wittgenstein is concerned with the cases where all

⁸ *The Claim of Reason*, p.6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.9.

¹¹ Ibid., p.13.

we can say is “this is just the way it is – these are the criteria we rely on.” An example of something Wittgenstein would not be interested in would be to ask “what are the criteria for moving the queen in chess?” In this case you can appeal to a rule book, expert, or instructor on chess. Instead, he is asking the type of question “can you play chess without a king?” In the latter case, we must already know that a king is required in order to *play the game*. In fact, we find the latter question odd, since playing a game of chess without the king, we could say, is *no longer playing chess*.

A second difference between the ordinary use of criteria and Wittgenstein’s – the way in which it is “strange” – is that the “object” in question, with respect to criteria, only involves those which “neither raise nor permit an obvious question of evaluation or competitive status.”¹² An example of criteria that would permit a question of evaluation or competitiveness would be such as when someone employs the move “castling” in chess where a player can move the king two squares towards a rook and then move the rook to the square over which the king crossed. Someone who is less familiar with the rules would have to consult a rule book or veteran of the game in order to verify the move’s legitimacy. Alternatively, Cavell lists off a number of issues Wittgenstein raises that do not involve evaluation or competitiveness such as pain, reading, thinking, and following a rule. In each case, these concepts are not special – they occur normally and without any sort of appeal to an external source – they are familiar to us. With these “objects” in mind, Cavell raises a problem for the Malcolm-Albritton view (or any view that tries to attain certainty through Wittgenstein): “If *these* concepts require special criteria for their application, then any concept we use in speaking about anything at all will call for criteria.”¹³ Cavell continues, “Wittgenstein’s insight, or implied claim, seems to be something like this, that all our knowledge, everything we assert or question (or doubt or wonder about . . .) is governed not merely by what we understand as ‘evidence’ or ‘truth conditions’, but by criteria” and then adds that “Criteria are not alternatives or additions to evidence.”¹⁴ In other words, if a concept as basic as “thinking” or “experiencing pain” requires criteria in order to understand them, then *all* concepts will require such criteria. If we did take “criteria” to serve the same function as “evidence” then, in a sense, views like the Malcolm-Albritton view would be using “criteria” to stand in for the traditional epistemological concept of “justification.” Consequently, such views

¹² *The Claim of Reason*, p.14.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

would be susceptible to the classic infinite regress problem: if every concept requires justification or criteria, then each justification will require further justification or criteria, *ad infinitum*. We would fall prey to the endless trap of seeking out criteria to justify our other criteria, but if *this* is how Wittgenstein meant for us to understand criteria, then he doesn't have much to teach us. This is just traditional epistemology.

Cavell presses further: "Without the control of criteria in applying concepts, we would not know what counts as evidence for any claim, nor for what claims evidence is needed."¹⁵ Criteria are how we apply rules, norms, words, and so on. One way to look at it would be to say that criteria are how (descriptively) we typically do things. The criteria for thought or pain are not things we seek evidence for (unless pushed by the traditional epistemologist) and yet we feel comfortable in identifying them. You know what it means for you to be in pain and you know when someone else is in pain without appeals to justification. Asking for justification for someone's pain is an odd question. Comparably, it would be like asking a philosopher for justification for *modus ponens* – at best, the person you're asking will just groan in response.

Nevertheless, I have not yet said what criteria are as much as what they are not. Furthermore, one could ask how we came to have these vaguely described conceptual building blocks. Apart from Cavell's definition of criteria (broadly understood) the clearest definition of Wittgensteinian criteria comes from David Macarthur: "criteria are 'our' shared criteria for the application of concepts that competent speakers are perfectly familiar with: ... everyday things, actions, objects and events."¹⁶ An assumption that has been implicit so far is that we all share the same criteria. Therefore, there is a question to be asked about both how we come to have the same criteria as well as whether or not there can be disagreement: how did we all come to be able to identify pain behaviour? Can someone be pain-blind (unable to identify it in the way I do)? To explore these questions I now turn to Kripke, whose answer is that it comes down to a matter of agreement. I show, however, that "agreement" is too shallow of a concept to explain the depths of criteria and claim instead that Cavell's concepts of "community" and "attunement" offer a better account.

¹⁵ *The Claim of Reason*, p.14.

¹⁶ Macarthur 2014, p.9.

1.1.2 Kripke: Agreement v. Community

Saul Kripke (1982) is another interpreter who offers an interpretation of Wittgenstein that includes a sort of acceptance of skepticism. Since Cavell offers an unconventional interpretation of Wittgenstein and his own commentary on Kripke,¹⁷ I compare his interpretation to Kripke's as a way of working out more details about Cavell's position (and as some evidence of literature review). While I speak critically of Kripke's interpretation, I am not interested in refuting his ideas. What I am interested in is explaining Cavell's view. Where I ultimately take issue with Kripke is that I understand his interpretation as pushing the notion of criteria onto the concept of "rule-following." His idea is that we follow rules by coming to *communal agreement* (criteria) which allows him to 'bite the bullet' of skepticism. What this would entail is that our criteria are the result of people (humanity or a specific community) coming to an *agreement* about our application of criteria (what we mean by "pain," "thinking," etc.). But according to Cavell, while Kripke's interpretation is internally coherent, his treatment of "agreement" is too shallow; it drastically overestimates rule-following while underestimating the *ordinary*. I agree with Cavell's assessment because after reviewing Kripke's book after working on Cavell for a few years I have come to recognize that "Kripkenstein" as it is colloquially referred to, is something like 'Cavell lite'. His views come close to Cavell's and yet they are somehow incomplete.

In order to set up the discourse between them (and to save words), consider how Cavell breaks down Kripke's major claims from *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* as follows:

- 1) The concept of a rule is fundamental to the *Investigations*.
- 2) A certain kind of example produces an experience we recognize as skepticism; namely examples where justification comes to an end and all we can say is "I am inclined to do/believe X."
- 3) The solution to the skeptical paradox is to come to communal agreement in a particular way.
- 4) Scholarship up until this point has been too preoccupied with the "private language argument" and instead, the sections (§243 and onward) are an application of the problem of sensations.

¹⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990).

- 5) §243 onward and the traditional “private language argument” are meant to address the “especially unnatural”¹⁸ problem of sensations and mathematics (philosophy of mind and philosophy of mathematics).

Instead of repeating all of Cavell’s arguments, I address his response to (1) in detail so as to expand on Cavell’s reading of Wittgensteinian criteria, which leads directly into responding to (2), namely that the types of examples Kripke uses to produce skepticism are bad examples. I also examine (3) in order to introduce the concept of the ordinary. As for the other claims, in response to (5), Cavell argues that because his response to (1) shows that rule following is *not* fundamental to the *Investigations*, there is nothing “unnatural” about sensation and mathematics to be concerned with (so of no interest to me). Conversely, Cavell is perfectly happy to accept (4) that scholarship has misused the sections involving the private language argument. What I intend to show through the following discussion is that Kripke commits the same error Wittgenstein accuses Augustine of in the *Investigations*: they both fail in their descriptions of the child’s relation to language, and consequently the world.

One of the major differences between Cavell and Kripke’s interpretations comes down to how they read §201 of the *Investigations*. It is, in fact, one of the few direct quotes that Kripke uses in the main part of his book. Cavell’s objection to Kripke is rather pointed: read the remainder¹⁹ of §201 and one should realize that rules *cannot* be the fundamental part of the *Investigations*.

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. [Kripke stops here] The answer was: if every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here. ... [passage continues].

While Kripke interprets this section as implying that rule following is central, Cavell points out that it can equally be understood to show that rule following is insufficient to address skepticism since “the facts about possible interpretations of a rule are not sufficient to cause skepticism (though they may play into a skeptical hand, one that has already portrayed rules and their role in language in a particular way).”²⁰ Put another way, for Cavell, simply because there are multiple ways to interpret any given rule does not result in undermining knowledge as such.

¹⁸ Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p.79.

¹⁹ So as not to be deceptive, Kripke *does* consider the remainder of the quote that I cite presently around page 55 of his book, but one should note, if you read on, that the criticism still stands.

²⁰ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p.68.

My claim is that the discrepancy between their interpretations comes down to whether or not they realistically produce skepticism. While I go over Cavell's notion of skepticism later, I start by explaining how Kripke *fails* to produce skepticism. Let's look at the major example Kripke considers: *plus* vs. *quus*. For Kripke, the idea is that when we apply the rule of addition, or "plus" and go to 'extend' this notion into the future, we can never *justify* this extension. By 'extension' here, I mean applying a concept again in the future such as how we first learn to add smaller numbers ($2 + 2 = 4$) and later 'extend' the notion ($5 + 26 + 129.50 + 71 = 231.5$). According to Kripke, we can never justify this extension because we cannot know if in the past we were really applying the 'rule' of addition or "quaddition." For Kripke's purposes, "quaddition" functions essentially as addition until the sums reach a certain threshold at which point all quaddition results default to '5'. What's more, when Kripke is 'confronted' by the skeptic, as he presents them, the suggestion is that the skeptic (insanely, I would say – see 1.3.3) tells Kripke that he "always meant" "quus" instead of "plus" in the past. That is to say, when I first learned the rule of addition, I cannot be certain I did not actually learn the function of quaddition, or at least I cannot rule out this possibility. He even claims that "the sceptic's hypothesis is not logically impossible."²¹ ²² Stating it quite clearly, he claims "This, then, is the sceptical paradox. When I responded in one way rather than another to such a problem as '68+57', I can have no justification for one response rather than another" and "there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning ... 'plus' ... and my meaning nothing at all."²³

Put aside the details for a brief moment. Imagine this: someone approaches you and tells you that you don't actually know whether you properly applied the concept of "addition" in the past because you cannot distinguish it from another rule – "quaddition." If I were to hazard a guess, I imagine most of us would ignore this person or, depending on our relation to them, we might just roll our eyes. So I ask both deliberately and somewhat rhetorically: is this really the kind of skepticism Wittgenstein was concerned with? Is this sufficient to produce skepticism?

I think not, and for a very specific reason; the *actual* end of §201: "But one should speak of interpretation only when one expression of a rule is substituted for another." At first, one might not see the contradiction here, but if we suppose that the rule being substituted must be *reasonable* on some level – some might say "natural" as opposed to "forced" – then Kripke's

²¹ Kripke, 1982, p.9.

²² Stephen Mulhall makes a very similar move in his interpretation of Cavell. See 1.2.4.

²³ Kripke, 1982, p.21.

formulation becomes suspicious. Whatever the “quus” example shows, it cannot succeed because *no one* is this kind of skeptic. Why would anyone suppose a “quus” function was involved? Even if such a person existed, their skeptical experience surrounding mathematics is not going to convince *me*, or many others I expect, of anything. Kripke is aware of this, of course, yet his answer is that ultimately this only shows “We act unhesitatingly but *blindly*.”²⁴ I propose instead that this is how Kripke is drastically underestimating the ordinary – a concept that requires further examination.

Kripke’s interpretation requires one to see Wittgenstein’s philosophy as a puzzle to be solved, first as a search for the paradox, and then as a search for a solution. Cavell claims instead that the *Investigations* should be read as “perfectly straightforward – or as straightforward (say undigressive) as any can be with spade turned, empty theses, no agenda to complete.”²⁵ This claim reveals two key features of Cavell’s reading, the first and obvious one being that Cavell takes Wittgenstein as straightforward as possible, but more interestingly and consequently, that we take Wittgenstein at his word when he says things like “If someone were to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.”²⁶ There are no theses in philosophy for Wittgenstein; instead, philosophy is about defusing confusions by examining linguistic frameworks. This is to take Wittgenstein to be a kind of quietist.

Taking Wittgenstein straightforwardly also exposes a conflict in Kripke’s account with the text of the *Investigations*. First, Kripke considers an individual in isolation and whether in isolation someone can follow a rule.²⁷ Wittgenstein claims that “To think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’.”²⁸ As Kripke points out, this is because my mere ‘belief’ or (the ‘inner’) ‘mental state’ that I’m following a rule cannot constitute following a rule since I could be mistaken. Since following a rule cannot be done in isolation, Kripke turns to rule following in a community, particularly in a student-teacher context, where a teacher instructs their pupil on how to follow a rule. At this stage there is no issue. Under Kripke’s account, the student seeks admittance into the community by trying to answer questions involving matters such as simple addition or following a series of numbers. If

²⁴ Kripke, 1982, p.87.

²⁵ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p.79.

²⁶ §128

²⁷ Kripke 1982, p. 87-90.

²⁸ §202

the student answers correctly, then they are admitted into the community, but if they fail, then all the teacher can do is repeat the exercise over again. The problem is that the student resembles the child from Augustine's self-description that we find at the beginning of the *Investigations*: training, unobserved, and isolated.

what strikes me about Augustine's description is how isolated the child appears, training its own mouth to form signs (...), the unobserved observer of our culture. The scene portrays language as an inheritance but also as one that has, as it were, to be stolen, anyway in which the capacity and perhaps the motivation to give it."²⁹

Kripke does not keep Augustine's image of the child in mind in his explanation and instead provides a very similar example of what Wittgenstein is guarding us against: the conception of language as the child learning in isolation. If anything is to be taken away from *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* it is that when reading the *Investigations* we must not forget the child – the very first example Wittgenstein considers.

While Kripke attempts to escape this problem by appealing to the community, the child is still an outsider looking in. Under his interpretation when the teacher is instructing their student and the student fails to follow a rule, there is a point where the spade is turned – bedrock – and so then the teacher “judges”³⁰ whether the student was either failing to follow the rule or committing an error. Likewise, the student is “entitled”³¹ to seek admittance into the community by demonstrating how they follow a rule. The community (the teacher) decides whether an individual (the student) can be admitted to “participate in the life of the community and in communication”³² or whether they are judged a “madman.”³³

This usage of the terms “judge”, “entitled”, and even “licenced” are, for Cavell, misunderstandings of the role of the community. This explains why Kripke believes that rule-following is the key to Wittgenstein, since he frames the admittance into the community as following rules as “tests,”³⁴ but this is not what Wittgenstein describes. This also addresses attempts one might make in defending or amending Kripke's interpretation if someone wanted to point out that Kripke can't be describing how we *actually* decide who is in or outside a community. Primarily because this *isn't* what we “actually” do. By interjecting this notion of

²⁹ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p.99.

³⁰ Kripke 1982, p. 89-92.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

judgement or licencing, Kripke is returning to the traditional problem of justification, whether this was his intention or not. He is claiming that one is justified in making a claim insofar as they have passed the test. Instead, when Wittgenstein describes the child and the teacher where reasons have reached bedrock he claims only that he is “inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do’.”³⁵ Wittgenstein is not “entitled” to anything here. He is not seeking justification.

I cannot help but view Kripke’s account of the *Investigations* as akin to an undergraduate lecture – and let me emphasize, this is not necessarily a bad thing. It is not that Kripke is wrong in his analysis, but much like how we simplify and categorize philosophers so as to make them more accessible to students, it seems as though Kripke has reframed the content much in the same way as one might unintentionally describe Wittgenstein as a behaviourist in lectures: even if Wittgenstein is not a behaviourist, you’re on the right track (or at least not necessarily on the wrong one) if you think he could be. What I mean by this is very simple. If I were to explain Cavell’s position to someone who had never encountered him before, I might try and explain our relation to criteria as something similar to – but not the same as – “convention” or “tacit agreement.” If we understand “agreement” as being conventional, then we get closer to Cavell’s position (ignoring the matter of rule-following for a moment):

The conventions we appeal to may be said to be “fixed”, “adopted”, “accepted”, etc. by us; but this does not now mean that what we have fixed or adopted are (merely) the (conventional) *names* of things. The conventions which control the application of grammatical criteria are fixed not by customs or some particular concord or agreement which might, without disrupting the texture of our lives, be changed where convenience suggests a change. ... They are, rather, fixed by the nature of human life itself, the human fix itself, by those “very general facts of nature” which are “unnoticed only because so obvious”, and, I take it, in particular, very general facts of *human* nature.³⁶

I take the emphasis here to be about how this sense of “convention”, while correct, is a loaded term that brings with it the idea that it is ‘merely’ conventional. The kind of agreement or convention that Cavell is pressing for is not a matter of us coming to terms and explicitly *agreeing* over how we use words. He is not discussing agreement about our grammar like how the *Académie Française* might agree over whether an Anglicism should be accepted into regular use. This is not a matter of convenience for any given group, but something more fundamental. He suggests that

³⁵ §217.

³⁶ *The Claim of Reason*, p.110.

Wittgenstein's discovery, or rediscovery, is of the depth of convention in human life; a discovery which insists not only on the conventionality of human society but, we could say, on the conventionality of human nature itself, on what Pascal meant when he said "Custom is our nature" (*Pensées*, §89); perhaps on what an existentialist means by saying that man has no nature.³⁷

Wittgenstein's concern, and therefore Cavell's and my own, has to do with criteria understood as the bedrock of our language – one might say the *requirements* for speaking. These are components of human life that are shared amongst humans, and so while they are "conventional" these are features not unlike the existentialists' (de Beauvoir and Sartre) conception of "freedom." While we are free to make our choices in life – in a radical way – it is nevertheless the case that we have a very basic kind of human condition. This idea of 'bedrock' or most basic human condition – where explanations come to an end – is, according to Cavell, our *criteria*. What I am suggesting is that our conventions, and particularly criteria do not come from communal *agreement* but (jumping ahead) from *attunement* or *acknowledgement*. Kripke's treatment of "agreement" is too shallow; it drastically overestimates or perhaps misunderstands rule-following while underestimating the *ordinary*. The ordinary, for Cavell, is the source of our criteria; the ordinary is what we are attuned to or acknowledging. Let me explain.

1.1.3 Austin and the Ordinary

"we shouldn't treat the ordinary with reverence, as if we're latter-day Wordsworthians. Not only not with reverence, but to see, to highlight in what we accept, that the ordinary is violent. When Wittgenstein says of the ordinary that philosophy leaves everything as it is, I'm taking this as an assertion that the actual ordinary is precisely not something that philosophy has left as it is. Philosophy has joined in the . . . (I wish I could have a verb for 'violent') . . . in the making violent of the world: the thing that politics means by the world having become a scene of power." – Cavell in "Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Paul Standish" p.166

What is the ordinary and what does it tell us about criteria? Answering this question will not only shed light on criteria, but also on Cavell's intellectual relationship with Austin. This is because Cavell takes his concept of the ordinary from Austin and from Wittgenstein, the school of 'ordinary language philosophy.' Our criteria for knowledge do not come from communal agreement as Kripke would have us believe but from what Cavell calls our attunement or

³⁷ *The Claim of Reason*, p.111.

acknowledgement; our “criteria are ‘our’ shared criteria for the application of concepts that competent speakers are perfectly familiar with: ... everyday things, actions, objects and events.”³⁸ Yet, while Cavell is proposing that there is a truth to skepticism, Austin was adamantly against any such notion. According to Austin, it has been shown “that many traditional philosophical perplexities have arisen through a mistake – the mistake of taking as straightforward statements of fact utterances which are *either* (in interesting grammatical ways) nonsensical *or else* intended as something quite different.”³⁹ Skepticism, of course, falls within this category of traditional perplexities. He rejects skepticism because the kinds of doubts and concerns raised by it (that our conception of certainty is at risk) do not arise in ordinary discourse: “Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*.”⁴⁰ According to Austin then, the skeptic’s doubts are inappropriate given the circumstances in which they are employed. Yet, Cavell observes that the ordinary language philosopher has no special authority over what is considered ‘ordinary.’ This entails that the skeptic has just as much authority over what is considered ordinary discourse. Austin’s objection fails to take skepticism seriously and it is this revelation that exposes the complexity of the ordinary.

Getting clear on Cavell’s conception of the ordinary leads to a discussion on determining how far Cavell agrees with and where he parts with Austin. There are at least two ways in which to interpret Cavell which I divide by the engagement or seriousness with which an interpreter takes the truth of skepticism. First, there is the ‘standard interpretation’⁴¹, offered by (but not limited to) philosophers such as Stephen Mulhall⁴² and Michael Williams.^{43,44} Second, there is an alternative, or ‘skeptical’, interpretation that I have found in the works of David Macarthur⁴⁵ and Andrew Norris.⁴⁶ Both interpretations agree on the first steps required to understand Cavell’s

³⁸ Macarthur, David. “Cavell on Skepticism and the Importance of Not-Knowing.” *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies*, vol.2, pp 2-23. (uOttawa Open Access, 2014), p.9.

³⁹ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p.3.

⁴⁰ Austin 1975, p.8.

⁴¹ Macarthur 2014, p.4. See also p.3 and footnote 7.

⁴² Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*. (Oxford University Press Scholarship Online, 1994/2011).

⁴³ Williams, Michael. *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁴⁴ Macarthur also includes Marie McGinn (1991) and Barry Stroud (1984).

⁴⁵ Macarthur, 2014.

⁴⁶ Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2017).

philosophy, such as how he takes his notion of the ordinary from his readings of Wittgenstein and Austin. What I argue, in conjunction with my explanation of the ordinary, is that the standard interpretation fails to move beyond Austin. Of course, Mulhall does not see himself as presenting an Austinian Cavell, but the ways he describes Cavell's criticisms of skepticism and traditional epistemology are too similar to Austin to ignore. Skipping ahead, maintaining that the skeptic is confused or misusing language would be to fall prey to the same objection Cavell raises against Austin. But first, back to the ordinary.

To Austin's credit, there *must* be something correct about saying that the skeptic is *not* speaking ordinarily. If, while having lunch, a colleague jokingly steals a french-fry and asks, "but was the french-fry ever really there?" I might scoff refusing to take the words seriously. *Obviously* the french-fry was there; "you just stole it!" While the example is ludicrous, this is allegedly what the skeptic does: "How do I know that the table is there? Was it ever there?" Despite this obviousness, Austin's objection is actually at the mercy of the skeptic's whim: Austin (or any other ordinary language philosopher) does not have any special authority over what constitutes 'ordinary' discourse. The skeptic, insofar as they speak English, has just as much authority over what constitutes ordinary use as the ordinary language philosopher.⁴⁷

But how can this be the case? Shouldn't the "expert" in ordinary language have *some* authority or special insight into what constitutes ordinary language usage? Furthermore, assuming the ordinary language philosopher does have some special insight, would they not be providing examples upon which we *agree*? If so, this would imply that Kripke may have been on to something. Perhaps his conception of agreement was not so shallow after all.

Cavell considers this problem in his essay "Must we mean what we say?" where he gives a detailed rebuttal to Benson Mates's criticisms against ordinary language philosophy. Mates's objection is that ordinary language philosophers are themselves confused because it is not clear if they are *describing* how we speak or instructing us on how we *ought* to speak.⁴⁸ If they are describing how we speak, then this is not up to the philosopher but the linguist! Furthermore, even if the philosopher took on this problem, the issue would be a matter of polling the most common ways of speech. On the other hand, if this is a normative problem about how we ought to speak, then it is natural to ask with what authority the ordinary language philosopher makes

⁴⁷ Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging" in *Must we mean what we say?*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.223.

⁴⁸ Norris 2017, p. 28.

their prescriptions. What makes the ordinary language philosopher's appeals and prescriptions to language better than anyone else's?

Mates claims that the disagreement between Austin and Gilbert Ryle about the word "voluntary" shows how the ordinary language philosopher's methodology is nothing more than armchair philosophy because there is no way for them to refute one another. They are merely providing descriptions or analyses of what they *think* are ordinary uses. Cavell, however, responds that Mates has completely misunderstood the nature of the disagreement. Just because there is a disagreement between two ordinary language philosophers does not entail that there is some internal incoherence to the method – either one of them could simply be mistaken. More interestingly, Cavell contends that even if neither comes to agree with the other, Mates's classifications gloss over the fact that ordinary language philosophers do not use the first person singular or the third person, but the *first person plural*: "the voice of the community."⁴⁹

When ordinary language philosophers appeal to ordinary language and begin a claim with "we say..." they are providing an instance or sample of how we use language. The question then is: how is one justified (or authorized or warranted) to make such a claim in the first person plural? The answer cannot be some sort of poll, or at least it would be unnecessary to do so, because a native speaker of a language does not need evidence for how they use the language – "they are the source of such evidence."⁵⁰ For example, when I use the phrase "I am sorry for your loss" this is ordinarily uttered to someone who is in mourning as an act of compassion (acknowledgment, even). This is not a rule or something we came to "agree" on. If someone uttered this phrase after stealing that french-fry from earlier, it would be fair to assume that the person was either being sarcastic or attempting to be funny or crazy. In making these observations I am not relying on some poll or philosopher to tell me how to use language. If someone *did* make a poll about how to use the phrase "I am sorry for your loss" I, as a fluent speaker of the English language, would be a *candidate* to include in such a poll – hence I am a source of the evidence. Does this imply that anything uttered in the first person plural cannot be mistaken? Of course not.

The claim that in general we do not require evidence for statements in the first person plural does not rest upon a claim that we cannot be wrong about what we are doing or about what we say, but only that it would be extraordinary if we were (often). My point

⁴⁹ Norris 2017, p. 30.

⁵⁰ Stanley Cavell, "Must we mean what we say?" in *Must we mean what we say?*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.4.

about such statements, then, is that they are sensibly questioned only where there is some special reason for supposing what I say about what I (we) say to be wrong; only here is the request for evidence competent. If I am wrong about what he does (they do), that may be no great surprise; but if I am wrong about what I (we) do, that is liable, where it is not comic, to be tragic.⁵¹

It is in this way that Cavell meant that we are the source of confirmation. We are what determine whether an example demonstrates what we say and it would be strange (if not disturbing) if we were (often) *wrong* about what we say. When competing samples are presented, neither of them refutes the other; the only thing that can accept or refute a sample is us.

– *Very well, one may concede, to speak of agreement in these kinds of cases would be strange. We could only imagine tacit agreement at most and whether or not two ordinary philosophers agree with one another over any specific instance of language is not all that interesting as it turns out. Nevertheless, how does this inform Cavell's conception of skepticism and his philosophy generally?* – The move that Cavell makes here, that we are the source of confirmation – of evidence – is an argument that reoccurs throughout this dissertation. It is both the site of community and also the site of *responsibility*. These are matters that take time to fully understand.

1.1.4 The Search for Community

“Yes, again it's an issue of the contract as not having happened in the past. The way I want to bring it into the present is not to ask whether I would have agreed to these principles of justice in the past when they were open with this thought experiment going on . . . and so forth. It's rather that what I have to do is to continually assess my consent in the present, that society is in fact itself always in formation.” – Cavell in “Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Paul Standish” p.159

There are some loose ends that deserve some attention before moving on surrounding the question of community. At this point, I have explained Cavell's use of Wittgensteinian criteria, replied to Kripke's concept of “agreement” as being too shallow to explain criteria, that instead, community and attunement are essential, and I subsequently considered how Austin should be seen as a stepping stone to the “ordinary” seeing as we should abandon the old project of accusing skepticism of nonsense. The final matter I wish to discuss in this section harks back to

⁵¹ “Must we mean what we say?”, p.13.

my discussion of Kripke and community, specifically revolving around the question of “tacit consent” and its role in the community.

The matter of consent, community, and the notion of social contract play an interesting role, albeit a strange one, in Cavell’s philosophy. What might appear like a tangent early on in *The Claim of Reason* about social contract theory provides insight into the notion of criteria and consequently community. Consider the following passage:

The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason.⁵²

Recall that the ordinary language philosopher is appealing to our ordinary language, i.e. to “what we say.” Cavell’s claim is that when we appeal to what “we” say we are searching for our community. One way to think of it is much like presenting an idea and hoping it is received well, except on a deeper level – i.e. at a level where we would claim one has been “acknowledged.” But this “we” might seem more rigid when considering the political process. While with ordinary language I argued it is not a matter of polling to see whether some criteria or words are used in a particular way, we literally go to the polls (in Canada) as a part of our political process. Norris is wise to point out, however, that the counting of the votes *identifies* the general will of the people (our attunement) but does not *constitute* the general will.⁵³ What I want to say is that every appeal to what “we” say is a request for acknowledgement. The appeal to what “we” say, remember, is our attempt at identifying shared criteria. Therefore, the search for community is likewise the search for our criteria. Now consider the following:

When I remarked that the philosophical search for our criteria is a search for community, I was in effect answering the second question I uncovered in the face of the claim to speak for “the group” — the question, namely, about how I could have been party to the establishing of criteria if I do not recognize that I have and do not know what they are. The answer, in terms of that remark, should best be to make out that there are (what Wittgenstein calls) criteria (i.e., to produce some), and to admit that nobody could have established them alone, and that of course whoever is party to them does know what they are (though he or she may not know how to elicit and state them, and not recognize his or her complicity under that description); and to emphasize that the claim is not that one can tell a priori who is implicated by me, because one point of the particular kind of

⁵² *The Claim of Reason*, p.20.

⁵³ Norris, 2017, p. 21.

investigation Wittgenstein calls grammatical is exactly to discover who. This is not much of an answer, but I do not mean it as much more than a further indication of the level at which I seek an answer.⁵⁴

First, make note of the final line where Cavell indicates that he sees himself as posing a question that he does not yet have an answer to. The question is that if our criteria are shared by a group, and these criteria are meant to be foundational, then how are these criteria founded in the first place? They must be founded by us since we are the source of our criteria, but ultimately, I may not have *consented* (certainly not explicitly) to criteria taking on whatever form they do for me. This is why Cavell asks how one can be party to establishing criteria, yet not know what they are. He specifies that one must only accept three premises: 1) that there are criteria, 2) nobody could have established the criteria alone, and 3) that everyone who partakes in the setting of criteria knows what they are – although they may have difficulty expressing this knowledge or their complicity in it.

It is at this point in *The Claim of Reason* that Cavell goes on what appears to be a tangent about social contract theory which can seem largely out of place in the discussions of language and epistemology. To the contrary, however, I have come to appreciate how important this section is, as it pre-emptively addresses a host of concerns that would have otherwise inevitably arisen. What Cavell does, much as I like to do, is draw an analogy. He considers the “familiar moment in the history of modern philosophy”⁵⁵ where David Hume attacks John Locke’s social contract theory. Social contract theory, as it turns out, has many considerations that are relevant to Cavell, such as his understanding of “conventions.” In particular, these considerations lead Cavell to address some common and misleading objections that can be raised against social contract theory and inadvertently against Cavell’s notions of criteria and community.

Where we typically consider the social contract theorists’ problem to revolve around the question “How could I have consented to the formation of government, since I am not aware that I was ever asked for it or ever gave it?”, instead Cavell suggests we should ask “How can I have recognized this government as mine since I am not aware that I am responsible for it?”. He explains this picture of consent and society in the following manner:

It is a very poorly kept secret that men and their societies are not perfect. In that case, in all actual cases, it is ungrammatical (not to say politically devious) to answer the question “Why ought I to obey?” in terms of the general advantages of citizenship. What the

⁵⁴ *The Claim of Reason*. p.22.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

question in fact means therefore is, "Given the specific inequalities and lacks of freedom and absence of fraternity in the society to which I have consented, do these outweigh the 'disadvantages' of withdrawing my consent?". This is the question the theorists of the social contract teach us to ask, and the beginning of an answer is to discover whom I am in community with, and what it is to which I am obedient.⁵⁶

Cavell is forcing us to reconsider an old problem with renewed perspective. First, Cavell emphasizes that there is a somewhat obvious and empty argument about how the dissolution of government should be avoided because it would be, more often than not, disadvantageous for us. In this “politically devious” sense, we *must* consent to the social contract. Contrariwise, the social contract theorist actually teaches us to question our position in a polis, to propose the possibility of an *alternative*. Doing this requires identifying one’s own position in a community in order to determine whether it is worth withdrawing one’s consent from the polis. So instead of an epistemological mystery – as Cavell calls it – Locke’s true project is an empirical and moral project.

It is because of Hume’s influence, Cavell surmises, that Locke has been understood as asking the former mysterious question of “why ought I obey?” and taken to give the answer that we consent *tacitly*. Granted, as I mentioned it can be helpful to view criteria and our formation of them – when thinking generally and not too deeply – as a form of tacit consent (or at least some form of passive, unintentional, or subconscious consent). The difficulty presented by Hume against Locke is that appealing to tacit consent is – at best – a “cruel dodge.” But Cavell points out that this question is not the one to which Locke gives the answer of tacit consent. The matter of tacit consent is in direct response to the foreigner – someone who is present within a community but who is *not* a member:

But the connection of tacit consent with the idea of foreigners (settled or passing through) is specifically and explicitly Locke's point. In those same sections Locke reiterates his contention that membership in the polis requires express consent. He may not have a good answer to the question "What counts as the (express) consent which establishes a polis?", and he may be culpable in not seeking a good answer to that question; but he is not culpable of having given it an epistemologically stupid and politically heartless answer.⁵⁷

Cavell adds that there is “ample room for stupidities” and “heartlessness” by looking elsewhere in Locke’s theory, but that this is not one of them. In order to determine what constitutes being a member of a community or polis has to be “express consent,” although what “express” entails here is left unanswered.

⁵⁶ *The Claim of Reason*. p.23-4

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.24-5.

Consider the following: “The effect of the teaching of the theory of the social contract is at once to show how deeply I am joined to society and also to put society at a distance from me, so that it appears as an artifact. But what is its point?”⁵⁸ I take our being joined to society and also distant from it to be the direct result of this question about how we consented to the polis or government. On the one hand, the *tacitness* of the situation seems to suggest our closeness is unavoidable, yet at the same time we are in that very moment *questioning* our continued consent. He then assumes that under most circumstances we would not withdraw our consent from the polis and presses

... whether the private motive of the theorist is to justify his conviction that the present is one of those few moments at which a dismantling of the artifact is called for, or whether to justify his view that this is never called for, the philosophical significance of the writing lies in its imparting of political education: it is philosophical because its method is an examination of myself by an attack upon my assumptions; it is political because the terms of this self-examination are the terms which reveal me as a member of a polis; it is education not because I learn new information but because I learn that the finding and forming of my knowledge of myself requires the finding and forming of my knowledge of that membership (the depth of my own and the extent of those joined with me).⁵⁹

Adding that one is not likely to take Locke or any social contract theorist seriously if they read them “as a set of pre-scientific jottings about existing states.”⁶⁰ There are a few steps to lay out here. First, the private motives of the theorist play an important role. Rousseau, contrary to Hobbes and Locke, “does not claim to know what the ‘state of nature’ is (was) like, but sketches a reconstruction of social origins designed to prove that what philosophers say about that nature is a projection of their own states of society, or their fantasies of it.”⁶¹ This is worth discussing further.

These considerations force upon my mind thoughts of Friedrich Nietzsche and some particular misunderstandings surrounding his position with respect to the sciences. Without going into too much detail, some thinkers *want* to take Nietzsche as presenting a scientific (or ‘naturalist’) project.⁶² However, this idea falls into very similar territory as understanding Locke and the state of nature as someone presenting something prescientific or even scientific – we have no reason to think this was their intentions. Moreover, consider Nietzsche’s claim in *Beyond Good and Evil* where he says, “Gradually it has become clear to me what every great

⁵⁸ *The Claim of Reason*. p.25.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² I have Maudemarie Clark 1990 and Brian Leiter 2002/2015 in mind.

philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.”⁶³ This seems to me to be in line with the idea Cavell is drawing from Rousseau. What Rousseau’s, Nietzsche’s, Locke’s, and Cavell’s philosophies all have in common is that they are reporting upon their own understandings and projections about the world, not some pre-scientific narrative. This is not to present some form of philosophical relativism (radical or otherwise), but to acknowledge the personal *informs* one’s philosophy.

When we return to the matter of society as an artefact to be abandoned, this is where the emphasis on the self becomes important. Resuming the discussion above, regardless of whether or not a philosopher desires to preserve or dismantle (parts of) society, the philosophical practice they employ is effectively a political self-examination. As Cavell says it is philosophical because it is a matter of questioning our assumptions (even if only to reaffirm them) and it is political because it is about one’s relation to the polis – to the community. I therefore propose the following thesis. It has become clear to me what every great political (or philosophical) work has been: namely, the personal reflections of its author as a kind of involuntary or unconscious search for community. When I think of the philosopher in this way, there is consequently something tragic about the image of millions of people across the ages writing grand treatises, papers, and books or giving classes and talks in their search for community only for them to speak past one another (avoidance), unable to find common ground, or, worse, ignored completely (or *even more* tragically only ‘heard’ once they’re dead).

Returning to Rousseau, Cavell believes that his approach provides more insight than other attempts at social contract theory:

What he claims to know is his relation to society, and to take as a philosophical datum the fact that men (that he) can speak for society and that society can speak for him, that they reveal one another's most private thoughts. His problem is to understand how that can be. The epistemological problem of society is not to discover new facts about it; the facts, as the Encyclopaedists were globally showing, are there to be had. The problem is for me to discover my position with respect to these facts — how I know with whom I am in community, and to whom and to what I am in fact obedient. The existence of the prior contract is not the explanation of such facts. On the contrary, it is a projection from the fact that I now recognize myself to be party to some social contract, or pacts, which explains (what we take to be) the prior existence of the contract.⁶⁴

When Cavell talks about speaking for others, he includes the possibility that others may also speak for him. – *How then does this result in revealing one another’s most private thoughts?* – I

⁶³ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 6.

⁶⁴ *The Claim of Reason*, p.25-6.

think there are at least a few ways to explain what he means here. Cavell alludes to this dynamic of speaking for one another at the very beginning of his first published essay *Must we mean what we say?* from the book of the same name when he points to the oppressiveness of ordinary language. He contends that ordinary language philosophy “seems to have uncanny information about our most personal philosophical assumptions.”⁶⁵ He believes that if we examine the oppressiveness of ordinary language “such feelings can come from a truth about ourselves which we are holding off.”⁶⁶ The question Rousseau asks is how we could have come to this sort of position, how did we become oppressed by the ordinary? Cavell’s question superimposed upon the former, is to add that with respect to the facts that are there to be had – recall Wittgenstein’s quietism – how do I determine with whom I am in community? Who *shares* my most private thoughts? What some people (those who ascribe a scientific lens) propose is that the social contract is the *explanation* for the contract’s existence – how we came to arrive in such a state. However, Cavell points out that the social contract is merely an acknowledgement of the fact that we *do* abide by a kind of social contract. The existence of a state of being cannot itself explain the reason for its existence, it merely is. By recognizing that the social contract exists, that we are all in search of community, we can learn from social contract theory as it aims to expose our innermost feelings.

Pulling again from my previous research⁶⁷, there is a Nietzschean construction of this problem that could offer some more light on these comments, specifically surrounding the *privacy* of these thoughts. Much like Cavell, Nietzsche is often misunderstood with respect to his position on skepticism. A feature of Nietzsche’s skepticism is how it ties into human psychology much like how Cavell constantly skirts the line between philosophy and psychology (not that I’m sure there *is* a determinate line to draw). To put it briefly, Nietzsche’s ideas surrounding concept formation, especially as outlined in *The Gay Science* section 354, give an overall picture that fits well with this notion of searching for community. The way we form concepts, for Nietzsche, is by becoming *conscious* of something. He says, “All of our actions are at bottom incomparably personal, unique, boundlessly individual, there is no doubt. But as soon as we translate them into consciousness, they no longer seem to be so.” Nietzsche position is simple: experience does not necessitate consciousness. A common example – albeit one I do not completely agree with – is to

⁶⁵ “Must we mean what we say?”, p. 1

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Getting Beyond Good and Evil: Reconciling Naturalism and Skepticism in Nietzsche’s Middle Period,” 2016.

point to animals: many would claim that animals are *not* conscious of actions, but, of course, they still have experiences. The same is true for humans, most experiences – especially at a young age – are just that, experiences. There is no need to become conscious of *every* experience. More importantly, when *do* we become conscious of a concept? Nietzsche says, “consciousness has only developed under the pressure of the need for communication.” The conceptual scheme is therefore as follows: a human exists and experiences the world; however, once the human encounters other humans, communication becomes necessary; communication requires that we become *conscious* of concepts, things, people, and so on, by coming up with ways to ‘*translate*’⁶⁸ experience into words; because communication is inevitably a ‘*translation*’ of the experiences, they are inaccurate or may be expressed or experienced differently (here we encounter skepticism and what some call Nietzsche’s ‘Falsification Thesis’). This is not a scientific explanation, but a helpful narrative of understanding.

So how is it that we reveal our innermost thoughts? Set aside thoughts of skepticism for the time being. When we ‘translate’ our experiences into words, we can sometimes encounter difficulty. Think of the dynamic between a patient and a mental health support worker. Say that the patient experiences an inexpressible anxiety that does not take on a specific object. An opposite case might be a trauma victim who’s “object” of their anxiety was the moment of their trauma, or the person(s), place(s), or thing(s) involved. A strong tool that is recommended to patients to develop in either case is “mindfulness.” This notion can take many forms, some practical, some spiritual, but for my purposes I focus on the practical: I take mindfulness to be the practice of becoming self-conscious or self-aware as a means of self-control. The role of the psychologist is essentially to guide the patient towards or (depending on the strategy) to directly reveal the inner thoughts and feelings that create the anxiety plaguing the patient. The former would be a sort of hands-off behavioural therapy, while the latter would take on a more prescriptive approach. When we ‘translate’ our thoughts then, we are being mindful of them – bringing them to the surface. In a sense, *communicating* about an inner thought is precisely *how* we reveal our inner thoughts. Even if we are not communicating with anyone (i.e., journaling), the act of becoming conscious, is just the moment of transformation where experiences are reinterpreted into words – the space we share.

⁶⁸ I’m using this word figuratively or metaphorically.

Instead of diving further into the depths of psychology, I would like to rein in this discussion back to the ordinary. What I would suggest is that our search for community stems from our human condition. We all know the trope that “humans are social creatures” but as with all tropes, this merely scratches the surface of a deeper experience. We all abide by a social contract, whether we want to continue participating in our respective political communities is for us to decide for ourselves. But “for ourselves” also requires we *engage* the community.

Remember the passage I quoted at the beginning of this section:

I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason.⁶⁹

We must start from the self – try to articulate what we mean – but then it must be acknowledged by members of our community. If my convictions bring me at odds with a community, this does not necessitate that I am a madman; it means I have failed to find my community or that the community has failed *me*. Remember, the personal is ‘translated’ into words, and so by attempting to express my inner thoughts I am seeking validation, seeking understanding. I want my reasons to *make sense*, but I can only do that *with others*.

Unfortunately, this does not answer the question of how it came to be this way – the answer to which some people want dearly. How is it that we have come to develop in *this* way? I cannot answer this question here and never aim to. I suspect this is a question for scientists and historians, perhaps, but ultimately it is not the core of my concern because I am only concerned with addressing the way things *are* (or more accurately, as I *understand* them). Cavell uses social contract theory to not only elaborate on how we use or understand criteria but also as an analogy for his own position. Social contract theorists like Locke have often been misunderstood as providing some sort of pseudo-scientific explanation for how the formation of government came to be. We live in a society where we do not share criteria on all fronts. Current (2020) issues such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement are a testament to that. People of colour are members of a community that do not accept them – or only when convenient. They find themselves forced to ask the question: am I prepared to reject the artefacts of our society despite possible repercussions? The resounding answer appears to be: Yes. They no longer consent to

⁶⁹ *The Claim of Reason*, p.20.

the injustices promoted by the polis they find themselves in; they demand that their suffering be acknowledged (although they might put it differently).

If one is willing to grant the importance of searching for community – that our human condition requires this search – then a whole host of problems could be raised and discussed. I touched on BLM in part because it is current, but also because of how important I think it is to think about this concept of community. Consider two frames in which to examine the same position: 1) Those people are rioting in the streets and destroying property, or 2) Those people have failed to be acknowledged throughout the course of history and demand justice. The second option may be more diplomatic and level-headed, but it could be considered no less deliberately blind to the violence in the same way that the first option is blind to the historical context. One can still condemn violence generally while still maintaining understanding for the need of *some* form of violence (likewise, we are allowed to be *conflicted* about these things). If we frame the problem as a search for community, instead of taking sectarian approaches, the hope is, of course, that we can come to peaceful resolutions. However, it is at this point where the conversation must take a pause until later because while my (unoriginal) proposal suggests that there may be better frames to operate under so as to resolve conflict; this is also where communication and resolution begin to break down. When one, or two, or more sides directly conflict and *refuse* to acknowledge the other, tragedy will inevitably follow – although what *kind* of tragedy, I have yet to articulate.

First, I must exit the realm of the ordinary in order to explore the realm of the philosopher, and more specifically our treatment of the skeptic. By this point I have established what criteria are and how a search for criteria is another way of saying a search for community. But, as Cavell often mentions in one form or another, criteria are just one side of the coin. The boogeyman of skepticism is stamped clearly on the other side, but we often cannot see it until it is flipped over.

1.2.0 Defining Skepticism

“From Sextus⁷⁰, [I learned] a benevolent disposition, and the example of a family governed in a fatherly manner, and the idea of living conformably to nature; and gravity without affection, and to look carefully after the interests of friends, and to tolerate ignorant persons, and those who form opinions without consideration: he had the power of readily accommodating himself to all. So that [discourse] with him was more agreeable than any flattery; and at the same time he was most highly venerated by those who associated with him; and he never showed anger or any other passion, but was entirely free from passion, and also most affectionate; and he could express without noisy display, and he possessed much knowledge without ostentation.” – The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, section 9.

I have been deliberately vague about a very important concept so far: what is skepticism? Part of my project herein has been to emphasize that how we approach skepticism is an important – if not the most important – aspect of how we understand this term and its ramifications. Despite all the considerations I have so far identified to try and establish the scope of skepticism by discussing criteria and community, what I am trying to show is still overshadowed by the history of skepticism and its never-ending iterations. Skepticism has become such a loaded term that I think there is a serious discussion worth having with respect to abandoning the term altogether. However, any attempts to showcase my project without mentioning skepticism would, I think, be immediately met with “isn’t this just a form of skepticism?” Notice how such an utterance would ordinarily be seen as an *objection* to a stance. One of the aspects of skepticism I wish to highlight in this chapter is just how *negative* and *antagonistically* skepticism is treated *de facto*.

Yet, to understand why skepticism is treated with such disdain I must address a larger question: what *kinds* of skepticism am I discussing? Which kinds should I not bother with? Furthermore, are the doubts that are raised by the skeptic ordinary or merely the intellectual musings of a loathsome armchair philosopher? I begin by narrowing the scope by using the term in the same way Cavell does: oddly. For Cavell, skepticism does not *only* consist of positions that deny our access to knowledge but also those positions that affirm our knowledge of the world as well – or more accurately, those who take the problem of the external world, other minds, etc. to be a problem about knowledge. This is what I call Cavell’s odd claim, but which I

⁷⁰ Whether Sextus of Chaeronea is the same person as Sextus Empiricus is up for debate. But for the sake of argument, imagine someone speaking of a *skeptic* in this way today – it’s almost unimaginable.

explain in the subsequent section with the help of Hilary Putnam. He offers a very accessible and sympathetic interpretation of Cavell which makes his claim simple to understand, although he still makes use of negative judgement values when discussing skepticism itself (although as a literary tool). Conversely, I consider a much more egregious example of negative judgement values in Brian Leiter's treatment of Nietzsche scholarship to showcase an example of negative discrimination against skepticism.

At this point I add another voice to the discussion: Richard Rorty. According to Rorty, Cavell wrote both an excellent and a terrible book, only lamenting that they share the same binding. Rorty disputes any attempt that relies on discussing anything to do with "traditional epistemology." In his mind, the fact that we are returning to Descartes' concerns and similar classic questions is a waste of time – these questions have been answered. Instead, Rorty believes that the second part of Cavell's book (as Rorty divides it) is an insightful piece of work that can be read apart from the first. Furthermore, he accuses Cavell of conflating various forms of skepticism in such a way that creates problems for Cavell. The second section of this chapter is consequently a response to Rorty's criticisms.

Once Rorty's concerns have been addressed, I raise an important feature in the third section as to how Rorty unwittingly points to what I think is a central problem with how we approach skepticism. I have indirectly touched on this matter before, but now I would answer it more clearly: how skepticism is *forced upon us*. This takes the form of my hypothesis: one cannot come to accept the truth of skepticism – our relation to the world as one of not-knowing – without having experienced it, without it being an *actuality*. I explain the scope of this hypothesis as well as how it can never properly become a *thesis* as far as I am concerned given the nature of these experiences. Finally, the final section of this chapter considers how Mulhall's rejection of skepticism in Cavell is tantamount to keeping Cavell's philosophy in line with Austin. One key feature worth highlighting about this chapter is that some philosophers (Rorty, Austin, Mulhall, etc.) fail to take the skeptic seriously.

This is all to address a larger claim that I put forward now. Skepticism is as much a part of philosophy as philosophy is a part of skepticism. One cannot have philosophical discourse without the possibility of skepticism. This is not to say that skepticism is *true*, only that there is a truth to skepticism – the fact that it always reappears. As such, the truth of skepticism is a part of

ordinary language philosophy itself, although I suspect most ordinary language philosophers would loath to agree.

1.2.1 Cavell's Odd Claim

Under the 'standard' interpretation of Wittgenstein and Cavell, skepticism is demanding that criteria confer certainty, when this was never something criteria were meant to provide. In this way the skeptic is speaking nonsense or cannot mean what he thinks he means. Under both the standard interpretation and the interpretation I defend later, this relates to what Cavell means whenever he says that a response to skepticism falls into the skeptic's hand. My suspicion is that, despite their attempts, those who accept some form of the standard interpretation still fall prey to this very trap. Alternatively, I think a skeptical interpretation⁷¹ provides a means by which to avoid this error or, to give you a sense of my purpose, grab the skeptic's hand with a firm handshake.

But first: who or what falls into the skeptic's hand and furthermore what is this 'hand'? Setting aside the standard interpretation for now, the group Cavell has in mind when he discusses falling into the skeptic's hand is traditional epistemologists – those who respond to the skeptic. This is how we get Cavell's odd claim about how he defines skepticism: "I do not, that is, confine the term ["skeptic"] to philosophers who wind up denying that we can ever know; I apply it to any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge."⁷² While Cavell admits that lumping all of traditional epistemology under the heading of "skepticism" is "perverse," it is nevertheless useful in his effort to grapple with the heart of skepticism – its very conception.

Putnam presents a very clear explanation of this point when he asks "How can answering skepticism be tantamount to skepticism?" He explains that whether someone 'responds' to the skeptic through positivism or some kind of metaphysical realism, they already give the skeptic too much. In the case of the former,

The positivists' strategy can be described thus: *to concede the correctness of almost everything the skeptic says* (e.g. we don't have moral knowledge, we don't know anything about other people except their behaviour, we don't know that there are any objects except

⁷¹ While more accurate, "interpretation that accounts for the truth of skepticism in a non-dismissive way," doesn't flow as well.

⁷² *The Claim of Reason*, p.46.

our own sense-data and constructions therefrom) in hope of keeping back from the skeptic the claim to some minimal sort of “scientific knowledge.”⁷³

The metaphysical realist, on the other hand, believes that we can know more than the skeptic or positivist “but this knowledge ... is knowledge of a ‘true world’ which has little resemblance to our quotidian world of common sense objects and fellow passengers to the grave.”⁷⁴ This can be seen in the Cartesian quest for certainty and his skeptical method, or in the Kantian notion of the noumenon. Whatever the case, those who attempt to refute the skeptic are already in agreement with them:

In sum, both the “skeptic” and his “opponents” deny the primacy and reality (or better, the primacy of the reality) of the life world. The ordinary human world is what they are one and all skeptics about: skepticism, as Cavell sees it, is a perpetual dissatisfaction with the human position, a demand for a God’s Eye View or Nothing, that degrades the only perspective that is actually available to us. It is this downgrading of the human position, this aspiration to be outside our own skins (nothing else would be good enough), that Cavell calls “skepticism.”⁷⁵

The quest for certainty, whether it’s in the form of the positivists “scientific knowledge,” metaphysical realism, or the (incorrect) application of criteria is, at its core, a *skeptical project*. The implications of these revelations are an important part of recognizing how the standard interpretation cannot be correct: if all Cavell is doing is ‘refuting’ skepticism (whatever that means) then this would be just another example of traditional epistemology. So when someone like Williams says Cavell provides “a refutation [of skepticism] as definitive as we ever see in philosophy”⁷⁶ he is *really* missing the point.

To make this clear, I would like to stick with Putnam. In another piece of his, “Philosophy as the Education of Grownups: Stanley Cavell and Skepticism,” Putnam makes it clear that “the first thing one needs to be clear about is that Cavell’s Wittgenstein is not out to ‘refute skepticism’.” He even presses this further by claiming you cannot hope to understand Cavell otherwise: “Miss it, and all this will be inscrutable.”⁷⁷ Much like my own position he agrees that “To read either *Philosophical Investigations* or *The Claim of Reason* as if it were a longer and more careful attempt to say what John Austin said in “Other minds” is to look at Wittgenstein’s

⁷³ T. Cohen, P. Guyer, and H. Putnam, *Pursuits of Reason*, (USA: Texas Tech University, 1993), p. vii.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Williams, p.16.

⁷⁷ Hilary Putnam, “Philosophy as the Education of Grownups: Stanley Cavell and Skepticism,” in *Reading Cavell* ed. Alice Crary, and Sanford Shieh. (London: Routledge, 2006) p.120.

work and Cavell's work in the wrong way."⁷⁸ It would seem I am in agreement with Putnam on these points – we might even say attuned!

I cannot help but speculate (and this pure conjecture) that some philosophers have something like a personal grudge against the notion of skepticism. I say this primarily because of the language used to accompany rejections, suspicions, doubts, and contempt for skepticism. Consider how Putnam says "it is, after all, Cavell who uses the *disturbing* expression 'the truth of skepticism'" (emphasis mine).⁷⁹ Why does he impose this unnecessary value judgement onto Cavell's notion of the truth of skepticism? However, it would be unfair to lump Putnam in together with those I have in mind because this is far from the most egregious positions out there, even setting Cavell and Wittgenstein aside. The narrative – I might even say philosophical crusade – against epistemological skepticism does very little to actually dissuade the skeptic and instead reveals just how dismissive (or disingenuous) one has to be in order to reject skepticism.

Take, for example, these claims made by Leiter (one of my go-to suspects) when he discusses even the *possibility* that Nietzsche could be providing or defending some form of epistemological skepticism. He makes the following claims: The maturity and quality of the secondary literature on Nietzsche before Leiter's is predominantly bad⁸⁰; Leiter's interpretation is now the 'standard' except in German-speaking circles⁸¹; commentators on Nietzsche have been making claims about which they have no authority⁸²; analytic philosophy is plainly better than what Nietzsche is doing⁸³; previous interpretations did not write with clarity, precision, concern for evidence, or dialectical rigor⁸⁴; and explicitly that the postmodern readings from Heidegger and Derrida are obscure.⁸⁵ He makes similarly dismissive remarks against Danto (1965), Nehamas (1985), Rorty (1989), and Richard Schacht. What ties the secondary literature, "German-speaking circles," the style of these thinkers, and what the analytic philosophers *lack* (according to Leiter) is skepticism. For some reason, proposing the *possibility* of skepticism merits *ad hominem* attacks. What could skepticism possibly have done to Leiter to make him speak of it so poorly? One might suspect he was traumatized by skepticism as a child if it were

⁷⁸ Putnam 2006, p.120.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.121

⁸⁰ Brian Leiter, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2002/2015), 2nd Preface.

⁸¹ Ibid., xi

⁸² Ibid., 1st Preface, 2002, xiv

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., xv

not for the blatant absurdity of the idea of being traumatized by a philosophical concept – but now *I* am the one judging too quickly in supposing this is absurd. I am, after all, building up to how skepticism is *forced* upon us.

When we think of conflicts of opinion, there is a certain rigour that comes with certain topics. Typically, political issues breed strong opinions, whereas other issues such as mathematical theorems (while still interesting for some) do not capture the same level of conviction or desperation.⁸⁶ We could say the same about many philosophical positions: it is rare to see insults hurled across a room full of philosophers – although it certainly happens. The question for me is therefore: what is it about skepticism that elicits such strong reactions? This is related to Cavell's own idea of acknowledging the standing threat of skepticism.

Whatever the case may be, it seems to me there is a distinctively normative project against skepticism; for some, it seems there is something normatively and inherently *wrong* with skepticism. For Leiter, not only are you mistaken if you think Nietzsche should be understood as a skeptic, but you are an utter fool if you then think a skeptical Nietzsche is in any way coherent (making me one of the biggest fools of all!). I think it is fair to say that this negative sentiment is present in Mulhall's presentation of the skeptic as "confused"⁸⁷ or likewise implicit in Putnam's "disturbing" projection onto the truth of skepticism. Putnam is the most sympathetic to skepticism as he admits right away (and even titles a section) that there is *depth* to skepticism. I think it is this *depth* that many readers are failing to appreciate.

Consider the example Putnam references: Othello's jealousy. He says "Othello is, in a sense, a genuine skeptic about one other mind – Desdemona's. His problem – and this is the horror of his situation – isn't that he lacks 'evidence' of Desdemona's faithfulness. It is that *no* evidence is good enough."⁸⁸ He then adds that the idea that an ordinary language philosopher could come in and say something like "*this* is just what we call conclusive evidence for Desdemona's faithfulness" "makes one want to vomit"⁸⁹ and later adds "it isn't just an intellectual error."⁹⁰ Furthermore, Putnam says "The point of saying this is not simply to awaken

⁸⁶ As with everything, there are exceptions. In response to this comment, I was told the tale of Hippasus. One interpretation of events surrounding his life would suggest that he was thrown from his ship by Pythagoreans for proving the square root of two to be irrational. So even the most traditionally boring topics can elicit reaction.

⁸⁷ Mulhall 1994, p.85.

⁸⁸ Putnam, 2006, p.126.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.127.

us to the suffering of others ... it is also to get us to see that an idea of being totally free of skepticism, in this deep sense, is itself a *form* of skepticism.”⁹¹ I would have to agree.

I am tempted to think that a part of this negativity surrounding skepticism has to do with the harshness of skepticism. The depths to which skepticism delves are not for the faint of heart:

[Nietzsche] ridiculed philosophers for regarding life as a problem of knowledge (*Genealogy of Morals*, p.682), implying that we question what we cannot fail to know in order not to seek what it would be painful to find out. This, of course, does not suggest that skepticism is trivial; on the contrary it shows how profound a position of the mind it is. Nothing is more human than the wish to deny one’s humanity, or to assert it at the expense of others. But if that is what skepticism entails, it cannot be combatted through simple ‘refutations’. The idea that a philosophical position can simply be ‘refuted’ is one that Nietzsche *also* ridicules (*Beyond Good and Evil*, p.499).⁹²

However, before we can properly appreciate how harsh skepticism can be, I want to suggest that there is, say, a value-neutral or even *positive* stance one can take towards skepticism that more accurately reflects its role in our human lives.

1.2.2 Kinds of Skepticism

Trying to define skepticism is like trying to define “games” – you can do it, but it will have limited applicability. We *can* define skepticism in rigid terms and set them into different categories like external world skepticism, skepticism about other minds, climate skepticism, religious skepticism, Cartesian skepticism, pyrrhonian skepticism, Kantian skepticism, Humeian skepticism, and so on (*ad infinitum*?). We can divide them up into specific instances, but ultimately there is *something* about all of these instances that unite them as skepticism, although I doubt this “something” is singular or simple by any means.

So naturally, the one thing I have yet to do is clearly define the different kinds of skepticism at play other than the truth of skepticism – our relationship to the world as not one of what we think of as “knowing.” But what are the other relevant kinds of skepticism at play? Richard Rorty is keen to point out just how ambiguous Cavell’s use of “skepticism” can be in his review of *The Claim of Reason, Cavell on Skepticism*. In this review Rorty identifies at least three distinct applications of skepticism in the book. He believes that Cavell is mistaken in his engagement with traditional epistemology, which renders a part of his philosophy incoherent. I

⁹¹ Putnam, 2006, p.127.

⁹² *The Claim of Reason*, p.109.

argue, instead, that Rorty misunderstands Cavell's engagement with traditional philosophy. Cavell is not trying to defend traditional philosophy he is only attempting to understand it. This is, in a way, one of the more important insights Cavell has to offer regardless of whether one accepts what he has to say: it is crucial to take each position seriously. Even when Cavell seemingly rejects a view, he rarely claims it is "wrong." Instead, he tries to go as far along with the ideas as possible before presenting his own view. I am attempting to do the same.

Rorty divides *The Claim of Reason* into two 'books', the first book consisting of parts I and II, and the second book part IV. As to what book part III is involved in, he makes no mention. Rorty describes his praise and disdain for the book by saying "I admire the second book as much as I disagree with the first."⁹³ Under his reading, Cavell suggests that traditional epistemology can lead us to the 'romantic' which "promises to relieve us philosophy professors from the shame we have felt ever since we began to suspect that our introductory courses in epistemology merely kicked up a cloud of dust around our students – so that they might be grateful to us for leading them out of it into the light."⁹⁴ Rorty finds it difficult (or impossible) to see how dragging us back through the problems of traditional epistemology, of the external world, can be of any benefit to us in an age when philosophy should be beyond these old problems.

Rorty's argument is that there are three "intellectual phenomena" that Cavell engages and mistakenly conflates:

- a) Professional Philosophy's Skepticism
- b) Kantian, Romantic Skepticism
- c) Existential Angst

Rorty takes issue with the fact that Cavell lumps (a) and (b) together since they are, he contends, ultimately distinct. Furthermore, Rorty claims that (a) cannot lead to (b) or (c), but that (b) can lead to (c). In due course, he claims that we can leave the traditional epistemological problems of "professional philosophy" such as those raised by "Ayer and Price in the care of Austin and Ryle, and hasten on to the serious thinkers"⁹⁵ (apparently, Ayer and Price aren't 'serious' and deserve to have their intellect brought into question). I explore each of these intellectual phenomena in Cavell with an emphasis on dispelling the issues surrounding (a) to show how Rorty should not treat the problems of traditional philosophy so dismissively. I suggest, instead,

⁹³ Rorty in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.10.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.15.

that this is a good example of Cavell taking each side as seriously as possible, which gives the illusion of internal tension. This is important because while Rorty's rejection fails to appreciate traditional epistemology, Cavell is not defending it, but engaging it seriously in order to come closer to grasping the truth of skepticism.

When referring to professional philosophy's skepticism (a), Rorty is discussing external world skepticism, or any theory that doubts the attainability of knowledge of the world. As I argued in the previous section, this does not only refer to theories that deny our capacity for knowledge, but also any theory that affirms the attainability of knowledge in response to the skeptic because Cavell applies the term "skepticism" to "any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge."⁹⁶ Rorty defines this intellectual phenomenon as the following: "The 'professional' philosopher's skepticism created by what Reid called 'the theory of ideas' (the theory that analyzes perception in terms of immediately, certainly known givens)."⁹⁷ A simple example of this type of skepticism is if one takes a ball (or any object) and claims: "when I see the ball, I only see *this* side of it; I can never see the ball as a whole." The key is that this is a problem about incomplete sense-data.

Rorty asks "But does he have to drag us back through Berkeley and Descartes to get us to see it? Why are not 'Rousseau and Thoreau and Kierkegaard and Tolstoy and Wittgenstein' (to cite one of Cavell's lists of heroes) enough? Why 'the external world' *again*?"⁹⁸ He thinks that the only good reason Cavell has for even considering the traditional problems is because these are the kinds of problems Wittgenstein concerned himself with. Yet, as far as Rorty is concerned, the problems being raised by traditional epistemology are a waste of energy. They had their time. Now we should move on to more important philosophy. But, of course, Cavell is not attempting to harken to a 'better' time in epistemology. What Rorty fails to appreciate is that he is looking at these old problems with renewed perspective. So what is this perspective then?

When I first began researching Cavell, a great deal of my focus went into Cavell's treatment of Descartes. I think Rorty was drawn, likewise, to Cavell's treatment of Descartes because on the one hand it is very familiar, while on the other it is different. Rorty just fails to see the difference. It would be prudent, therefore, to go through Cavell's treatment of Descartes in order to identify Rorty's first misunderstanding.

⁹⁶ *The Claim of Reason*, p.45.

⁹⁷ Rorty in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.12.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10.

Cavell sees Descartes as an important starting point in examining the traditional skeptical investigation. How do you know that you are not dreaming? You cannot know that you are not dreaming, therefore it could all be a dream. This is the simplified core of the skeptical recital in trying either to claim that these considerations lead to skepticism, or that there must be something wrong with Descartes' methodological doubt because skepticism cannot be true. The shift from talking about how we can know things in themselves to talking about sense data occurs when Descartes says

Surely whatever I had admitted until now as most true I received either from the senses or through the senses. However, I have noticed that the senses are sometimes deceptive; and it is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once.⁹⁹

Descartes claims that most beliefs are derived from the senses, but given that the senses can deceive us, we cannot *fully* trust them. With that said, this does not necessitate that we cannot know anything through the senses. Descartes' aim is to find something indubitably certain, this simply means that sense-data cannot fulfill the desire of attaining indubitability. However, if sense-data is taken to be the only way by which we can have knowledge of the external world (which some traditional epistemologists do), and Descartes is correct about sense-data being incapable of indubitability, then this would result in skepticism about the external world.

While Descartes's considerations should be familiar to many reading this, there is one thing in particular that Cavell emphasizes that he thinks is central to understanding the motivations behind skepticism: "The 'grounds for doubt' he is going to raise are ones which must be *reasonable*."¹⁰⁰ When we pose the skeptical question "how do you know?" it must be a reasonable question. As I said, Descartes does not suppose that simply because he is deceived sometimes by the senses that therefore he is always deceived, as he goes on to say "on what grounds could one deny that these hands and this entire body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to the insane."¹⁰¹ Here we see an important move that *not all doubt* should be accepted or considered. Instead, Descartes requires a *reasonable* doubt, which to some degree can be found in the dreaming argument:

⁹⁹ Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, ed. *Modern Philosophy. 2 ed. An Anthology of Primary Sources*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2009), 41.

¹⁰⁰ *The Claim of Reason*, p.131.

¹⁰¹ Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, ed. 2009, p.41.

This would all be well and good, were I not a man who is accustomed to sleeping at night, and to experiencing in my dreams the very same things, or now and then even less plausible ones, as these insane people do when they awake.¹⁰²

It can be difficult to distinguish between being asleep and awake, and therefore at any given moment, the sensations you feel or the situation you find yourself in might in fact be a dream.

At this point, Cavell wants to discover how it is that this

reasonableness of the philosopher's considerations was a function of their being just those ordinary and everyday considerations that any person who can talk and can know anything at all will recognize as relevant to the claim ... under scrutiny.¹⁰³

Cavell's aim is to investigate how the skeptical problem arises in a normal or reasonable manner as opposed to being pure speculation. This grows more interesting when we reconsider the arguments made by the ordinary language philosopher. In particular, Austin, according to Cavell, understands the skeptical grounds for doubt as taking the following argumentative form:

Claim: there is a goldfinch in the garden.

Request for Basis: How do you know?

Basis: From the red head.

Ground for Doubt: But that's not enough; woodpeckers also have red heads.¹⁰⁴

Austin sees this as an example of the skeptical argument since "the conclusion is, as Descartes explicitly says, not that the claim is 'manifestly false', but rather that the claimant can no longer claim to know it's true: it can be reasonably doubted."¹⁰⁵ Where Austin takes issue with this is where Cavell quotes him stating "yet some are prone to argue that because I sometimes don't know or can't discover, I never can."¹⁰⁶ Austin's accusation is that the skeptic takes an example such as the goldfinch – where doubt can be raised about a particular knowledge claim – then goes on to make a larger claim that therefore we cannot know *anything*. In other words, his accusation is that the skeptic does *not* have a reasonable doubt – they are overgeneralizing. If this accusation proved true, this would show that the skeptic's argument is in fact unreasonable and undermines itself:

If the considerations of the ordinary language philosopher provide us with the model or image of the reasonableness that the traditional epistemologist requires of his procedures,

¹⁰² Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, ed. 2009, p.41.

¹⁰³ *The Claim of Reason*, p.131.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.132

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.133

show us what the reasonableness is that those procedures require, then how can those very considerations seem to come to cast suspicion on those very procedures?¹⁰⁷

For Cavell, the challenge here is to figure out how the ordinary language philosopher can claim the same kind of reasonableness, but comes to an “apparently contrary” conclusion. How can the skeptic, or Descartes, attain the reasonableness they are looking for? The first step to take in response to this criticism is to create the same argumentative form as Austin’s example, but with the considerations Descartes has made:

Claim: I have hands

Request for Basis: How do you know?

Basis: From the senses

Ground for doubt: But that is not enough; the senses sometimes deceive you.

As can be seen the argumentative form is identical. However, there is still a fundamental difference in what is being claimed. In response, Cavell begins by saying “now first of all the epistemologist is not *arguing* what Austin says he is prone to ‘argue’.” Instead, he says the skeptic “sees or recognizes that since I don’t know, or can’t discover, in *this* case, I can know in *no* case at all.” The challenge is to determine what this “seeing” or “recognizing” entails.

Where the epistemologist’s project begins “is one which we should all recognize as holding the best prospect of certainty”¹⁰⁸: the fact that I have hands is something that I take to be as certain as can possibly be. The skeptic takes the best possible case for knowledge as opposed to a case for knowledge that could be modified in order to be more certain, such that

to say that the philosopher takes ... the ‘best’ case for knowing is to say that he takes a case in which factors of personal training and care of judgment, and in which contextual matters of opportunity and conditions, are irrelevant: all you have to know, to achieve knowledge in the philosopher’s case, is, one could say, how to talk.¹⁰⁹

In Austin’s example, there is the possibility of improving our capacity for knowledge. We could have been closer to the goldfinch; we could have studied bird watching practices in order to identify different birds more quickly; etc. But as Cavell argues “in the traditional philosopher’s case, no such descriptions will help; change any of the obvious factors any way you like ... and you still won’t have so much as touched the question whether we know that there is a table, a pencil, an envelope here.”¹¹⁰ No amount of expertise or closeness is going to help you determine

¹⁰⁷ *The Claim of Reason*, 132

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 133

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 133-134

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134

how you know you have hands. It is in this sense that Austin's argument fails, for the object of knowledge is different.

The skeptic is concerned with generic objects, and it is in doubting generic objects that the skeptic is led to doubting knowledge as a whole, since these examples are supposed to be representative of our *best* cases for knowledge. Once this is understood Cavell claims "the step from there to the conclusion that we never know, is trivial."¹¹¹ This is why Cavell claimed that the skeptic is not prone to argue what the ordinary philosopher claims they do, because the skeptic does not need to argue this point at all. If it is the case that our most exemplary form of knowledge can be doubted then this brings our entire claim to knowledge into question. Yet, the question is: what is the context in which the philosopher *raises* these concerns? If the context is not a reasonable one then the skeptic fails. With this in mind Cavell says

But what I have so far claimed is this: if there is a fallacy in the traditional conception or repudiation of knowledge, it is betrayed not by a hasty generalization from 'some' cases to 'all' cases, but by the way in which, or the purpose for which, the philosopher selects that 'best' case of knowledge, and by what he has had to do (to himself) in order to get the question whether we know *to arise there*.¹¹²

If there is a fundamental problem inherent within skepticism, we cannot simply leave them in the hands of Austin to dismiss as Rorty suggested; instead it has to do with the selection of the *generic object* as grounds for doubt – i.e. why doubt that your hands exist in the first place?

In his quest to understand how the skeptical question arises, Cavell takes the traditional epistemologist, and therefore some skeptics, to respond to Austin's accusations in the following manner: "It is a perfectly natural question, but one that 'for practical purposes' *need not arise*."¹¹³ This is to respond to Austin's claim that the grounds for doubt is unreasonable, and reply that it is in fact reasonable, but will not arise outside of the philosophy class room. There is reason to believe that Cavell is keeping Descartes in mind (or Hume), as Descartes says "But this undertaking is arduous, and a certain laziness brings me back to my customary way of living."¹¹⁴ The idea is that despite being confronted with these grounds for doubt and uncertainty, we fall back into our ordinary modes of believing in the external world.

Cavell does not like the response that skepticism need not arise as it seems plain that if the traditional epistemologist concedes that in ordinary situations the grounds for skeptical doubt

¹¹¹ *The Claim of Reason*, 134

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 135

¹¹⁴ Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, ed. 2009, p.43.

need not arise, then the traditional epistemologist and the skeptic have given into Austin's criticisms. Given that epistemology casts doubt upon the whole of knowledge by casting doubt "on a case of knowledge which we all recognize to exemplify knowledge at its best"¹¹⁵ Cavell suggests the following: "If, therefore, there is something wrong with the epistemologist's procedures it must, apparently, lie in his choice of generic object as his focus of investigation, or in the basis he has chosen as its support, or in the ground for doubt he has directed against this basis."¹¹⁶ There are three ways to properly object to the skeptic: either you question their choice in a generic object, the support for their choice in a generic object, or the grounds for doubt for doubting said object. Cavell thinks that most attempts – such as Austin's – to reject skepticism take the argumentative form of the latter two options:

It should trouble someone who thinks these criticisms sufficient that their subjects do not find them fatal; they themselves have urged the reasonableness of their procedures while they also fully recognize the paradoxicality of their conclusions. If you accuse someone of being unreasonable, it isn't only good manners, or good policy, to be sure you know why he thinks he is not. Maybe there is something you are not noticing. And of course it is *no* answer to a paradox to say it can't be true; the point of calling a claim paradoxical already registers the fact that it looks as if it can't be true.¹¹⁷

Cavell is pointing out two important steps here: first, Austin and other philosophers who believe they have completely banished the skeptic should reflect upon the fact that the skeptic remains unconvinced; second, the implications of Cavell's statement are fairly straightforward – taking these routes against the skeptic fails to take the skeptic seriously (so – I might add – why should the skeptic take these criticisms seriously?). Furthermore, even if these arguments could be considered convincing, Cavell is questioning whether they are fatal to the traditional skeptic's position: while they might create difficulties or show inconsistencies, they do not truly refute the position. Therefore, he wants to further investigate the first option instead.

Before examining this choice in the generic object, Cavell qualifies his project:

I cannot prove, I do not know that I would wish to prove, that there is an initiating question about knowledge as a whole, and once initiated an unignorable question, that philosophers of knowledge, of human knowing, find themselves to pose.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ *The Claim of Reason*, p.135.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.136

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.137

Cavell does not want to claim that he can determine that there is a single initiating question about knowledge which necessarily pushes us to skepticism. Instead, Cavell begs us to take the skeptical position seriously to understand how it comes to be:

What I am asking, then, is that we take the philosopher's original — and originating — question with the same seriousness that the ordinary language philosopher wishes us to take any statement a human being utters ... Unless we make that question real for ourselves, the philosopher's answers to it will seem as slovenly and unreal — as academic — as the ordinary language philosopher supposes. And once it seems a real problem, the answers to it may not seem so clearly, or wrongly, forced.¹¹⁹

If we do not take the skeptical question seriously, then we are guilty of talking past the skeptic. This concern is not merely aimed at the ordinary language philosopher, but also at any traditional epistemologist or skeptic who thinks that the skeptical position is merely an academic one, or one that only arises in theory as opposed to practice.

It would be prudent then to provide a real-world example to make this case more persuasive. Normally, when discussing epistemological skepticism, the sentiment is that this range of thought occurs *only for the philosopher*. The way skepticism is treated is as though it never occurs for the rest of humanity – it is the philosopher's boogeyman. Sometime before the end of the Fall semester of 2019 I met a non-philosopher who expressed solipsism – skepticism about other minds – unprompted in such a genuine and detailed way that would put many of the objections that have been raised throughout this work to shame. What do I mean by this? The anecdote goes as follows: at a birthday party I met a person – Wallis – who is very energetic and full of life. I spoke with Wallis on numerous occasions throughout the night and as I approached them again, amongst some others, I realized they were in the middle of an intense conversation (I did not realize this *until* I approached). The conversation was about love, but not the concept itself. The question was fairly simple: how can I know that my love is reciprocated? The question was not geared towards romantic love, necessarily (although the implications are the same – or worse), but instead towards the love Wallis felt towards others generally. The dilemma was that they could not know whether their love was reciprocated, which Wallis found disturbing especially given just how much love they felt they had to give. Those involved in the conversation tried to reassure Wallis in various ways or to question them in such a way as to 'lead' them away from the skeptical conclusion... suddenly this sounds familiar. Imagine Rorty walks into the room then or, worse (perhaps), Austin. Austin approaches Wallis, a tear still

¹¹⁹ *The Claim of Reason*, p.138

sliding down their face, and says “I understand you find this quite disturbing, but you should know that the context in which you are raising the question “is my love reciprocated?” is not being raised in the right context, and is therefore nonsense.”

Of course, this is absurd. Not only would such a remark be rude, it entirely misses the point. Clearly, Wallis has experienced something that has led them to this conclusion. Furthermore, this conclusion has nothing to do with philosophy as a tradition. It just so happens that in this very real scenario a non-philosopher (I can say it has been more than ten years since the last time Wallis *could* have taken a class in philosophy) developed the skeptical recital on their own terms. Granted, this was at the birthday party of a fellow philosopher and based off the fact that Wallis shortly thereafter became very important to me personally, I would certainly say they have philosophical “tendencies.” Nevertheless, there was no professor whispering in their ear or “throwing up a cloud of dust.” What could possibly lead to such conclusions? How about experiencing psychological gaslighting? Or toxic relationships – romantic, familial, or otherwise? What of trauma? PTSD? In other words, experiences that, while varied and unique, could and have happened to far too many of us. Philosophers aren’t going to respond to the skeptic in a satisfying way by *dismissing experiences*. How do you help someone in a situation like this? More often than not you at least begin by listening seriously.

To briefly address Rorty’s original concern then – why go back to Descartes? – the answer is simply that we don’t need to, but it’s easier than rehashing the same problems in different contexts when we already have a shared reference point (Descartes). I would also point out that Cavell agrees with Rorty’s dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy – their philosophical education. In fact, Cavell thinks Rorty is right in claiming that philosophers like Austin and Wittgenstein have provided the tools for addressing traditional philosophy (epistemology) and that he has no interest in ‘resuscitating’ a dead tradition. Instead, he claims

the question becomes how its preoccupations could ever have seemed to express our fundamental concerns about our relation to the world and I and others in it, which for me, is to ask how modern skepticism (in Descartes and Hume and Kant) can (have) come to seem the fundamental question of philosophy.¹²⁰

Rorty can complain about being forced to go back to the “external world” *again*, but in the end the problems of others and knowledge isn’t going away simply because philosophers decide to ignore it. We must still ask: how is the non-philosopher still coming to the same problem?

¹²⁰ Cavell in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.159.

Before seeking answers to the question Cavell poses, let us turn to the second of Rorty's classifications for skepticism. The Kantian, romantic skepticism (b) is defined as the "worry about whether the words we use have any relation to the way the world actually is in itself."¹²¹ Rorty describes this kind of skepticism as a "hope for an impossible kind of knowledge, a knowledge unmediated by our language-games."¹²² An example might be the problem of infinite regress: if all statements require justification in order to be true, and consequently known, then those justifications will require further justifications, *ad infinitum*. Alternatively, another example would be Kant's idea of a noumenal world (hence, 'Kantian').¹²³ The difference between romantic skepticism and professional skepticism is that the key to romantic skepticism is that there is no concern about sense data, but a concern about "for us" (inside our language game) vs. "in itself", whereas professional philosophy's skepticism draws the distinction between "inside the mind/outside the mind."¹²⁴ Recall, Rorty takes no issue here with this kind of skepticism. His point is that he believes Cavell wrongly conflates the distinction between the professional and Kantian forms of skepticism by failing to acknowledge the difference between these two approaches – I come back to this in a brief moment.

The third intellectual phenomenon of existential angst (c) is the experience of existential dread due to some sort of revelation, in this case epistemological (skeptical) doubt. The example Rorty gives is of Cavell giving the following description of such an experience:

"seeing ourselves outside the world as a whole," looking in at it as we now look at some objects from a position among others. This experience I have found to be fundamental in classical epistemology (and, indeed, moral philosophy). It sometimes presents itself to me as a sense of powerlessness to know the world, or to act upon it; I think it is also working in the existentialist's (or, say, Santayana's) sense of the precariousness and arbitrariness of existence, the utter contingency in the fact that things are as they are.¹²⁵

Cavell goes on to describe the experience in a very Nietzschean way as wanting "to know the world as we imagine God knows it ... to rid us of the prideful craving to be God – I mean to *rid* us of it, not to replace it with a despair at our finitude."¹²⁶ The God's-eye view is (b) in the sense that we crave to know the world as we imagine God knows it, but our Kantian, romantic

¹²¹ Rorty in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.12.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.12-13.

¹²³ Of course, these are ideas that are typically found within traditional or professional philosophy. For some reason, Rorty seems to think that these modes are more legitimate forms of philosophy, or at least that there is something more legitimate about them.

¹²⁴ Rorty in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.15.

¹²⁵ *The Claim of Reason*, p.236.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.236-7.

skepticism brings the possibility of such knowledge into doubt. Our desire for the God's-eye view reveals that our relation to the world is precarious and arbitrary – constrained by language – and therefore one may be filled with anguish; once we abandon the search for truth, we are led to existential despair. But in this line Cavell suggests that he wants to *do away* with this desire for truth – to be rid of it, not replace it with our existential angst. It is in this way that Kantian, romantic skepticism (b) and existential angst (c) are connected.

One may note, however, that in Cavell's description of this experience, he includes "classical epistemology" as a prime suspect in generating this sort of experience. Rorty insists, however, that there is no "logical connection"¹²⁷ between (a) and (b) and furthermore that only the "Kantian hope for an impossible kind of knowledge, a knowledge unmediated by our language-games, our patterns of justification, our ideas or words ... as produced by the Sartrean sense that only such an impossible sort of knowledge would overcome our terror at the sheer contingency of things."¹²⁸ In the case of the professional philosopher, Rorty consistently returns to the image of the traditional philosopher unable to take their own position seriously: skepticism can be left in the armchair. When the philosophy professor encounters a student who actually believes traditional skepticism, they try to assure the student that "it is all 'just philosophy.'"¹²⁹

Cavell offers high praise in return for Rorty's criticisms by saying "there is no other known to me who is intellectually or culturally more broadly informed."¹³⁰ However, this doesn't preclude Rorty from effectively missing the point. Again, the point is not to revive a dying tradition, but to examine why it has persisted so long – why it continues to persist.

To frame the question with my whole project in mind, I suggest a slight modification: instead of seeking *the* (or *a*) truth of skepticism, we should be after the truth *in* skepticism. The comparison that always comes to my mind is John Stuart Mill's skeptical argument from *On Liberty* for free speech which can be simplified into three points:

- 1) Our current set of beliefs could always be wrong, or a competing set of beliefs true. To assume otherwise would be to assume infallibility.
- 2) Even if a set of beliefs is incorrect or false, it is often the case that there is nevertheless a sort of truth in it, and should therefore be examined.

¹²⁷ Rorty in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.15.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.14-15.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p.13.

¹³⁰ Cavell in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.158.

- 3) Even if somehow our current set of beliefs happened to be wholly true, and the competing set of beliefs wholly false, our beliefs must be questioned and challenged otherwise we will fall into dogmatism.

With this in mind, assume traditional epistemology is dead (therefore we need not concern ourselves with (1)). Nevertheless, there might be some portion of truth to the tradition that could still be of value (2). Furthermore, even if the tradition proves practically useless, it is still important to remind ourselves of these traditions to avoid falling into dogmatism (3). While in the case of (3) one could use this to defend why we still educate undergraduates by invoking the same old philosophers and ideas, (2) is of far more interest to Cavell and me. While Rorty facetiously complains that philosophy professors are merely baiting undergraduates into a fake mystery, Cavell is trying to determine how we have been so consistently drawn to this traditional vein, to skepticism. That is to say, even though traditional external world skepticism is effectively ‘wrong,’ or ‘misleading,’ there is still something about it that draws us toward it. We cannot seem to shake the skeptical impulse. It is this impulse, this pull towards skepticism (and conversely our equally seductive desire for truth) that Cavell wants to uncover. There is something that is true *in* skepticism, or *about* skepticism.

Cavell admits on numerous occasions – one could even say is self-conscious – that he has failed to make clear the connection between traditional epistemology (a) and the other two intellectual phenomena of romantic skepticism (b) and existential angst (c).¹³¹ I must consequently admit my own self-consciousness when approaching this problem precisely because the fact that Cavell cannot explicitly make this connection seems to be a part of the problem itself. Let me explain.

1.2.3 “Forced upon us”

Rorty unwittingly points to what I want to suggest is central to the conflict around the truth of skepticism when he says: “My complaint about Cavell’s treatment of skepticism may be summed up by saying that his book never makes this possibility [of skepticism] clear for someone for whom it is not yet an actuality.”¹³² For Rorty, the experience of skepticism that Cavell is trying to invoke is not one he has lived, it is not an actuality. Cavell is all too aware of

¹³¹ c.f. Cavell in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.159 and *Claim of Reason*, p.142.

¹³² Rorty in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.16.

this problem, which one can see from his considerations surrounding what he calls the “sense of something amiss,” which is a moment when skepticism “has been forced upon us.”¹³³ This sense of something amiss is the direct *experience* of skepticism – what I suggest makes it an “actuality.” He considers this sense while grappling with the ordinary language philosopher’s argument against skepticism: that the traditional examples used to show the problem of skepticism do not arise ordinarily, and are therefore unfounded.

If the philosopher's situation is one in which there is in fact, or in appearance, something amiss, something which needs accounting for, then the ordinary language criticisms to the effect that the possibilities the philosopher invokes are absurd, unrealistic, unreasonable, can be repudiated.¹³⁴

In other words, if Cavell can show that the problem of skepticism is ‘ordinary’ in the sense that it is forced upon the philosopher in some way (through the sense of something amiss) then the ordinary language philosopher’s (Austin’s) objection will be addressed. Cavell’s “major claim,” as he puts it, is that the skeptic’s doubts are “a response to, or expression of, a real experience which takes hold of human beings” and that while the skeptic’s doubts are “not a response to questions raised in ordinary practical contexts” it is nevertheless “a response which expresses a natural experience of a creature complicated or burdened enough to possess language at all.”¹³⁵ Cavell gives three lived examples (calling a phone number he believed was incorrect, tuning into the radio and believing he knows better than the radio host, and the epistemology class room) where he has encountered the sense that something is amiss and where he has been forced to re-examine a situation and ultimately infer the moral that “human beings are *fallible*”¹³⁶ (recall Mill’s first argument). I can also attest to having had the sense of something amiss, and one that resembles a problem found in traditional philosophy. For this reason, I offer my own example in the following tale.

Around the age of four or five I lived in a strange house in the middle of London, Ontario next to the river which was surrounded by trees (or a “bush”) and a few long-abandoned and crumbling houses. I distinctly recall that one day there had been a number of dead rats in the yard and I remember my brother’s father hard at work to clear them out with a rake. I asked him about this roughly a year later; whether he remembered that strange event. He responded with

¹³³ *The Claim of Reason*, p.139.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.140.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.143.

confusion by asking me to repeat myself. I quickly told him it was nothing. What I realized was that one of my memories was in fact a dream. One might insist I had *mistaken* the dream for a memory, but other than the contents of this phenomenon giving me a strong enough *hint*, there is no way for me to distinguish this dream from other memories. Even to this day, I have a clear and distinct image in my mind of the events much in the same way I do about other events around that point in my life such as the first real goal I ever scored playing soccer or later my first (failed) Catholic confession. What if the dream had been slightly less absurd? What if he had been raking toy cars or piles of dandelions? While still strange, this sort of experience becomes more difficult to explain away. I had only come to this surprising discovery nearly a year later after having voiced the memory aloud by standing in the same spot I had occupied in my dream. I realized that such a situation was so absurd that it *had* to be a dream. Notice too that I was only able to *realize* it was a dream by speaking with another human; I became *conscious* of events. In that moment, as I stood stunned by my realization, I was experiencing the sense of something amiss.

Regardless of whether one finds my story convincing, this kind of example is insufficient to make the jump from realizing one was struck by the feeling of something amiss, that one was incorrect about something which he or she believed they were certain about, to the metaphysical conclusion that one can know *nothing*. A sense of feeling amiss that was much stronger would be necessary to make this claim. Furthermore, Cavell is not looking to prove that we can know nothing, but as I have said, he is trying to determine the origin of such a conviction or thought. He then says the following:

I can here only attest to my having had such experiences and, though struggling against them intellectually, have had to wait for them to dissipate in their own time. It seems to me that I relive such experiences when I ask my students, as habitually at the beginning of a course in which epistemology is discussed, whether they have ever had such thoughts as, for example, that they might, when for all the world awake, be dreaming.¹³⁷

What more can be said then? Can we only take Cavell at his word? Perhaps one might attempt to survey individuals to see if others have ever had this experience. Is there an example that I, or Cavell, could give that would *convince* someone of this sense of something amiss without having *experienced* it themselves?

¹³⁷ *The Claim of Reason*, p.143.

If it is the case that an experience is required in order to understand a concept, then I fear this could have tragic consequences. The implication is that a concept would be inaccessible to someone if they lacked the necessary experience (or, more accurately, if they are incapable of identifying or relating to such an experience). Consequently, there could be a case where two competing views are arrived at through rational means and where at least one view requires an experience to understand. This case would entail that the defenders of these views would fail to attain attunement or agreement – they would have a “rational disagreement.”¹³⁸ I would even go so far as to use Cavell’s phrase and say this could lead to an “intellectual tragedy.”¹³⁹

Put more directly, my hypothesis is this: one cannot come to accept the truth of skepticism – our relation to the world as one of not-knowing – without having experienced it, without it being an *actuality*. To be clear, this experience need not take the shape of a dream. One might experience skepticism through going to a philosophy class, through interpersonal drama, seeing a film, or any other number of ways. While Cavell explicitly calls this a sense of “something amiss”¹⁴⁰ and sometimes calls it an “experience”, he describes it more often as a “relation” such “that our relation to the world’s existence is somehow closer than the ideas of believing and knowing are made to convey.”¹⁴¹ The wider implications are that we may attain rational disagreement – a situation in which no rational argument could disprove competing views – and that at least one of these views are *inaccessible* to the advocate of the opposing view. When considering only the matter of the skepticism, this suggests that philosophers like Kripke and Rorty – including major interpreters of Cavell such as Mulhall (1994) and Williams (1991) – *may* have never experienced the sense of something amiss or the truth of skepticism. Alternatively, it could be that they have had a related experience, but something about the experience put them off (given some of their hostility towards skepticism, this might be more likely). Without having experienced skepticism, one may struggle to understand it. Therefore, if one lacks the experience, one may be unable to appreciate the importance of skepticism to Cavell.

It must be emphasized that this is a *hypothesis* and could never become a proper thesis. The reason being is that it would be incorrect (and over presumptuous) to claim that someone else

¹³⁸ *The Claim of Reason*, p.254.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.139.

¹⁴¹ Stanley Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.22.

lacks a specific experience necessary for understanding. Making such a claim is effectively a (weak) kind of solipsism, where “all we can know” is our own experience, and since these experiences determine how we form our concepts, we cannot come to share these concepts. Instead, what my hypothesis is meant to convey is the *possibility* of having un-accessed concepts: *it could be the case* that the major interpreters of Cavell lack the proper experience, but I cannot claim that they *have not had* such an experience. To claim they haven’t had such an experience would require a detailed analysis of their views and a dose of mindreading.

Return to the case of the teacher and student I discussed in relation to Kripke in Part I. I ended the discussion by recognizing the point where reasons come to an end, where Wittgenstein is “inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do’.”¹⁴² There will inevitably be moments where the teacher tries to convey information, but the student will (seem to) fail to understand the concept. Kripke’s conception was that the student seeks entry into the community, but what my analysis of community would suggest, is that the child is *not* seeking *admittance*, but is already a member seeking *acknowledgement*. We could say, continued admittance, but this would still maintain the notion that the student is being “judged” or “tested.” Instead, *prima facie* the example of a priest or religion teacher trying to explain the concept of God to a student might serve as a better example where *some* kind of experience would be required in order to understand the concept of the divine. My young brother serves as a good case of a ‘student’ failing to understand the concept of God: one day, quite sporadically, my brother (no older than ten years old at the time) declared that he believed in God. Whereas I had been originally raised Catholic, my brother had received no religious education whatsoever. When my mother and I asked why, he replied (quite seriously) it was because of the comedy film *Bruce Almighty*. This is a perfect example of how someone being mistaken about *what we do* can lead to a comic situation. I am inclined to say that my brother’s view of God as Morgan Freeman is incorrect and so he did not understand the concept of “God.” Is this because of a lack of experience? *Probably*. Are we inclined to say that his views of God are completely inaccessible to others? Of course not.

What this example is meant to show is that even when someone does not share our reasons for believing in any particular view, we do not simply *give up*. A good teacher perseveres in their attempts to educate. And I might add, regardless of age. At one point Kripke says of an adult misapplying addition without any visible pattern of error: “If this happens to him generally, and

¹⁴² §217.

his responses seem to me to display little discernible pattern, I will judge him probably to have gone insane.”¹⁴³ I cannot agree with this statement because many of us often fail to apply mathematical principles in ways that can be quite baffling. For example, the closest I have come to experiencing skepticism at the hands of mathematics (Am *I* the one who’s misunderstanding addition?) came about while finding a new place to live with one of my partners. The issue was that my partner failed to apply (what I see as) basic addition when it comes to understanding how we would be losing money by paying first month’s rent on a new apartment while still overlapping the (already paid) last month of rent on the old apartment. In her mind, the old place was already paid for, what does it matter if our last month of the old home and first month of the new home overlap? Perhaps this is not quite “to display little discernible pattern”, but the misunderstanding did persist for an extended period of time. The solution, of course, was to approach the problem differently: by showing an excel sheet with all the monthly rent values, suddenly the misunderstandings disappeared. No one is insane for being bad at math – even if they are habitually bad at it. In fact, it seems to me that mathematics is a poor site to evoke skepticism in general.

More broadly, consider for example, when the competing world-views are between a teacher and student, we are inclined to think that typically the student is incorrect. To put it plainly, the student is not likely in a position to evoke skepticism in the teacher, primarily only the teacher could evoke skepticism in the student due to the nature of their authority. However, in the debate between Cavell’s standard interpreters and me, this serves as a case where the debate is equal – on even footing, say. We provide reasons for our view, but eventually, through great (and serious) deliberation we *may* come to a point where debate comes to an end – where there is no *convincing* the other side. Even in the case where it seems as though there is *nothing left to say* I could not claim that they lack the necessary experience to understand the truth of skepticism. Instead, what must be done (and what good philosophers often do), is to keep pushing our ideas forward. We keep trying. To borrow a term from Nietzsche, we become *Versucher* – tempters and attempters.

¹⁴³ Kripke, 1982, p.90.

1.2.4 Standard vs. Skeptical: A Matter of Refutation

I have been setting the scene with this idea that there is a “standard” interpretation of Cavell as well as a “skeptical” one. I would now like to tackle these differences directly in such a way as to address the standard interpretation so as not to misrepresent some of their ideas. Particularly, I would like to return to the issues brought up in 1.2.1 and my discussion of Cavell’s odd claim. What I suggested was that, first and foremost, there is some kind of prejudice against skeptical theorizing, but more questionably I may be taken to suggest that the whole of the standard interpretation fails to address Cavell’s claim that he (and Wittgenstein) is not in the business of *refuting* skepticism. If this is correct, this would be a gross oversight on the part of the standard interpretation; so gross as to wonder how any interpretation without an account of Cavell’s claim should ever be considered “standard.” However, credit must be given where credit is due: Mulhall does offer an account of what Cavell means when he says he (and Wittgenstein) is not in the business of refuting skepticism. To showcase Mulhall’s stance on this issue, I rely on the work done by Sanford Shieh, who discusses this tension with a good deal of attention and clarity. The only non-skeptical interpretation I know of other than Mulhall who explicitly attempts to address Cavell’s position on refutation (and the truth of skepticism) is Malcolm Turvey¹⁴⁴, but seeing as he is unsympathetic to Cavell’s position, I am not interested in addressing his comments here. By discussing the shortfalls of Mulhall’s position I show how my original criticism of the standard interpretation as akin to an Austin 2.0 stands firm. Furthermore, I take my contributions to be in line with those of Macarthur and Norris, who offer similar interpretations to my own.

According to Shieh’s account, if Mulhall is being sincere in claiming that the skeptic speaks nonsense or is unintelligible then there is a serious problem of consistency: “does inevitable unintelligibility not furnish a conclusive reason for rejecting any philosophical position, and is not the refusal to title such conclusive reasons a ‘refutation’ a quibble?”¹⁴⁵ The echo of Williams’s silly claim that Cavell’s position is “a refutation [of skepticism] as definitive as we ever see in philosophy”¹⁴⁶ effectively exposes how Mulhall is making the same claim. The way we normally employ the word “unintelligible” is when describing something worth refuting.

¹⁴⁴ “Is scepticism a ‘natural possibility’ of language? Reasons to be sceptical of Cavell’s Wittgenstein”, 2002.

¹⁴⁵ Sanford Shieh, “The Truth of Skepticism” in *Reading Cavell* ed. Crary, A., & Shieh, S. (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 147-8.

¹⁴⁶ Williams, p.16.

How can we (or why would we) describe “unintelligible” as something other than a form of rejection? So if Mulhall were to insist that “unintelligibility” is not a form of refutation for Cavell, he would need to answer the question: so for practical purposes how is this any different from a refutation?

What perplexes me is that Mulhall seems to be aware of the issues I have raised at least on some level as he begins his discussion of refutation as follows:

By this stage in Cavell's painstaking investigation, it may seem clear that the sceptical impulse has run into the sands. Not only the assumption that genuine grounds exist for raising a doubt about a claim to know of the existence of a generic object, but also the assumption that it is appropriate to articulate such a knowledge-claim about such an object in the first place, have both been shown to lack any substance; and as a result there appears to be no way in which the sceptical impulse might find intelligible expression. It might seem that if anything constitutes a refutation of scepticism, this does; and if it is interpreted this way, Cavell's work would stand four-square within the tradition of orthodox Wittgensteinian treatments of scepticism.¹⁴⁷

As far as Mulhall is concerned, Cavell has shown that the pursuit of the generic object and other components of the skeptical recital have “run into the sands” (contrary to my position). Mulhall admits that as his position stands, it appears as though Cavell *is* providing a refutation of skepticism, in line with the old Wittgensteinian reading (or Austinian reading), but that ultimately he needs to account for Cavell’s insistence that he is not in the business of refuting skepticism. Mulhall provides four reasons for understanding Cavell’s non-refutation position. The first reason is as follows.

First, it is a repudiation of the idea that Wittgensteinian criteria in themselves constitute a refutation of scepticism. Cavell wishes to dissociate himself from any version of a claim often made by Wittgensteinian philosophers, namely, that criteria confer certainty, from which it would follow that the mere presence of criteria in any concrete case is enough to license a flat rejection of any attempt to articulate sceptical doubts, and that the continued desire to articulate such doubts must be symptomatic of a simple failure to apprehend the true nature of ordinary language.¹⁴⁸

The first part of this claim makes perfect sense: Cavell does not believe Wittgenstein is in the business of refuting skepticism. Yet, the second part of this quote alleges that the mere presence of criteria is sufficient for rejecting *any* attempts to articulate skeptical doubt. If that sounds contradictory to everything I have said about Cavell so far, that’s because it is. Here he seems to side with me despite the fact that his conclusion is not *that* different from the position he says

¹⁴⁷ Mulhall 1994, p. 102.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

Cavell wishes to dissociate himself from. What is the difference between Mulhall's position and the Wittgensteinian philosophers?

He attempts to reconcile his stance against skepticism with the truth of skepticism – our relation to the world not being that of knowing – by making claims like the following: “Cavell disavows refutation because the trouble he discerns in skepticism is not falsity but unintelligibility.”¹⁴⁹ So we should see skeptical claims as unintelligible – void of meaning. Somehow this is different from “a flat rejection of any attempt to articulate sceptical doubt.” Shieh confirms this by pointing to the fact that Mulhall claims “the inevitable consequence of succumbing to the skeptical impulse [is] that that impulse cannot be given intelligible expression.”¹⁵⁰ The idea here is that it is not the case that the skeptic is “false” or “wrong” in what they are doing, but unintelligible. The skeptic is attempting to view the world from a God's-eye view, to find some form of certainty. Remember, skeptics include both those who affirm and those who deny that we have knowledge of the world (or other minds). The skeptic is trying to escape the bounds of our criteria – the bounds of our intelligibility. So the skeptic is not wrong, so much as confused.

For example, skeptical claims, such as “we cannot know that there is a piece of paper on the table,” are senseless in that they erroneously contain words that are familiar to typical users of the English language. The clause “we cannot know” cannot ordinarily be used to denote absolute uncertainty, instead it can only be used in a practical sense, such as “we cannot know if there was any evidence in the car because it exploded.” In this example there is a clear line that can be drawn about how we cannot confirm or verify a piece of information and in which it makes sense to say “we cannot know” whereas for the piece of paper on the table such a denial (insofar as it *is* on the table) is nonsense. If this sounds familiar, it is because Mulhall's standard interpretation essentially continues with Austin, but modifies the position in order to avoid the problem of authority:

if our relation to the world and to others in general presupposes a background of attunement in criteria, then it cannot be one of knowing, where knowing is construed as certainty; but by the same token, that relation cannot be subject to failures of knowledge. The problem with the sceptic is not that he fails to recognize that criteria can provide the knowledge he craves, but that he raises the question of knowledge at the level or depth at which human beings relate themselves to the world by means of criteria, and so at a level

¹⁴⁹ Shieh, 2006, p. 147.

¹⁵⁰ Mulhall 1994, p. 104.

or depth at which knowledge is not and cannot be at issue. In so doing, in asking criteria to do what they cannot intelligibly be asked to do but taking that inability as a failure, the sceptic in effect repudiates our criteria; he refuses them as inadequate to their task.¹⁵¹

Mulhall's interpretation of Cavell can be seen as an Austinian response to skepticism, but attempting to accommodate that our relation to the world is not one of knowing. In Austin's objection, the skeptic's mistake is in using our criteria (our ordinary usage) incorrectly. Under Mulhall's formulation, it is not that the skeptic is using language incorrectly (since he has as much authority as the ordinary language philosopher) it is that the skeptic is demanding of criteria something it cannot provide. Skepticism is demanding that criteria confer certainty, when this was never something criteria were meant to do.

Mulhall makes these claims in part based on an earlier claim of his that "Cavell's understanding of criteria implies that, although the conclusion of scepticism is in some way awry or confused, the progress of the sceptic to the point where he feels compelled to renounce the conceptual scheme he shares with others cannot be blocked simply by invoking criteria."¹⁵² Mulhall bases this claim on the following passage in *The Claim of Reason*, yet Cavell makes no mention of the skeptic being awry or confused, but the opposite:

If the fact that we share, or have established, criteria, is the condition under which we can think and communicate in language, then skepticism is a *natural* possibility of that condition; it reveals most perfectly the standing threat to thought and communication, that they are only human, nothing more than natural to us.¹⁵³

Assuming criteria are an adequate way to describe how we ordinarily engage in communication, then skepticism must exist. Criteria are a natural part of our relation to the world and skepticism is a result of when criteria fail us. Mulhall's idea that criteria prevent the skeptic's doubts from taking shape is backwards. Our criteria are not perfect, can never be perfect. Therefore I ask: how could we improve criteria or change them or alter them if doubting them leads to being *unintelligible*?

If you look at the section Mulhall quotes it even mentions the truth of skepticism at the end of the passage. Mulhall is in a strange position because while his analysis is excellent, he does

¹⁵¹ Mulhall 1994, p. 84-5.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁵³ *The Claim of Reason*, p.47.

everything he can to omit or evade the truth of skepticism.¹⁵⁴ He rarely mentions the truth of skepticism and even when he does he refers to it as a “truth or moral that can be derived from scepticism.”¹⁵⁵ By referring to the truth of skepticism as a “moral” (I have only found Cavell referring to it this way in two places in *The Claim of Reason*) it inadvertently diminishes the power and importance of the *truth* of skepticism. What Mulhall fails to appreciate is that while Cavell is not jumping into bed with traditional epistemological skepticism, he is nevertheless trying to come to terms with our skeptical impulse – he is grappling to understand why skepticism has never been fully vanquished.

Now, to some extent Mulhall allows for some of the concerns I have raised, but in a very inadequate way in his presentation of the second component of Cavell’s reasons for abstaining from refuting skepticism:

This is Cavell's second reason for rejecting the idea of refuting scepticism: we cannot ‘refute’ the possibility that someone will decide (or find, or be driven to the conclusion) that he no longer agrees with others, that his attunement with them has limits; we cannot ‘refute’ the possibility of repudiating an agreement, however fundamental that agreement may be.¹⁵⁶

Shieh shares my reluctance in finding this second component at all convincing. As he puts it “It is hard to make sense of this reason, because it is unclear what would count as refuting a possibility.”¹⁵⁷ Mulhall seems to be allowing for a very rudimentary or empty form of skepticism despite all the efforts he has placed in avoiding skepticism: there is always the ‘possibility’ that someone might present a compelling skeptical argument. How is this any less “unintelligible” than all the other forms of skepticism presented so far? Would Cavell really stake the whole of his project on a *possibility* of skepticism? This is far too weak. If skepticism were a mere possibility, it would never have survived this long.

The third component Mulhall provides is where we can see that his structural reconfiguration of Cavell’s ideas falls apart:

Of course, given that Cavell also regards agreement in criteria as the presupposition of mutual intelligibility, he is committed to thinking that the consequence of repudiating them will be a failure of intelligibility—an inability to mean, what we think we mean, or to mean anything, by what we say; so a mismatch between what the sceptic says and what he

¹⁵⁴ In *Recounting the Ordinary*, Mulhall makes mention of the truth of skepticism no more than ten times (and fewer times explicitly). Five times in his chapter on external world skepticism, three times in the chapter on skepticism about other minds, once in a postscript, and arguably once in his chapter related to art.

¹⁵⁵ Mulhall 1994, p. 106.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁵⁷ Shieh 2006, p. 148.

wishes to mean remains the inevitable consequence of succumbing to the sceptical impulse, such that that impulse cannot be given intelligible expression. But this merely provides a third reason for rejecting the idea of refuting scepticism: for on this account of its necessary fate, the sceptical impulse is not best characterized as a commitment to a body of beliefs or hypotheses which might be based upon inadequate evidence or invalid arguments and so might be open to refutation; it is rather an impulse to repudiate or deny the framework within which alone human speech is possible, and so exemplifies one way in which human beings attempt to deny their conditionedness (their condition). In short, on Cavell's view, the sceptical repudiation of criteria embodies an inflexion of the human desire to transcend finitude, to deny the human; and although we may struggle against or succumb to particular outbreaks of such a desire, and although the desire itself may be subject to diagnosis and interpretation, it is not open to refutation.¹⁵⁸

The skeptic is doomed to unintelligibility. The skeptic does not mean what they think they mean because they doubt the very foundation of meaning. The skeptic is the confused one attempting to escape finitude. To put the issue more plainly, Mulhall sees criteria as providing the basis for our language – without criteria you cannot even speak (this is correct). Skepticism is the point at which those criteria are being brought into question (correct) and *therefore* attempting to operate outside the system (dubious). Being outside the “system” entails unintelligibility (even more dubious).

I indicated that two of Mulhall's moves were dubious – why? If Mulhall was correct in identifying that all skepticism is, is an attempt to get outside the system and to get a God's-eye view then he would be equally correct in claiming all skepticism is nonsense or unintelligible. And this *is* true about *some* forms of skepticism. But, what I have been trying to show is that there are many sides to or kinds of skepticism. The kind of skepticism Mulhall has in mind would certainly fall into the traditional epistemological branch and so – and this is important – if someone was committed to a body of beliefs and hypotheses that affirm (in some shape or other) that our relationship to the world is one of *knowing* then Mulhall would be correct. But the *truth* of skepticism acknowledges that our relationship to the world is *not* one of knowing. Furthermore, this is still at odds with Cavell's insistence that the traditional vein of skepticism has something important to teach us.

Shieh reveals that the natural tension in Mulhall's position is a matter of trying to maintain two claims that are essentially in conflict: “there is no crucial piece of knowledge about language that skeptics lack or have forgotten, and that the rest of us possess”¹⁵⁹ and that that skepticism's

¹⁵⁸ Mulhall 1994, p. 104.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p.103

“necessary fate”, as Mulhall puts it, leads to unintelligibility. In other words, if we have perfectly reasonable grounds for rejecting skepticism in a specific instance, these reasons are accepted by the skeptic. Nevertheless, the skeptic persists. This persistence is not supposed to be the result of a *mistake*. But unintelligibility entails *some* kind of mistake, does it not? In order for the skeptic to persist under Mulhall’s characterization would be to imagine a skeptic who accepts their own unintelligibility such as a traditional epistemologist claiming “Of course I know that my philosophical project requires me to be unintelligible; but that’s all right I have decided to be unintelligible, because my project is more important than mere intelligibility.”¹⁶⁰

This is what the traditional epistemologist would have to say under Mulhall’s characterization. But *who* out there really believes this? *Who* is this unintelligible skeptic? Nietzsche effectively does this when he says that “The falseness of a judgement is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgement; in this respect our new language may sound strangest.”¹⁶¹ He *could* provide a case of someone who is doing what Mulhall claims the skeptic has to do, but given that Cavell makes no indication that this is his move, I do not see a compelling reason to pursue this line of reasoning further here. The point is that the skeptic *is* reasonable, *is* fully informed, and *is not* merely making a mistake. If the skeptic is reasonable, fully informed, and not committing an error, how could they be unintelligible?

Finally, the fourth component of Mulhall’s position, I include for completeness’ sake more than anything else is that he takes the skeptic’s “persistence in the face of philosophers’ attempts to treat his doubts as misplaced or false reveals an important flaw in the position of his opponents, both traditional and Wittgensteinian— namely, their belief that we do know, and with certainty, the things that the sceptic doubts.”¹⁶² This would be what Mulhall calls the moral of skepticism; that the pursuit for certainty is a lost cause. I agree with this claim, but given its context, it comes off as shallow in its attempt at rectifying the fact that Cavell speaks too highly of skepticism to fit with the rest of Mulhall’s interpretation.

I have found no reason to believe Mulhall sees himself as presenting an Austinian Cavell, but the ways he describes Cavell’s criticisms of skepticism and traditional epistemology is too similar to Austin to ignore. By maintaining that the skeptic is confused or misusing language he falls prey to the same objection Cavell raises against Austin. Norris points this out in his analysis

¹⁶⁰ Shieh 2006, p.150.

¹⁶¹ *BGE* 4

¹⁶² Mulhall 1994, p. 106.

of Cavell's essays "Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy" and "Austin at Criticism."¹⁶³ Believing the idea that the skeptic can be corrected or is committing an error fails to take the skeptic seriously. The skeptic is just as authoritative about how we speak as Austin is and both are vying for acknowledgement from other speakers. According to Cavell, Austin fails to properly employ his own ordinary language philosophy because it is "methodologically fundamental" to take the skeptic seriously, "not out of politeness" but because the nature of claims to the ordinary refute themselves without acknowledgement.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, I contend that while Mulhall and the 'standard' interpretation attempt to keep Cavell close to his teacher, Cavell never had any intention of staying true to Austin, even in some modified form:

I knew that I must go beyond Austin's practice by showing that an acceptance of Austin's work provides simultaneously an authentication of the possibility, as well as a rejection of the stability, of skepticism; eventually Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* will demonstrate, to my mind, that such an idea has to show itself essentially in every sentence of philosophy (even when any given sentence may show no sign of being philosophical).¹⁶⁵

This can likewise be seen in "Performative and Passionate Utterance" in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* where Cavell criticizes Austin for not abandoning this whole use of "nonsense" as a means of dismissal. In fact, Cavell thinks that Austin's concepts of performative and passionate speech acts shows precisely why the emotivist project of insisting that moral utterances are neither true nor false, leading to a kind of logistical nonsense, is a disingenuous enterprise. Cavell is effectively accusing Austin of double-dealing since the ordinary language philosopher leaves open the possibility that the emotivist is right – "But the view that an utterance which is neither true nor false is thereby nonsense is precisely that for which Austin's work on the performative provides waves of counterexamples, the instances of which may mount, he claims, into the thousands."¹⁶⁶ Even though "he does not directly challenge it [the claim of nonsense]"¹⁶⁷ Cavell wants to determine why Austin leaves this open.

While I could explore Cavell's answers to these questions to understand why Austin leaves this option open, I am not pursuing this question seeing as it does not help expand on any ideas in Cavell's works at this point. My reason for bringing this up is to insist on the fact that Cavell

¹⁶³ Norris 2017, p.41.

¹⁶⁴ Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.239.

¹⁶⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p.306.

¹⁶⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), p.161.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

detaches himself from Austin and any claims about skepticism being empty, nonsensical, or *unintelligible*. Admittedly, the skeptic can be confused, but this is not so much the skeptic being inherently confused as opposed to specific instances of a confused skeptic – there are many as it turns out.

But before I move on, I would like to put one question to rest. One problem I had with my interpretation was the fact that Cavell had access to Mulhall's commentary and philosophy. If Mulhall's interpretation is inconsistent with Cavell's conception of skepticism, then what did Cavell have to say about it? In their interview discussion, Paul Standish asks Cavell what he thinks of Mulhall's position which seems to cast him as a "libertarian" as opposed to a "communitarian" even though Cavell's treatment of those concepts seems to "defy the very terms of that dichotomy" to which Cavell responds that roughly Norris got the political dimension of his work correct and "That the community, rather than its existence being taken for granted, is always in the process of forming itself in every word."¹⁶⁸ This sets up Standish's follow up question: "Why do you think it's important for Stephen Mulhall to cast you in that way?" to which Cavell responds

I think it's related to his wanting to protect the idea of rules as the basis of grammar that he inherited from a kind of economical reception of Wittgenstein. It's a loyalty to his education. He's an extremely intelligent person. I think he once described his motive in writing his large book about my work in terms of his wanting to reconcile what he's grown up with, on the one hand, with my innovations in the subject, on the other, and to find that they weren't such a large departure. There are a number of departures which he cares about, which is what prompted him to write the book, but he wanted to think that he could preserve at least what was said about the inheritance of language and still have Freud and Heidegger, the relationship with the arts, the other things that he cares about, and keep all this intact. That may be much too crude an answer, but it is how I think about it."¹⁶⁹

It seems almost crude to claim that Mulhall was merely biased towards his own education, his own philosophical background, but this is roughly Cavell's view on the matter and one that I highlighted before: "Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir."¹⁷⁰ It seems to me that Cavell is correct in highlighting Mulhall's intelligence, because he *does* seem to understand Cavell perfectly up until skepticism rears its head. I think Mulhall's

¹⁶⁸ Stanley Cavell, "Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Paul Standish", interview with Paul Standish, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 46, No. 2, (2012), p.158.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 6.

commentary and work would be all the more excellent if he had been able to identify and acknowledge these points of departure with respect to skepticism. But he doesn't and so instead of "Mulhall's Cavell" we have the "standard interpretation" which is itself misleading. I am the one who gave it the title "standard interpretation" herein, but that is because it presents itself in this manner, as being the "correct" way to interpret Cavell. And so to delve deeper into the implications of Cavell's philosophy I must move beyond Mulhall.

1.3.0 The Nature of Philosophy

Am I a bad writer? Imposter syndrome looms. I do not bring this up in self-pity, but instead as a moment of self-reflection. We (philosophers) often hold on to old sectarian ideals surrounding our precious treasure (philosophy). We guard it carefully. Of course, I'm generalizing. How *should* we *do* philosophy? If I dare even write the words: what is philosophy? – *Enough with your stream of conscious, what is it you mean to say?* – Philosophy and writing are intertwined – institutionally at least – in such a way that you cannot consider one without the other. So then, how do *I* do philosophy? What is my style? How is it important? Does it speak to *you*?

Perhaps *this* will speak to you instead: It is at this point that I would like to take a moment to reflect upon my own philosophical methods so far and to settle some matters surrounding Cavell's position on external world skepticism and skepticism about other minds. While it might seem somewhat backwards for me to reflect upon my methodology part way through this philosophical endeavour, I take the time to do this now because many of the issues and features raised by Cavell have informed my methodology. That is to say, one cannot fully appreciate my method and its motivations without taking what I have said about criteria and our relation to skepticism into consideration.

I have no reason to doubt that Cavell has had an influence on my writing. Whether for better or worse, I leave up to the reader (my first paragraph of this chapter, my use of brackets and interruptions, and my "penchant for comma splices" being the most obvious examples). There is something about Cavell's style that is jarring and intentionally so. This style puts some people off. Others see it as an easy opening for *ad hominem* attacks. Jonathan Culler pondered this issue and compiled a concise list of harsh commentary on Cavell's style in *The Claim of Reason*: Anthony Kenny describes Cavell's style as "self-indulgent" and the book as "a misshapen, undisciplined amalgam of ill-sorted parts"; Mark Glouberman describes the style as "inexcusable"; and Dan Ducker complains that "There are moments in Cavell's book where one wants to scream, 'Good God, come to the point!'"¹⁷¹ As someone working on Cavell, I can sympathize with the last sentiment, although I would not ascribe it is a weakness of his writing as opposed to being indicative of my eagerness. But what are we supposed to do with this? Even if

¹⁷¹ Jonathan Culler, "Bad Writing and Good Philosophy" in *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.48.

these criticisms are “correct” (whatever that means) how should this inform our reading of Cavell or what we take from his writing?

There are several things I would like to accomplish in this third chapter before the end of Part One. First, I consider my use of anecdotes and argue that they should be seen as moments where I am extending my hand out for acknowledgement. Specifically, I return to the case of Wallis – my most suspicious use of an anecdote – and consider the fact that there is a paradox built into the relationship between criteria and skepticism. This leads me to a Nietzschean analysis, where I argue that Cavell’s “Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance” can be read as an example of being a *Versucher*. Subsequently, I consider weak vs. strong skepticism and the relationship between genuine philosophy and philosophical labour. All of which help further articulate the scope of Cavell’s philosophy and skepticism and my own position with respect to the nature of philosophy.

Second, I want to put an end to any remaining speculation surrounding Cavell’s stance towards skepticism. Particularly, I am going to examine his position when it comes to the distinction between external world skepticism and skepticism about other minds. As it turns out, the major difference between the two boils down to the fact that when it comes to external world skepticism we *must* consider alternatives to the skeptical conclusion whereas for skepticism about other minds there are no alternatives. Moving along, I show how skepticism forces us to reflect upon ourselves in how we cannot separate ourselves from the skeptical recital of other minds. Ultimately, Cavell’s position is simple: when he speaks of skepticism of the external world, the skeptic is perfectly capable of being understood – as reasonable – even if we must, like Hume, suspend such doubts in order to go about our lives. He is equally as clear that skepticism about other minds is inescapable: we *live* our skepticism. The skeptic is not unintelligible. While sometimes the skeptic might be confused or mistaken (just like any other individual), what is “unintelligible” is the response of the traditional philosopher *to* the skeptic – to the person who has had skepticism forced upon them. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, and as the final section of Part One, I introduce the notion of tragedy.

1.3.1 Anecdotes and Acknowledgement

It should be evident by this point that I rely on anecdotal evidence – some might say no evidence at all – in arguing for some of the positions I have put forward, especially concerning other peoples’ experiences. There is the general concern about cherry-picking non-representative examples or the matter of whether anecdotal evidence has any value in the “scientific method.” In my first chapter I considered Mate’s objection to the ordinary language philosopher which is very reminiscent of this type of concern: how “we” use language is not up to the philosopher but the linguist; if we really want to see what “we” say we should do a survey. A survey provides statistical evidence, which is scientific and therefore more reliable. I am, just like any other human, prone to cognitive bias and the examples I provide will always skew in my favour (it would be odd or perhaps concerning if it didn’t). Is this a problem?

Consider the following: “When Wittgenstein, or at this stage of any philosopher appealing to ordinary language, ‘says what we say’, what he produces is not a generalization (though he may, later, generalize), but a (supposed) *instance* of what we say.”¹⁷² So when Wittgenstein says “we say ... ‘He has been in continuous pain since yesterday’”¹⁷³ or when Austin says “at least sometimes, we say we don’t know, but only believe”¹⁷⁴ these are not generalizations, but examples, samples, or “instances” of how we typically speak. Yet, that which determines whether these serve as accurate examples of what we say is the community which receives it: “The only source of confirmation here is ourselves.”¹⁷⁵ We, as a community of speakers, either confirm or deny any given sample. Consequently “One sample does not refute or disconfirm another,”¹⁷⁶ the examples themselves cannot reject one another; the only thing capable of doing that is us – the speakers of the language. Of course, conflict can arise and disputes can reach a point of near-irreconcilability, and so “if the disagreement persists, there is no appeal beyond us, or if beyond us two, then not beyond some eventual us.”¹⁷⁷ This is what Cavell calls an “intellectual tragedy.” If one is willing to entertain the concept of the truth of skepticism I can

¹⁷² *The Claim of Reason*, p.19.

¹⁷³ §151

¹⁷⁴ J.L. Austin, “Other Minds” in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961), p.77.

¹⁷⁵ *The Claim of Reason*, p.19.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

begin to show how Cavell thinks tragedy born of this skepticism can reveal “a genuine, a fruitful, perplexity.”¹⁷⁸ But first, what do these considerations tell us about anecdotal evidence?

First and foremost, this entails that there is a limit to what I can do with the examples or anecdotes I provide – but have I tried to ‘surpass’ these limits? Committed a fallacy? Take the anecdote I use in support of my hypothesis that an experience may be needed to properly understand the concept of skepticism or the truth of skepticism specifically. I relied on a dream I had in order to exemplify how one might come to the experience of something amiss. Is this some form of fallacy? Not as far as I can tell. One could find my anecdote unsatisfying in some way, but it is essentially no different from a hypothetical example. If it is some form of fallacy then any hypothetical example is just as guilty. Likewise, the anecdote about my brother and his misunderstanding of God was an instance of misunderstanding, not a generalization about all children towards God. However, I think the anecdote about Wallis, who fears whether their love is or can be reciprocated, deserves another examination. There is a sense in which I *am* using this example as a more traditional form of evidence: here is an example of a non-philosopher who has encountered the experience of something amiss – who lives their skepticism. There’s an implicit premise or generalization: this person is not the only one or is not *merely* an anomaly. But is this implicit premise justified? Do we have reason to believe it? This question distracts from the point: when talking about someone else’s experiences the question of whether someone’s experiences are ‘true’ is secondary, if not completely irrelevant, to the fact that questioning someone else’s experience is a matter of acknowledgement or avoidance. Either you accept someone’s words or you doubt them. Let me make this example as concrete as possible by providing ‘proof’ of it:

¹⁷⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.22.

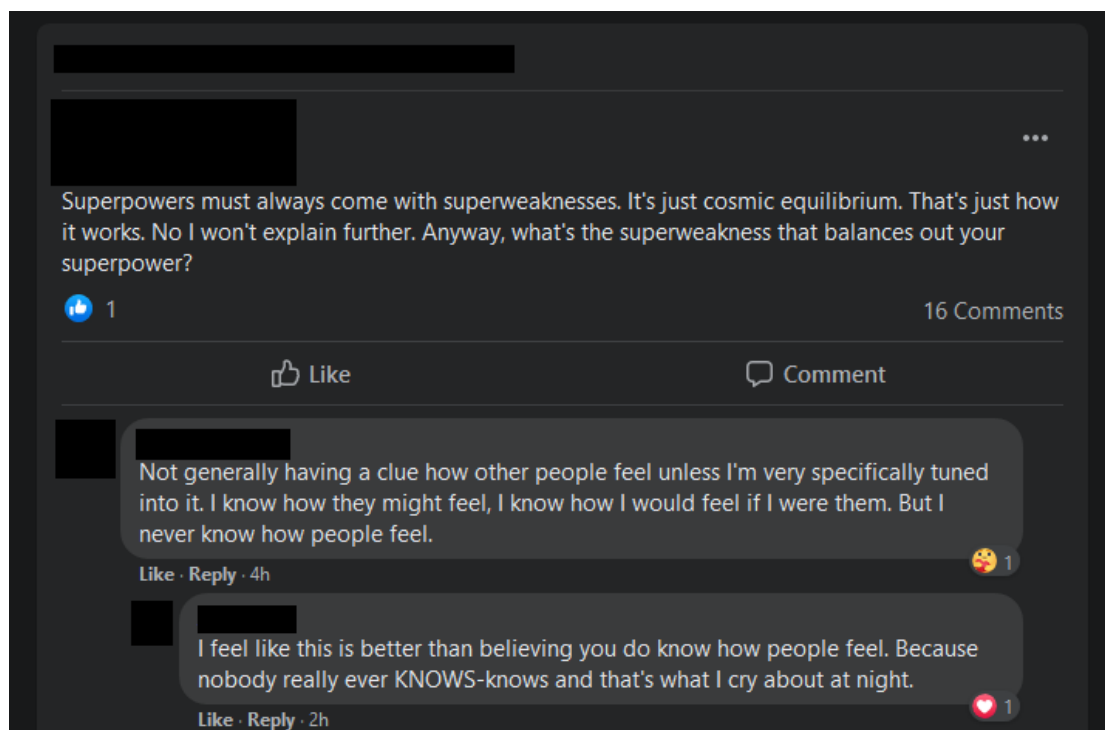


Figure 1: A brief online interactions between Wallis and a friend.

Here the original poster and final response is Wallis from my earlier party example where they encounter a similar (if not the same) problem, but brought up (unprompted) by yet another person. The question being posed: what is your super weakness? The answer provided: being unable to know how other people feel. They even add that they can know possible options and how they would feel in the other's position, but nevertheless incapable of knowing the other. Wallis concludes that nobody "really ever KNOWS-knows" and that this is tragic enough to merit tears. I might be tempted to say they were being hyperbolic, if I hadn't seen those tears in person. But why do I bring this up? What move am I trying to slip by in this emotional appeal?

What I want to address here is the fact that there is a paradox built into the problem: if criteria do not provide certainty, but we nevertheless rely upon them, then when we move to *change* or *alter* the criteria there is nothing, no criteria, or rules to fall back on. The moments at which criteria fail us we are left *alone*. All that is left are experiences. All that remains is attunement, acknowledgement, or avoidance. That is to say, the moments I shift to anecdotes that are not merely standing in for hypotheticals, are (or should be) those moments at which criteria end, we reach bedrock, and I now appeal for acknowledgement. But in this appeal there are at

least two options: acceptance or rejection; acknowledgement or avoidance. If you acknowledge that my anecdote is a good one, then there is no trouble. I am no longer alone. However, what about the position that we philosophers inevitably take on? The contrarian. In the Wallis case, I am asking the reader to take the instance of a non-philosopher producing skepticism to stand in as a counter-example to those who think skepticism is solely the philosopher's problem. In the dream example, I said it is much like a hypothetical example *except*, I would add now, that it brings me (I hope, *us*) closer to the "ordinary." To deny these anecdotes is equivalent to rejecting *me*. This is not inherently problematic, I may be mistaken, or my descriptions may be unclear, I may not 'connect' the anecdotes to the ideas I discuss, and so on. But assuming I am not *merely* mistaken entails that the rejection of my ideas at this stage is a rejection of me – the person. What I want to draw attention to, or push for, is that we as philosophers need to be more conscious of the fact that this is what we often do in order to reject ideas. But you would show prudence in taking me (and others) seriously. It would be wise to hear the voices of others and be cautious in condemning them. This is not an appeal for leniency, what I want to make clear to my reader in the remainder of the dissertation is that acknowledgement and avoidance are a part of many of our philosophical considerations, whether we see it or not.

1.3.2 The nature of (genuine) philosophy

One might feel dissatisfied with my second chapter "Defining Skepticism" seeing as I neither offer an overtly conclusive definition of skepticism, nor did I give Cavell's final verdict on skepticism, or how it is meant to remain a standing threat. I think the final answer resides in the (I suspect)¹⁷⁹ least read part of Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* in "Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance." It might not appear all that unusual that the final answer would be found at the end of a book. Yet, "Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance" may not only be the least-read component of his book, but, I suspect for many, the most frustrating. Why is that?

In response to this question, and as a way to frame the whole of the final section of *The Claim of Reason* I propose taking a look at a concept put forward by Nietzsche: *Versucher*. I have mentioned this concept in passing, but it is at this stage that it becomes illuminating. I take

¹⁷⁹ Many reviewers seem to either praise or hate the final section of the book and so at the very least it is the most contentious part of the book. Perhaps even the most hated. Also just as likely the most loved.

the bulk of my considerations from my Master's thesis "Getting Beyond Good and Evil: Reconciling Naturalism and Skepticism in Nietzsche's Middle Period" (2016). What I propose is that Cavell, as a philosopher, resembles the ideal "philosophers of the future" that Nietzsche was fixated on. Before explaining what I mean by this, I should make it clear ahead of time that I am *not* claiming that Cavell sees himself in this way *nor* am I considering that he had this in mind when writing the final section of his book. However, I *do* contend that Cavell's task and methodology in "Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance" is a perfect example of what it means to be a *Versucher* and potentially a "philosopher of the future."

First, one must (briefly) understand Nietzsche's project in *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. When speaking of getting beyond good and evil, Nietzsche mentions that it will be accomplished by a philosophy (*BGE* 4) and if getting beyond good and evil requires a philosophy, there must obviously be a philosopher. In *BGE* 4 Nietzsche claims that "To recognize untruth as a condition for life ... a philosophy that risks this would by that token alone place itself beyond good and evil." Presumably, insofar as he intends for the philosophers of the future to be included in his project, they will aspire to get beyond good and evil, and therefore recognize the value of "untruth." There is a real discussion worth having surrounding whether what Nietzsche means by "recognizing untruth" is related to the "truth of skepticism" but for my purposes I *assume* they are roughly related. Nietzsche first mentions these "new" philosophers in *BGE* 2: "in all seriousness: I see such new philosophers coming up." In *BGE* 2, Nietzsche is critical about the "faith in opposite values" (*BGE* 2), that philosophers have so far presumed there are opposite values. He wants to suggest, instead, that "maybe" these opposites are insidiously related and merely appear as opposites (I would add, such as criteria and skepticism). He then goes on to say the following:

But who has the will to concern himself with such dangerous maybes? For that, one really has to wait for the advent of a new species of philosophers, such as have somehow another and converse taste and propensity for those we have known so far – philosophers of the dangerous 'maybe' in every sense. (*BGE* 2)

He claims that these new philosophers will be concerned about "dangerous maybes," about asking dangerous questions – questions philosophers do not want to acknowledge. This leads the new philosophers to inquire about "dangerous" topics (i.e. the threat of skepticism).

The term *Versucher* is taken from section 42. Consider this section while keeping Cavell in mind:

A new species of philosophers is coming up: I venture to baptize them with a name that is not free of danger. As I unriddle them, insofar as they allow themselves to be unriddled – for it belongs to their nature to *want* to remain riddles at some point – these philosophers of the future may have a right – it might also be a wrong – to be called *attempters*¹⁸⁰. This name is in the end a mere attempt and, if you will, a temptation.

As I unriddle Cavell, insofar as he allows himself to be unriddled, I recognize that there is a point at which he *must* remain a riddle if only because he is *Versucher*. Walter Kaufmann translates *Versucher* as “attempters” but notes that “*Versucher* also means tempters (which does not seem intended here as the primary meaning) or experimenters (which is meant but would spoil the triple play on words).”¹⁸¹ *Versucher* is also comparable to “skepticism”: “The Greek verb *skeptesthai* means ‘to inquire’ or ‘to examine’ and is a cognate of *skeptikos*, which eventually came into English as ‘skeptic.’ Skeptics were also known as ‘Zetetics’, a name that derives from the verb *zetein* (‘to search’).”¹⁸² To search, to inquire, to examine, to attempt, and to experiment, while not necessarily synonymous, these terms form a set of concepts that intrinsically link skepticism with the notion of *Versucher*.

Nietzsche is unsatisfied with philosophers and in many ways dissatisfied with his own philosophy as well. Whether he succeeds at being a philosopher of the future himself is a question that is not easily answered. But when I read “Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance” I cannot help but identify Cavell’s method as the closest thing I have read that resembles the task of the *Versucher*. The final part of *The Claim of Reason* is an attempt, an ongoing search or experiment. – *But an attempt at what? A search for what? An experiment on what?* – Cavell is attempting to grapple with our human condition. He is experimenting with skepticism and seeking acknowledgement – as we all do. More importantly, the inquiry, the search, or the experiment, never ends. We keep looking.

– *But what does this mean?* – Consider what Cavell discusses in this final part of the book: the parable of the boiling pot, the problem of private language, the possibility of automatons, what it means to deny someone’s humanity, and how all of this has to do with skepticism about other minds. In fact, in some ways, some might mistake some sections of the later part of the book as being *boring* – especially for academic or traditional philosophers. He seems to be regurgitating the same old problems that we have encountered since our early undergraduate

¹⁸⁰ *Versucher*.

¹⁸¹ Walter Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans., (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 242-3.

¹⁸² Jessica N. Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 36.

years. One might be overcome with impatience towards Cavell at this stage because every consideration seems to be just another tangent revolving around the same old problems.

More frustratingly (to some), there is a strange phenomenon throughout the whole of Cavell's book that is most predominant in "Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance" which is the fact that Cavell does not appear to provide answers for the problems he raises. He very clearly identifies *limitations* or *complications* with respect to skepticism and its critics, but he does not seem to come to many firm conclusions by the end of many of his digressions. The old adage that philosophy simply raises more questions than it answers seems apt here. What are we to do with a series of problems being raised that seem to have no answer?

This is a good time to go back to the beginning. It's time to remind ourselves that Cavell understands "philosophy not as a set of problems but as a set of texts."¹⁸³ We are tempted to take each instance Cavell provides as a problem to solve: a puzzle with a solution, a singular answer – certainty. We want to be comfortably certain of the answer Cavell provides, if not to maintain his coherence, but for our own purposes, to determine whether his "answers" are true for *me*, for *us*. For example, consider his response to the problem of private language. It seems as though Cavell provides an answer, but really his aim is always to draw our attention elsewhere, to further problems:

So the fantasy of a private language, underlying the wish to deny the publicness of language, turns out, so far, to be a fantasy, or fear, either of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown, but in which I am powerless to make myself known; or one in which what I express is beyond my control.¹⁸⁴

The "answer" to the problem of a private language (too briefly) is really just a fear of inexpressiveness: either as being incapable of making myself known or of my expression being beyond my control. But of course this "answer" simply shifts the problem. The issue, for Cavell at every turn, seems to come down to a matter of acknowledgement. Instead of asking "can we have a private language?" He asks the questions: "Why do we attach significance to any words and deeds, of others or of ourselves? ... How can anything we say or do count as doodling, be some form of nonsense; and why is all the rest condemned to meaning?"¹⁸⁵

Skepticism then, or "a fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness" (being unable to mean what we want to), 'solves' the problem of "the responsibility for making myself known to others."

¹⁸³ *The Claim of Reason*, p.3

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.351.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.351.

What Cavell means by this is that it takes a form of avoidance. If we cannot control our own meaning, there is a defeatist complacency that can feel peaceful for some – if only momentarily:

it would relieve me of the responsibility for making myself known to others — as though if I were expressive that would mean continuously betraying my experiences, incessantly giving myself away; it would suggest that my responsibility for self-knowledge takes care of itself — as though the fact that others cannot know my (inner) life means that I cannot fail to.¹⁸⁶

This relies on the old skeptical recital that Cavell returns to frequently: only *I* know whether I'm really in pain. While this gives the skeptic what they want it allows one to find some consolation in the fact that at least *they* (the individual) *know*. The danger with such a notion though, lies in the false complacency it gives us about the self: do you *really* know your inner life? Could you not be equally mistaken or misled? He then adds that

The wish underlying this fantasy covers a wish that underlies skepticism, a wish for the connection between my claims of knowledge and the objects upon which the claims are to fall to occur without my intervention, apart from my agreements.¹⁸⁷ As the wish stands, it is unappeasable. In the case of my knowing myself, such self-defeat would be doubly exquisite: I must disappear in order that the search for myself be successful.¹⁸⁸

This point is difficult to grasp, but I take “I must disappear” to be referring to the idea that the other cannot know me and therefore I do not ‘exist.’ We make this intellectual move in order to find consolation in being certain of our own (inner) life. In other words it's another skeptical trap. What I want to suggest now is that Cavell toys with a similar duality in skepticism (although he does not put it this way) that can be found (more explicitly) in Nietzsche's *Versucher*.

For Nietzsche there is a division between (at least) two kinds of skepticism: weak skepticism¹⁸⁹ and strong skepticism. Nietzsche describes weak skepticism in *BGE* 208 as a “delicate creature” who is easily frightened and whose “sickness” is bad for health. He describes it this way in part because the weak skeptic is afraid of passing judgements altogether; afraid to come to any sort of decision. Nietzsche says that this skepticism is “the most spiritual expression of a certain complex physiological condition” and can lead to a “paralysis of the will.” If a weak

¹⁸⁶ *The Claim of Reason*, p.351.

¹⁸⁷ Cavell's phrasing here is notoriously difficult to understand but can be understood by breaking up the clauses as follows: “The wish underlying this fantasy covers a wish that underlies skepticism, a wish for the connection between (a) [my claims of knowledge] and (b) [the objects upon which the claims are to fall to] (which then) occur without my intervention, apart from my agreements.”

¹⁸⁸ *The Claim of Reason*, p.351-2

¹⁸⁹ He does not explicitly refer to it as weak, but describing it thus fits his narrative.

skeptic refused to pass judgements on any topic, then this would in fact lead to a form of paralysis. One could even see it as a kind of nihilism, because if the weak skeptic cannot recognize either truth or untruth, then they can neither seek truth like the traditional philosophers nor get beyond good and evil. Obviously, no one wants to be this kind of skeptic. In fact, I would go so far as to claim that this is often the type of skeptic that traditional epistemologists focus much of their attention on: a s(t)ick man. Putting forward arguments that attempt (but ultimately fail) to refute a position that no one wants to be in, is not a very interesting thesis. Now I say no one ‘wants’ to be this kind of skeptic, but perhaps out there somewhere there is such a person. I cannot say for certain, but my suspicion is that anyone who really believed such a form of skepticism would likely find themselves paralyzed if not from some form of madness, then from morbid anxiety, and therefore unlikely to care what a philosopher has to say.

The temptation or generalisation of the traditional philosopher or epistemologist is to reason that all forms of skepticism result in this kind of absurdity; if you cannot know the generic object then you cannot know *anything*; if you cannot *know* anything then you cannot *do* anything. However, for Nietzsche (and I suggest for Cavell), there is “a stronger type of skepticism.”¹⁹⁰ In explanation of what this type looks like, he offers a parable:

This skepticism despises and nevertheless seizes; it undermines and takes possession; it does not believe but does not lose it-self in the process; it gives the spirit dangerous freedom, but it is severe to the heart; it is the German form of skepticism.

The first part of the parable about how this skepticism “despises”, “seizes”, “undermines”, and “takes possession” points to how *active* the stronger type is meant to be. This is easier to understand in conjunction with how he says this skeptic “does not believe but does not lose it-self in the process.” In other words, the strong skeptic *does* pass judgement; *has* to pass judgement. Where the weak skeptic encounters their doubts and becomes paralyzed by them, the strong skeptic does not allow themselves to be lost to the nihilistic void. At the end of the quote, he identifies this skepticism as “German” because he believes it is the German “spirit” by which “Europe was after all awakened from her ‘dogmatic slumber’.”¹⁹¹ The German spirit therefore appears as another expression of “strength” here, given how he describes it as having “the inclination to virile skepticism” and being “decisive.”¹⁹² Additionally, Kauffman suggests that “dogmatic slumber” is an allusion to Kant’s dictum that Hume interrupted his own “dogmatic

¹⁹⁰ BGE 209.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

slumber”¹⁹³, suggesting that according to Nietzsche the strong skeptic – since the German spirit is just an expression of strong skepticism – is capable of evading dogmatism.

Nietzsche then connects his notion of the strong skeptic with the philosophers of the future and consequently *Versucher*: “Suppose then that some trait in the philosophers of the future poses the riddle whether they would not perhaps have to be skeptics in the sense suggested last (strong skepticism), this would still designate only one feature and not them as a whole.”¹⁹⁴ That is to say, the philosophers of the future are strong skeptics and he adds that they can be seen as “critics” or “men”¹⁹⁵ of experiments.”¹⁹⁶ These philosophers are not *merely* skeptics, but instead people who are attempting to grapple with the problems that confront them in a way that acknowledges their finitude while nevertheless persevering in their search, experiments, or attempts.

I would like to add a modification to Nietzsche’s ideas above. The strong versus weak distinction here, while appropriate for Nietzsche, does not work well within my own framework. It would be better, perhaps, to identify them as a “positive judgement value” versus a “negative judgement value” version of skepticism. Ultimately, skepticism itself has no inherent value, only that which we impose on it. So what I am proposing is to focus on both how skepticism hinders us and how it helps us or *could* help us. Doubt in any matter can be beneficial, but also a hindrance so that in the end a balance needs to be struck. The issue is, as I mentioned before, what we take the skeptic’s position to be. If the skeptic is denying that we can know anything at all, we might roll our eyes or if they were persistent enough, we may throw them in a mental institute; but I would say the vast majority of people who could realistically be called skeptics do not fall into either category. Instead, often when people experience skepticism, it is far more subtle. Even dangerous. While I oppose conflating or reducing mental illness to a form of skepticism, there are certain anxieties and triggers of depression such as imposter syndrome or having experienced certain kinds of trauma that I think exemplify just how deeply our skepticism is rooted. Inevitably, this kind of skepticism has (and should have) negative judgement values surrounding it; this kind of skepticism corrodes, undermines, and confuses the one under its thrall.

¹⁹³ Kaufmann, 2000, p.323

¹⁹⁴ BGE 210.

¹⁹⁵ “People” would be a better description for my purposes.

¹⁹⁶ BGE 210.

Cavell also connects skepticism with mental health in the form of anxiety; however, as he explains, this was a position he did not begin with but “had to come to”:

a second inheritance of the Investigations—was the discovery that the economical way, the virtually received way, to take the book was as a refutation of scepticism. And that seemed to me wrong in a way that was completely essential to what seemed to me inescapable in the text: that there is a dimension of anxiety, of threat, in human conversation and confrontation that the Investigations seems to me responsive to; that this couldn't be so if the possibility of scepticism were not incessantly on its mind. Why ideas of risk, threat, anxiety all seemed to me to be catered for within the concept of scepticism I didn't know when this came out. It's what philosophy calls scepticism but what in Wittgenstein turns out to be something different: thirty years later I will say that Wittgenstein gives a portrait of the modern subject that contains issues of diversity and anxiety and sickness and torment.¹⁹⁷

If you think Wittgenstein was in the business of refuting skepticism, then you are attempting to address the symptom and not the cause. As Paul Standish puts it in the same interview, “scepticism in its epistemological formulations, then even in its most dry, theoretical arguments it's actually a symptom of a repressed anxiety.”¹⁹⁸ To which Cavell responded “That's exactly what I think,” although as I said, this was a conclusion he came to over time.

So with these considerations of *Versucher* and mental health in mind, I raise the following question (again, but in a different way): how are we to respond to a *real* skeptic? Not the fabricated thought experiment, but the people who have these lived experiences, who experience this repressed (or not so repressed) anxiety; how do we respond to those who have felt the sensation of something amiss, or been wounded so deeply as to be incapable of shaking the throes of skepticism on their own? Of course, we do not seek the philosopher's help with this kind of question; this is a matter for the practitioner of mental health. Yet, the philosopher does feel entitled to respond to the skeptic when not confronted as a real human being. How am I to interpret the philosopher's claims that another human being is ‘nonsensical,’ that their words are ‘void of meaning,’ or that they are incoherent *other than* as denying at least some part of their humanity – their experience? I am compelled to conclude that this too must be another form of avoidance. What then is a philosopher to do? What *should* a philosopher be doing here? Genuine philosophy.

One might be tempted to think that Nietzsche's concept of genuine philosophy from *BGE* 211 indicates that there are two separate tiers of philosophy with philosophical labour and

¹⁹⁷ “Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Paul Standish”, p. 156.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

genuine philosophy, as he says “I insist that people should finally stop confounding philosophical laborers, and scientific men generally, with philosophers; precisely at this point we should be strict about giving ‘each his due,’ and far too much to those and far too little to these.”¹⁹⁹ For Nietzsche, genuine philosophy should not be conflated with the majority of scholarly activity, regardless of whether it is in the sciences or what we generally consider as philosophy such as “history of philosophy.” Philosophical labourers “have to determine and press into formulas ... some great data of valuations – that is, former positings of values, creations of value which have become dominant and are for a time called ‘truths’.”²⁰⁰ Philosophical labourers attempt to explain and understand the philosophy, the created values, of genuine philosophers. Their entire task is to make sense of the values of another, to abbreviate, summarize, and so on. For example, a great deal of what I have done in this dissertation (and most of academic philosophy in general, I think) would count as philosophical labour.

However, it would be a mistake to think that this means that this kind of philosophy is ‘worse’ or ‘less valuable’ (the question of value is actually quite important). That is to say you are not “less of a philosopher” for doing philosophical labour particularly because of the fact that “It may be necessary for the education of a genuine philosopher that he himself has also once stood on all these steps on which his servants, the scientific laborers of philosophy, remain standing – have to remain standing.”²⁰¹ This passage reveals, first and foremost, that Nietzsche believes that philosophical labour is important and that philosophical labour is meant to serve genuine philosophy. He claims philosophical labour is necessary in order for the genuine philosopher “to pass through the whole range of human values and value feelings and to be able to see with many different eyes and consciences.”²⁰² This indicates that experiencing a range of perspectives is important for genuine philosophy. Cavell would call these perspectives “fantasies.” Lastly, Nietzsche states that the above considerations “are merely preconditions of his task,” and the task itself is “that he [the genuine philosopher] create values.”

“Creating value” is how Nietzsche sees the philosophers of the future – the strong skeptic – escaping the problem of the paralysis of the will that can be found in weak skepticism. If there are no concrete, indubitable, forms of knowledge, and we are confronted by this doubt at every

¹⁹⁹ *BGE* 211.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*

turn, there is a point at which you must *create* your values. This is helpful, I think, in revealing how one could begin to construct an answer to the question I've been returning to throughout my dissertation: what happens when criteria fail us? What happens when we want criteria to change? To put it very simply, as far as Nietzsche is concerned: we make it ourselves. The problem with this is that it does nothing to acknowledge the other. It's all well and good for Nietzsche to create his own values, his own criteria, but I think his personal history is a testament to what happens when you fail to be understood, when no one acknowledges you. This was, I suspect, inevitable due to how deeply he was questioning our criteria. For example, when Nietzsche says "The falseness of a judgement is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgement; in this respect our new language may sound strangest,"²⁰³ he sounds strange and (intentionally) loses the acknowledgement of many when he reframes his position like this. So much so that some have even tried to reinterpret his entire project to avoid this single quote.²⁰⁴

Cavell does not, as far as I can tell, take this step towards 'creation' that Nietzsche is so eager to leap into. But what I would like to suggest is that we can learn, as philosophers, how to approach this situation as Cavell does: slowly and carefully. If what we are doing is either reformulating old ideas or creating new ones we should be mindful. Do not take the other for granted and instead rely upon your philosophical labours – your variety of experiences – in order to remind yourself of your position – our shared fantasies. Therefore allow me to try and clearly articulate how I perceive my methods and how I believe we should be *doing* philosophy: philosophy is just another word for skepticism; I doubt my position and re-evaluate it, and continue to do so until the day I die, while keeping an eye out for the very real need that so many philosophers seem to forget – to acknowledge the other.

1.3.3 The role of traditional philosophy

"Love brings the high and concealed characteristics of the lover into the light – what is rare and exceptional in him: to that extent it easily deceives regarding normality." – Nietzsche, BGE 163.

²⁰³ BGE 4.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick, *The Soul of Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The questions surrounding how it is we acknowledge the other, I think, is not a question that troubles most philosophers explicitly. There is an impersonal aura that surrounds philosophers at times as we distance ourselves from others and put great pains into remaining impartial – specifically when confronted with a problem we deem worth philosophical attention. What I want to do now is take the same old problems of external world skepticism and skepticism about other minds under Cavell and make what is implicit in how he changes the discussion into something explicit: what happens when instead of examining “the problem of the external world” we examine the *skeptic* of the external world and instead of examining “the problem of skepticism about other minds” as the *skeptic* about other minds. By changing the focus from the theory to the individual, I am not (if it wasn’t sufficiently obvious already) going to conduct a survey or gather data on “skeptics” (not that, that wouldn’t be interesting, despite how difficult it would be) but instead simply recall the fact that in order for there to be a position, there must be someone who holds that position. With this mundane fact in mind, the old problems begin to look very different.

First, it should be established ahead of time that Cavell does not agree with the conception of Cartesian dualism. He offers a number of arguments (that I will not repeat here) to the effect that one cannot truly separate the body from the soul. With this in mind, consider this distinction:

With material objects, all I claim, or assume, is that I *see* them, see *them*. It is the most natural assumption in the world. So where does the assumption come from according to which I must have correctly identified you as a human being? From some such fact as that my identification of you as a human being is not merely an identification of you but *with* you. This is something more than merely *seeing* you. Call it empathic projection.²⁰⁵

When confronted with material objects we point towards them in the world, we see them, but when it comes to human beings there is more than merely “seeing.” When you “see” an object, you remark upon its parts, but you do not (unless you’re a child or believe in the possession of inanimate objects) believe that they have a soul. There is more to being human than merely pointing to the body. – *But did you not just forewarn that Cavell does not subscribe to the Cartesian dualism? What is this business with a soul?* – Cavell, in this instance, is using the concept of soul figuratively, but with intention:

If I say the spirit of the wind is the wind, I wish to be understood as telling you something not about a spirit but about the wind. (I claim to know nothing about spirits that you do not know.) On that understanding, then: The spirit of the body is the body. — Wittgenstein

²⁰⁵ *The Claim of Reason*, p.421.

takes the risk of apsyichism, the risk that his understanding of the human body (as, for example, a picture) is unnecessary, or insincere, or dead. If this is behaviorism in disguise then a statue is a stone in disguise.²⁰⁶

While there is a conceptual division or separation, ultimately, the only way to engage a soul is to engage a body – there is no literal division. To speak of one is to speak of the other. The obvious exceptions being when someone dies we no longer identify a soul, or those who deny the humanity of others whether through objectification or dehumanization. What happens is that there is an added layer to humans that we (can fail to) acknowledge, which we often refer to as the soul or mind. That is why Cavell says that identifying a human being is not about identifying your body, but *with* you and he calls this empathic projection.

Cavell later asks “Then what is the moral of the [skeptical] recital?” with respect to empathic projection. It reveals, I would say, the truth of skepticism once again:

On the one hand it seems to me that something of the sort recited must be true; not perhaps that there just may be other things for you to be, but that my taking you for, seeing you as, human depends upon nothing more than my capacity for something like empathic projection, and that if this is true then I must settle upon the validity of my projection from within my present condition, from within, so to speak, my confinement from you. For there would be no way for me to step outside my projections.²⁰⁷

We are confined by our position, by being human. We are necessarily kept apart; we cannot enter one another’s mind. This is the central feature of skepticism about other minds, and so there is nothing particularly *new* here. However, there is an important distinction that can be drawn from this observation:

What is the worst that befalls me should it be the case that material objects do not exist? I suffer a generalized *trompe l'oeil*, and of course *trompe l'oreille* as well, and so on; my senses (and what they sense?) cheat me (naturally cheat me) into taking it that there are things where there are only interpreted sensings. It is a biological demand. But if there are no other human beings, then what befalls me is a generalized and massive *trompe l'ame*; my soul (and what it wishes?) cheats me (supernaturally cheats me) into taking it that it has company. It is a spiritual demand. And couldn't the demand go unmet?²⁰⁸

Here we see a clear division between the two kinds of skepticism and how we relate to them. If the skeptic of the external world really believes that we cannot know the world, the worst case is that they are mistaken. But this is unproblematic in the sense that we nevertheless have a biological demand. This is precisely what Nietzsche was trying to expose with his “Falsification

²⁰⁶ *The Claim of Reason*, p.400.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.423

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.424

Thesis”: we experience the world, express it, and consequently *falsify* it. Cavell does not go as far as Nietzsche²⁰⁹, or perhaps he is a better skeptic, in that he says *at worst* we could be mistaken (falsifying). It could, for all we know, also be correct. The point is that regardless of whether or not our engagement of the world is ‘true’ *we have to act as if it is*. In this sense, Hume was correct in his remarks that we return to our normal lives regardless of our philosophical doubts.

However, when we shift to other minds, there is a much different conclusion that is drawn: the fact that even if we fully intend to ‘return’ to our normal lives, the philosophical doubt remains. With external world skepticism we might be tempted to say that we cannot consistently “produce” our skepticism. Instead, it merely comes in waves. We can dismiss it; *have to* dismiss it. When it comes to the skeptic about other minds “the question is whether we are in a position to conclude that skepticism concerning other minds, so produced, fails to be as reasonable; that is to say, fails so to be produced.”²¹⁰ With this question in mind, he comes to the following ‘conclusion’:

I do not, accordingly, so much wish to claim that I have found certain ultimate asymmetries between these skepticisms as that the oscillation between sensing an asymmetry under each symmetry, and a symmetry under each asymmetry, is itself asymmetry enough to warrant, if not to assess, an intuition that in the sense in which we can arrive at skepticism with respect to the external world we cannot arrive at skepticism with respect to other minds; or rather, that with respect to the external world, an initial sanity requires recognizing that I cannot live my skepticism, whereas with respect to others a final sanity requires recognizing that I can. I do.²¹¹²¹²

If the skeptic doubts the external world so insistently, there comes a time where there is a “sanity check” a point where we grow concerned for the skeptic. This was essentially what I was exposing when discussing Kripke’s attempt to evoke skepticism through mathematics. While not identical, skepticism about the external world and mathematics can always be checked against observation of either the world (pointing/looking/etc.) or the rules of mathematics – the criteria (like checking the rules in chess). However, when confronted with skepticism about other minds,

²⁰⁹ I would add, however, that Nietzsche makes this move with intentional hyperbole. He is shocking his reader.

²¹⁰ *The Claim of Reason*, p.425.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.451.

²¹² Also consider this passage from p. 427: “Intuitions of skepticism with respect to the external world and with respect to other minds have been parallel, or predictably inverse, over much of their lives, as we have traced them. With respect to the external world, I cannot get outside my circle of experiences to compare them with the reality, if any, they represent; my senses come between reality and my experience of reality. With respect to other minds, I cannot get inside the other’s circle of experiences, to compare with them the reality, if any, represented by what I experience of him; his body comes between the reality of the other and my experience of that reality.”

the sanity check goes the other way. We *must* doubt the other; there is no other way (although this need not happen in every case). Imagine someone approaches you to tell you who you “really are.” Such a proposal – tantamount to literal ‘mind-reading’²¹³ – could easily make you wonder about *their* sanity. This happened to me in fact. A self-described shaman offered to tell me my spirit animal. He (with consent) took both my hands in his and closed his eyes and then after some meditation was reluctant to tell me the answer: a lion. When I asked him why he was reluctant, he said it was because it was a very ‘feminine’ spirit animal. Frankly, I still am unsure of whether I was more put off by the fact that he thought I would be offended for having a ‘feminine’ spirit animal, or the fact that he was white (as far as I could tell) and so this made me wary of or sensitive to improper appropriation on his part. Regardless, his ‘insight’ into my mind inevitably only increased my distrust. What I’m driving at is that the ‘default’ position once one has experienced the problem of other minds is skepticism.

From this realization, Cavell goes on to specify the fact that there is no *alternative*, unlike in the case of the external world where there is an abundance of alternatives (e.g. various modes of observation or scientific methods):

there is no everyday alternative to skepticism concerning other minds. There is no competing common sense of the matter; there is nothing about other minds that satisfies me for all (practical) purposes; I already know everything skepticism concludes, that my ignorance of the existence of others is not the fate of my natural condition as a human knower, but my way of inhabiting that condition; that I cannot close my eyes to my doubts of others and to their doubts and denials of me, that my relations with others are restricted, that I cannot trust them blindly. — You’d be a fool if you did. — Spare me that. That aside, my position here is not one of a generalized *intellectual* shortcoming.²¹⁴

If this really is the default position, a position for which there is no (sane) alternative, then it is equally important to realize that skepticism is not attempting to highlight any kind of intellectual shortcoming, any weakness of the mind, or weakness of the human condition. This is the move that many traditional philosophers subtly sneak into their dismissals of skepticism. They see skepticism as attacking their own intellectual capacity. As if skepticism is attacking *them*! But to conflate the human condition with weakness is, at best, unnecessary romanticism.

From these realizations Cavell conversely does “not know whether or not, so to speak, to come to the conclusion that I can never know of the existence of others on the basis of empathic

²¹³ I consider an academic example in 2.2.1.

²¹⁴ *The Claim of Reason*, p.432.

projection alone.”²¹⁵ Cavell is effectively suspending judgement on the metaphysical question of whether or not empathic projection grants us the existence of others, but instead –again – he shifts the problem: “But what I now wish to say is that I do not know whether empathic projection is, or is not, a sufficient basis for acknowledging the other's existence.”²¹⁶ While empathic projection seems like a reasonable understanding of our relation to the other, Cavell cannot conclude whether or not it is sufficient for acknowledgement, which is his real concern. He adds, “It is not settled what, if anything, would go beyond the cognitive feat of empathically projecting his humanity; nor what, if any, relation I bear to him; nor how, if at all, I can reveal myself to him as having denied this relation.”²¹⁷ There are many questions that can be raised around the problem of the other, but whether we ‘really’ know the other is wholly secondary to whether or not we acknowledge the other.

Yet, Cavell identifies a ‘structure’ in this very “inconclusiveness”:

It is a structure in which the question "Who, or what, is this other?" (or the question "Is this in fact an other?") is tied to the question "Who, or what, am I, that I should be called upon to testify to such a question?". How, and why, am I thrown back upon myself? — I notice, looking back over the skeptical recital, that it contains the following, so far unexamined, feature: that the moment at which I singled out my stranger was the moment at which I also singled out myself. ("I, for one, am prepared to say that I know that no one of you — you, for instance. . . .")²¹⁸

There is a sense in which Descartes was correct in his formation of *cogito ergo sum*. What Cavell takes note of is the fact that when we are confronted by the other, by the question of their very existence, there is a related question of “who am I to answer such a question?” So while Descartes was more concerned about the external world when he proposed his *cogito*, he was correct in appealing to it by recognizing *himself* in the equation: “This is what *I* have to say about the other.” This is, in a way, connected to what I have been pressing about philosophers: that we fail to recognize ourselves in the very questions we pose. Skepticism forces this question; it forces us to reflect upon ourselves; it forces itself upon us.

The alternative to such a proposition is equally startling:

"They (my eyes) are shut", as a resolution, or confession, says that one can, for one's part, live in the face of doubt. — But doesn't everyone, everyday? — It is something different to live without doubt, without so to speak the threat of skepticism. To live in the face of

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 428.

²¹⁶ *The Claim of Reason*, p. 428

²¹⁷ Ibid., p.429.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it. And if you find that you have fallen in love with the world, then you would be ill-advised to offer an argument of its worth by praising its Design. Because you are bound to fall out of love with your argument, and you may thereupon forget that the world is wonder enough, as it stands. Or not.²¹⁹

He adds: “I said there is no general, everyday alternative to skepticism concerning other minds. Now I will say: I live my skepticism.”²²⁰ There is a lot to unpack here. First, we live in the face of doubt every day. Anyone who *doesn't* is something quite different; we might even find it strange or unnerving under some circumstances. If someone “happily shuts their eyes” in the face of doubt – call it blind faith – we might see this as dangerous or romantic. This is why Cavell adds that if there is such thing as a “correct blindness” then it must belong to love. “Love” seems like the only ‘acceptable’ form of blindness, but even then, there are dangers (which I explore in Part Two). But assuming one loves the world in a healthy way and remains blind to some aspects of the world and its people, Cavell points out that if you praise the world’s Design – if you look for structure – you will come to be disappointed and inevitably fall out of love. As Nietzsche puts it, “One no longer loves one’s insight enough once one communicates it.”²²¹ The more you know, the less blind you can be to the faults of what is loved. Or not. Cavell leaves this possibility open – *but why?* – It seems to me that he *must* leave this possibility open given how complex and vague the concept of love and blindness are. What he is saying is not that “this is the way the world is for humans” but that “this is how *I* see the world in this case.” All of this amounts to reflecting upon the self: perfectionism.

As a final comparison between the two skepticisms, consider how “I have to ‘forget’, or ignore, close my eyes to, somehow bypass, the presence of doubts that are not mine, of ‘possibilities’ that I have not ruled out;” when it comes to the external world. We take the very practical stance that “I accommodate myself to a universal human condition, or rather, a condition shared by all creatures endowed with sensuousness, a condition over which no one (possessing sensuousness) has a choice, save to be cautious.”²²² The moral surrounding external world skepticism – and this is an obvious one – is that we need to be cautious because we *could* be wrong, but this is not troubling for us. It is obvious. Conversely,

²¹⁹ *The Claim of Reason*, p.431.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

²²¹ *BGE*, 160.

²²² *The Claim of Reason*, p. 437-8.

the surmise that I have not acknowledged about others, hence about myself, the thing there is to acknowledge, that each of us is human, is not, first of all, the recognition of a universal human condition, but first of all a surmise about myself. To accommodate myself to my restrictions of acknowledgment would be to compromise my integrity, or perhaps to constitute it, such as it is. It is as a general alternative to skeptical doubt that Austin was moved to say that, in substantiating my claims to know, "enough is enough"; I must have said enough to rule out other reasonable, competing possibilities. But how much is enough when it comes to knowing and acknowledging the humanity of another? How many times, and about just which matters, must I pity another, help another, accept another's excuses, before concluding that enough is enough? "Give me another day; another moment; another dollar; another chance. . . ." If I do not answer such appeals, is this because I have found the other, this other, not to be worth it, or entitled to it, or myself not to be up to it?²²³

At what point do we hit bedrock? When is the spade turned when it comes to other minds? It's we who decide. With the external world "enough is enough" when we need to come to a decision: we guard against possibilities we deem reasonable and move on.²²⁴ While what constitutes what is reasonable may be difficult to pinpoint, there are nevertheless cases where such a problem would be unreasonable. Compare two grounds for doubt: (1) Charlie said he would be here by now, perhaps he forgot? Or (2) Charlie said he would be here by now; perhaps he was hit by a meteor? The first option feels more likely, but both are 'possible.' A balance must be struck. This is effectively what I described as the strong skeptic's position: to remain open or even press forward doubts, yet still come to some form of decision or conclusion. We *must* move on. But this framework of "enough is enough", of hitting rock bottom, or at confronting our criteria, we realize that when acknowledging the other that what is "enough" is wholly undetermined.

A good example of this can be seen in an anecdote that someone shared with me that I believe many of us can relate to in various ways: A person was waiting in line at a fast-food chain where a single mother in front of them had her credit cards declined while trying to pay for her child's meal. The person in line stepped forward to pay for the meal and wished the mother and her child a good day. After the mother left, another person waiting in line behind them commented something to the effect: "you know that was probably a scam, right?" What I find interesting is that upon hearing this story I immediately think about how I would act in such a situation. If I'm being honest with myself, I'm still too often timid and frugal to perform such an

²²³ *The Claim of Reason*, p.428.

²²⁴ To those who would say that the problem of the external world is therefore addressed by Cavell and perhaps in some sense "refuted" or "rejected" I would pose the following question: Where does an immeasurable amount of an individual's knowledge come from? Other human beings (teaching, reading, etc.).

act of kindness, but neither am I convinced by the cynic in this tale. Two people (and any other onlookers) were confronted by this woman's humanity: she did not explicitly ask for assistance, but she was clearly struggling (being unable to feed your own child must involve immeasurable embarrassment). Note how both people in line have the same information – neither of them could be said to be *mistaken* about any details. She *could* be lying. But does this matter? If the woman is being deceitful, she may have good reasons for the deceit (or not). The way I take Cavell's insights is to come to this conclusion: the question of whether or not the woman was lying is a distraction; one could put forward an investigation into the woman to see if she does the same thing at other establishments, but this is not the question that the people in line are being confronted with. The question is whether they are willing to acknowledge the suffering of this woman (not to mention the child), and furthermore, whether they are willing to relieve the suffering by offering assistance (acknowledgement²²⁵ of the suffering). The question is: what are *you* willing to do? How empathetic are *you*? How cynical are *you*? The question of whether or not the woman is honest is a distraction from acknowledging *ourselves*.

Finally, to finish this train of thought, consider what Cavell says next:

But even if we recognized some such surmise as that of a restriction on my humanity arising from my inability —or the lack of occasion —to acknowledge the other as a human being, surely this is not the same as not knowing that others are humans? I do not know a confident answer to this question, because I do not know that there is a confident answer to the question, "How do I know that there are (other) human beings?". I mean I do not know whether there is or is not a sensible answer to that question; nor whether, if there is, it is the one that shows the knowledge to be very special or nothing special.²²⁶

He admits that he cannot answer this question and adds that not only is he unsure whether there is an answer to it, but that he's unsure if an answer would show us anything important. This is why I emphasized that our response to the single mother, or to others, is not really a question of "are others really human?" but "am I willing to acknowledge you in this moment?" The philosophical or – perhaps more accurately – metaphysical question is a distraction from the real problem: the problem of acknowledgement.

The remainder of this dissertation will be occupied with the problem of acknowledgement and its intricacies, but I want to make it clear that attempts to explain away or qualify Cavell's

²²⁵ There is a question here that I do not aim to answer within the context of the dissertation, but which is certainly worth asking: Does acknowledgement require action or can we acknowledge the other silently? To refer to acknowledgement as some inner process is undoubtedly a lost cause, but there may be situations in which doing or saying nothing *could* also be a form of acknowledgment. In Part Two I touch on similar ideas. See 2.1.3.

²²⁶ *The Claim of Reason*, p.439.

position to show that he follows in the footsteps of Austin is a mistake. Skepticism – *the truth of skepticism* – is integral to Cavell’s philosophy, as can be seen not only from what he explicitly says, but also in his methodology. Cavell is very clear: when he speaks of skepticism of the external world, the skeptic is perfectly capable of being understood – as reasonable – even if at the end we must suspend such doubts in order to live our lives. He is equally as clear that skepticism about other minds is inescapable: we *live* our skepticism. The skeptic is not unintelligible. Although sometimes they may be confused, what is “unintelligible” is the response of the traditional philosopher *to* the skeptic – to the person who has had skepticism forced upon them. Nevertheless, some traditional philosopher persists in their denial of the skeptic’s humanity, but frankly this is no great loss. Not many people will grow concerned about whether or not some particular traditional philosophers believe them or empathize with them. However, it is not only philosophers who do this. While we might ignore the disgruntled tirades of a traditional philosopher as we roll our eyes in response to *their* exasperation, it is quite another thing to be confronted by a loved one in the same way. It is quite another thing when an entire community rails against you and denies your humanity.

1.3.4 “Incipit Tragoedia”

*“Incipit Tragoedia” we read at the end of this awesomely aweless book. Beware! Something downright wicked and malicious is announced here: **incipit parodia**, no doubt.” – Nietzsche, GS P2*

The connection between skepticism and tragedy is not an obvious one, but by examining the two closely, one can begin to see how they are deeply linked. I might say, insofar as Cavell can be taken to be putting forth any theses of his own, one of the theses I would identify is how he connects these two concepts:

both skepticism and tragedy conclude with the condition of human separation, with a discovering that I am I; and the fact that the alternative to my acknowledgment of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him. Acknowledgment is to be studied, is what is studied, in the avoidances that tragedy studies.²²⁷

²²⁷ *The Claim of Reason*, p.389.

As far as Cavell is concerned, skepticism and tragedy are concerned with the same problems, the problem of the other and the self. “Human separation” is just those moments in which we avoid the other – like the cynic in my example of the mother with her child. This reflection back upon ourselves is one of the first connections to be drawn between skepticism and tragedy: they both *force us* to ponder our position relative to whatever crisis skepticism or tragedy provokes.

To better explain the connection between skepticism and tragedy, I would like to consider an example that I believe is very important for both the LGBTQ+ communities and any view that aims to propose change in society. Consider the contemporary debates surrounding pronoun usage. There is a sense in which it is “ordinary” to refer to individuals by the gendered pronouns they are designated at birth. Of course, with the growing acceptance of transgender and non-binary²²⁸ peoples this entails that there is a group where what counts as “ordinary” pronoun usage is different from other groups. With some of the political fervour that has been growing over recent years, it is simple enough to imagine how tragedy may be born of this division. My personal position on this is no secret: use the preferred pronouns of those who ask it of you to the best of your ability and leave it at that. With that said, for a few classes I taught on freedom of expression I *did* attempt to come to terms with the opposing view that pronouns should stay the same. The moral I wanted to draw for my class, not just in this particular case, was that these divisions can be *hard* to pin down and conclude with a firm position. It is never so simple as to say “let people say anything” or “restrict just *this* kind of speech” or any other view. What I discovered while preparing and eventually teaching these classes is that the debate itself was rather empty of philosophical content but rich with personal content.

After teaching the class about Mill’s skeptical arguments for free speech (mentioned in 1.2.2) I switched focus to the contemporary problem of the pronoun debate within the context of our Canadian experience, which I called “The Peterson Problem.” There is an ‘infamous’ debate hosted by Steve Paikin on *The Agenda* where he hosted a panel of diverse opinions (although notably lacking diversity elsewhere). The panel became infamous after a Teaching Assistant at Laurier University showed *part* of the debate in a political science course in order to foster debate and discussion (conversely, I assigned the entire debate as the “reading” for that class). She was subsequently accused of being “transphobic” and causing “harm” and “violence.”

²²⁸ Non-binary refers to a genderqueer identity that does not identify with masculine or feminine. Some people also identify with terms such as transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, gender fluid, or agender.

Eventually things were cleared up (to a degree), but only after the Teaching Assistant released clips from her interrogation by the administrative staff of the university.²²⁹ The bulk of the views in support of leaving gender pronouns alone expressed during this panel can be summed up very quickly: (1) a new bill (at the time), Bill C16, would result in improper pronoun usage being tantamount to hate speech and therefore a crime, (2) there are only two biological sexes, (3) there is a “cabal of radical left-wingers” promoting ‘dangerous’ and ‘chaotic’ ideology, (4) “made up” pronouns (ze/zer) are an “unnatural” change in language, (5) we cannot dispense with the distinction between singular and plural, and (6) there are so few transgender people that this issue does not merit a complete re-evaluation of pronoun use.

Let me begin by taking the philosopher’s path in this debate. With respect to (1), Kyle Kirkup from the University of Ottawa, an expert in constitutional law, criminal law, and family law quite adamantly insists that (1) is not the case. Given my lack of legal expertise I deliberately “appeal to authority” in this case, which seems prudent in legal matters. (2) Might be seen as an empirical question, but once one takes the time to examine scientific considerations there are signs of obvious doubt. For example, if one were to claim chromosomes determine sex there is Chimaerism (which occurs to most of us) where boys retain XX chromosomes from their mother into early adulthood, how mothers retain chromosomes from their children (microchimaerism), and the fact that people born with ‘abnormal’ genitalia receive gender assignment surgery *at birth*.²³⁰ Similarly to (1) I am no expert in any of this, but there is also the fact that pronouns are meant to refer to *gender* and not *sex*, which is a very basic distinction: sex refers to ‘biology’ and gender to social ‘role’ (whether this is ultimately a helpful distinction is another debate). So even if there were only two biological sexes, this point is merely a distraction: we’re talking about how someone would like to be referred to, we are not referring to someone’s biology, chromosomes, or genitals (and outside of medical practices, this is a perverse thing to do anyways). (3) Can be safely dismissed as either unsurprising or simple conspiracy theory; if there is a cabal of left-wingers I am probably one of them, especially since I explore the ‘dangerous’ topic of skepticism, but I would hardly consider myself a threat to society and

²²⁹ I showed my class clips from this encounter – the wave of recognition (and anger) that passed over their faces as the administrator said “These are very young students, and something of that nature is not appropriate to that age of student, because they don’t have ... [he’s interrupted] they’re very young adults. They don’t have the critical toolkit to be able to pick it apart yet” was one of the most satisfying moments I have experienced in teaching so far. Needless to say, these students didn’t identify with his projection of them.

²³⁰ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/sex-redefined-the-idea-of-2-sexes-is-overly-simplistic1/>

certainly not a part of any “cabal.” Then of course (4) is merely an appeal to ‘nature’, i.e. a basic fallacy; just because it is “unnatural” doesn’t mean anything. If what is meant is that “deliberate or direct” change to language is bad, this would require an argument that I have not encountered and suspect would fall into its own problems. Why would we *ever* stipulate that we *cannot* directly alter language? Language is constantly changing. Furthermore, insofar as *you* have understood me perfectly well throughout this dissertation, I take this as sufficient to show that we *can* use “they” and yet nevertheless *maintain* the distinction between plural and singular, thus rejecting (5).²³¹ Finally, I don’t find (6) merits acknowledgement other than to say: tyranny of the majority, anyone? The idea that we “cannot” change how we use language is simply empty. What they mean to say is “we *shouldn’t*” (and not merely “I don’t want to”) but this requires a very different reason of its own, whereas I can think of many reasons why we *should* alter our pronoun usage in order to acknowledge our trans and non-binary folks.

Looking at the bigger picture, as I discuss tragedy, there are at least two forms of tragedy that I identify in Cavell’s work: being mistaken about “what we do” and “intellectual tragedy.” When I first engaged the pronoun debate for my class I was *looking* for an “intellectual tragedy” (more on this later) but instead what I found was a complex case of being mistaken about “what we do.” This idea of being mistaken about what we do first arose much earlier in my dissertation where I highlighted this remark:

The claim that in general we do not require evidence for statements in the first person plural does not rest upon a claim that we cannot be wrong about what we are doing or about what we say, but only that it would be extraordinary if we were (often). My point about such statements, then, is that they are sensibly questioned only where there is some special reason for supposing what I say about what I (we) say to be wrong; only here is the request for evidence competent. If I am wrong about what he does (they do), that may be no great surprise; but if I am wrong about what I (we) do, that is liable, where it is not comic, to be tragic.²³²

When I last discussed this, it was with explicit concern about establishing how we are the source of confirmation about the ordinary, about “what we do.” When competing samples are presented, neither of them refutes the other; the only thing that can accept or refute a sample is *us*. I claim that the person who is opposed to changes in pronoun use is tragically mistaken. This can be seen in part by how none of the arguments even attempt to address the transgendered or non-binary

²³¹ Most of us are perfectly comfortable in understanding the “royal ‘we’” as well, which is a perfect example of a ‘grammatically incorrect’ use of the plural meant to designate the singular.

²³² “Must we mean what we say?”, p.13.

person; they all point to external features that can be masked as empirical facts (references to biology, law, and language) so as to give the illusion of impartiality. I say tragic because while some of their claims may seem comic due to how ill-conceived they are, they nevertheless result in attempts to avoid the other, or worse, *erase* the other.

This is one concept I would add to this Cavellian picture of philosophy alongside acknowledgement and avoidance. I add “erasure”²³³ because “avoidance” (at least, for me) does not adequately articulate the *deliberate* nature of some the cases it points to. “Avoidance” can be passive or indirect. “Avoidance” (evading; circumventing; escaping) is *ignoring* the other, whereas I see “erasure” as *actively* harming the other. That is not to say that avoidance isn’t harmful – quite the contrary – but erasure seems to me a specific kind avoidance that recognizes the severity and nature of some stances toward the other. I hope to further refine this idea as I move forward and engage more examples. I take this notion of “erasure” from the lived problem of “bi-erasure” that I have not only witnessed but *committed*. My poor brother was the victim of my erasure, although only briefly, when he came out to me as bisexual. He was still in high school and without any thought – and probably given the fact that I did not see my brother as a sexual being – I said “ah well, you’re still young.” The implication being: you still haven’t *made up your mind*. With time, this entails, he might come to *pick* between his preferred genders with which to sexually engage. (Notice the *strangeness* of this implication.) My mother overheard my comment and voiced her surprise (with unfiltered disappointment) and my brother remarked disdainfully that “that’s what my Dad said.” I slyly laughed as I backpedalled: “I was being facetious! Good for you!” as I very quickly realized what I had done. What I did, if only for a brief moment, was *erase* my brother’s experience, his very being. I *actively avoided* him. It was not a “conscious” remark, but instead pointed to old notions I still held revolving around sexuality.²³⁴ This point became all the more important for me to examine as I realized that this was not only a problem in the “straight” world, but also in the queer one. As a bisexual woman and single mother in the 90s, my mother experienced this even more harshly as she was confronted by gay women telling her to “pick a side” and ‘open minded’ couples²³⁵ looking to purely objectify and commodify her.

²³³ I will not commit to claiming that my use is perfectly synonymous with the colloquial use of this word, but they are certainly linked.

²³⁴ I was happy to learn that my brother had completely forgotten about these events until I brought it up to him.

²³⁵ Now, often referred to as “unicorn hunters.”

Returning to the matter of pronoun usage, I realized that those who reject modifications to pronoun usage (at least with respect to the ‘arguments’ I have mentioned) are an example of being mistaken about what we do and a case of trans-erasure. I say “mistaken” quite literally: legally, biologically, as a conspiracy, and how language works in at least two ways. What the ‘debate’ shows us has nothing to do with the content; whether pronoun misuse could ever be considered a hate crime or whether there are more than two sexes or how we use language are all distractions from a very simple fact: those who reject a change in pronoun usage are erasing trans peoples’ lived experience. In this case, this “mistake” is not comic when nearly two thirds of trans youth (aged 14-25) have committed self-harm and more than one in three have attempted suicide.²³⁶ This is tragedy. And this is just *one* form of avoidance as erasure.

Sadly, I have nothing to add in the form of a direct resolution to this problem. While some people may be mistaken about all of these things, it is not so simple as to point this out. A great deal of *The Agenda* panel can be summarized as those guilty of trans-erasure baiting its opponents into calling their speech “hateful” or “harmful” and therefore criminal. By getting their opponents to take this position, they can firmly declare that *they* are under attack, that *their* rights are being violated (freedom of expression). We might engage these questions philosophically, as I did, but none of the considerations I raised will change the mind of the one denying pronoun flexibility – of the trans-erasure stance. This suggests to me, something quite radical: philosophy may be ill-equipped (although certainly not useless) to address social issues of this kind; that is to say, many philosophers would be incapable of altering the disposition of the toxic skeptic, the weak skeptic.

What alternative is there then? Determining whether there is a way to truly resolve this dispute would require a great deal of psychological and sociological knowledge, which I lack. What’s worse is that a dark voice whispers in the back of my mind, perhaps the cynic or the weak skeptic. A pessimism that is not my own, or not only mine: “Madness is rare in individuals – but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule.”²³⁷ I say madness because that seems like the right word to describe the mass avoidance and erasure of the lived experience of every person who identifies with a group that has been disenfranchised – LGBTQ+ peoples, people of colour,

²³⁶ Veale, J., Saewyc, E., Frohard-Dourlent, H., Dobson, S., Clark, B. & the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey Research Group. *Being safe, being me: Results of the Canadian trans youth health survey*. (Vancouver, BC: Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, 2015).

²³⁷ GS 156.

Indigenous or First Nations, women, and people of various religions, to name the first few that come to mind.

Moving forward, instead of pulling from a wealth of experiences, I shift my focus to a particular (and I suspect more personal) form of avoidance and erasure: sexual jealousy. Jealousy, I contend, is a prime example of an accepted practice that necessitates avoiding the other and under severe cases erases them. I go over more concrete reasons for why I say sexual jealousy is an “accepted practice”, but there are some things worth highlighting now. My stance on sexual jealousy is very simple: sexual jealousy is *dangerous*. I do not mean dangerous in the sense I used more recently of my skeptical methods herein being dangerous, but a true danger where in severe cases someone’s life (primarily women) is in danger. As I have engaged people both colloquially on an individual basis, at workshops, and at philosophy conferences on the questions surrounding sexual jealousy, the resounding formal response that I receive is that there must be *something good* about jealousy. The two predominant responses I receive could be summarized as the following: either 1) jealousy is a natural occurrence or 2) jealousy can be seen as *proof* of one’s love or affection (implicit in both: so shouldn’t this absolve us of some blame?). I offer no reason as to why these are the predominant responses, but let there be no doubt that these are the responses I have received from multiple sources at *every* presentation I have given that has touched on sexual jealousy. That said, over the years I have had more and more people approach me to convey that they more or less share my views or experiences around jealousy. I do not care about answering the question “why are we jealous?” but instead, “what should we *do* about it?” I highlight sexual jealousy because it is something most of us can relate to and because it is so widely and passively accepted as *inevitable*. What I hope to show is that, at the very least, we need not be doomed to *this* tragedy.

Part Two: Tragedy and Sexual Jealousy

2.0.0 Introduction

One way to describe what I am doing here in this latter half of the thesis is putting the theoretical musings of the first half into practice. It is all well and good to discuss skepticism and tragedy and try and relate them to the everyday as I have begun to do, but inevitably many people (philosophers and non-philosophers alike) roll their eyes at the idea that our philosophical musings have *practical* implications. Not to be dramatic (although when discussing tragedy, this may be impossible), but it seems to me that there are grave implications to the conceptual scheme of acknowledgement I have put forward that are informative and helpful for addressing very real and very common challenges that many of us experience. Of course, I cannot claim that these ideas are helpful to everyone, but knowing they have very helpful to *me* the hope is that they might be helpful for others. Again, I don't take the notion that just because an idea or philosophy is "mine" that it suddenly entails that it is immune to criticism or even only accessible to me. I mean only that *this* is how *I* address the kinds of problems I raise in real contexts. Furthermore, I do not make these comments to be coy or to distance myself from my earlier claims. I make these claims because it seems to me important to highlight these facts if I am to be taken seriously as a skeptic who accepts the truth or moral of skepticism. Just as Cavell says that "One misses the drive of Wittgenstein if one is not ... sufficiently open to the threat of skepticism (i.e., to the skeptic in oneself)",²³⁸ I would say my work would be incomplete without embracing the threat of skepticism, without being *conscious* of the threat.

One of the notions I would like to put forward, that is not at all unique to me, is that *art* should be seen as a form of philosophizing. I do not mean to suggest that the two are synonymous, as disciplines they obviously employ different mediums and tools, but at the very least they are sister disciplines. They may engage questions differently, but ultimately they are concerned with the same thing: seeking community and criticism. I explore this line of thinking by comparing Cavell's concepts with that of Alva Noë's from his book *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*. What I find helpful about this comparison is that I take the two to share some central ideas in common, but express those ideas within very different contexts. Whereas

²³⁸ *The Claim of Reason*, p.47.

Cavell's style is intentionally dense and philosophically rich, Noë's book conveys similar ideas in very direct and simple ways that makes it more accessible. With that said, Noë's position is imperfect for my own purposes. I highlight some ways in which I disagree with Noë's project insofar as he fails in convincing me of a strict dichotomy between art and function, as outlined by the example of pornography that I explore later. Put very simply, what I take from Noë's ideas is this: criteria can be understood as *how we are organized* whereas we can understand some skepticism as a form of *reorganization*. While some of the connections between the concepts will seem obvious, other aspects are not so clear, and therefore I take the time to break down these comparisons below.

Once I have put forward my case for understanding both art and philosophy as means of attempting reorganization, I consider Cavell's treatment of Shakespeare. I take the time in 2.1.2 to reaffirm Cavell's stance that Shakespeare should be seen as engaging the questions of his culture – which includes the problem of skepticism. I wish to dispense with any notion of there being a “primary” discipline (between philosophy and art, specifically) and use this as a springboard for discussing the creation of a genre in 2.1.3: the comedy of remarriage and how Cavell views this genre as a development of feminist ideas that were (at the time) thought to have dissipated after the right to vote was established. In order to elicit an understanding of how the concept of acknowledgement sheds light on sexual jealousy, I consider, as Cavell does, *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) with discussions surrounding Shakespearean texts interspersed. Later, in 2.1.4, I modernize the discussion by considering *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) as a modern comedy of remarriage. (Consequently, due to the limited number of “cases” I consider, it should be kept in mind that my own discussions are “western”-centric). By doing so, I argue, first, that we should reframe (reorganize) ourselves in such a way to be more aware of (attuned to) acknowledgement. Typically, whatever issues we face we consider them first and foremost as matters of fact, but what comedies of remarriage help show is that matters of fact do little or nothing to disperse skepticism in a sexually jealous context. Second, I consider what it means to be acknowledged, and *who* decides what counts as acknowledgement – to put a long story short, it is the recipient of acknowledgement who decides. Finally, I consider reasons why we might think the characters in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* fail to acknowledge one another.

With the notion of the comedy of remarriage in mind, I consider a number of technical issues surrounding seeing cinema or film as a means of engaging skepticism by considering Cavell's comments in *The World Viewed*. In 2.1.5 I return to the question of tragedy and while briefly considering the first type of tragedy – of being mistaken about what we do – I go on to expand on the notion of intellectual tragedy. In some ways, this section is my most experimental, as I find this part of Cavell's work to be some of the most difficult to work out. Finally, I conclude the first half of Part Two by putting forward sexual jealousy as a good candidate for what it means for someone to “live” their skepticism. While this will be, in part, shown through the discussion around comedies of remarriage, I draw further parallels between skepticism and jealousy, by examining how Descartes's search for God – his skepticism in the form of methodological doubt – shares striking similarities with what occurs in jealous figures such as King Leontes of *The Winter's Tale* and Othello.

As I established in the first half of the dissertation, and as I continue to repeat throughout: the problems we face when we encounter skepticism are rarely about the epistemological content but instead a matter of acknowledgement or avoidance – possibly even erasure. It is for this reason that the remainder of my thesis is dedicated to deconstructing our conceptions of sexual jealousy through a Cavellian lens. On the one hand, this is an obvious move; while on the other hand, one should come to see how I am moving past some of the concerns Cavell raised surrounding the question of jealousy. It is obvious in that Cavell engages Othello and Leontes directly on many occasions, these are ideas he is familiar with. Othello and Leontes *fail* to acknowledge the other (their wives) and because of this, tragedies are born. As a proper tragedy this is where *Othello* ends, whereas in *The Winter's Tale* it is a part of a longer journey, and thus as a comedy, all is well in the end. Cavell often contrasts these two together and considers how they comment upon one another. However, what I want to discuss about sexual jealousy is within real contexts, not merely fictional.

To begin my focused discussion on jealousy, I consider the motivations surrounding sexual jealousy, specifically that of jealous men. This is highlighted in two ways in 2.2.1 where I consider some legal matters before moving on to the evolutionary psychology of David Buss who argues that jealousy is an evolutionary phenomenon that is perfectly justified. He goes so far as to claim that jealousy serves as a sort of “emotional wisdom” that accurately signals to us when we are under threat from ‘sexual treachery.’ I leave my criticisms of Buss for later, but

needless to say I take *great* issue with Buss's claims and highlight how he *misuses* anecdotes as evidence.

In 2.2.2 I consider the dangers of jealousy in two ways. First, I indulge in some philosophical analysis through Nietzsche to offer a sort of literary conceptual engagement where I contend that jealousy can be seen as connected to *ressentiment* or Judeo-Christian values. Afterwards, however, I consider *actual* evidence in the form of statistical data to show exactly how dangerous – i.e. life threatening – sexual jealousy can be. Both frameworks, while wildly different, come to the same conclusion: jealous men are dangerous to women, and proprietariness or possession plays a part in their jealousy. I do this to set the groundwork for sketching out a hypothesis in 2.2.3: that monogamy and specifically monogamous marriage has warped into a means of avoidance. I do this in order to show how far we can take Cavell's ideas and to pave the way for more areas and topics to explore. Finally, in the final chapter, I attempt to make sense of Cavell's concept of recovery and re-examine the three instances in which I mentioned recovery throughout the dissertation. I explore what it means to recover and outline a number of limitations I can identify in my position.

My aim here is to encourage self-reflection as well as to show how my work can be expanded on, both in and outside the company of Cavell. While so far, I have suggested that as a tradition philosophy has done a poor job of responding to the skeptic without obvious bias, this entails that at least for the moment philosophy cannot hope to show us signs of recovery. The best alternative I can so far conceive of while remaining in the realm of philosophy, I contend, is art.

2.1.0 Art as Philosophy

Instead of trying to answer the questions “what is art?” or “what is philosophy?” I focus on a very basic feature that I think at least *most* people would agree with: philosophy is about questioning things. I am deliberately vague. This is not all of what philosophy *is* but it seems to me that if there is *any* essential feature of philosophy, this (or some variation of it) would qualify as a candidate. To borrow a formulation from Noë that he uses to try and generalize about “pictures” I would put it this way: The generalization that “philosophy is about questioning things” captures a basic feature of philosophy without flattening out or ignoring the great diversity of background contexts that motivate and condition the practice of philosophy.²³⁹ Why do I bring this up? Because I want to claim very explicitly: art is philosophy (a form of philosophizing, a sister discipline). That is not to say that *all* art is philosophy (and I would be hard-pressed to come up with more than a dozen names of examples of *philosophy* as art – especially without mentioning anyone some might not consider a part of philosophy). I would go so far as to say that for me to be convinced otherwise would require drastic changes in my world view. I say this, in part, because of that very basic notion of philosophy I just used: that philosophy is a matter of questioning things. So when I move on to speaking of organization and reorganization as applying so smoothly to criteria and skepticism I am just leaning on the fact that I see philosophy as a matter of questioning things. If skepticism is a matter of doubting, then I cannot see how one could be said to be “doubting something” without also “questioning something.” Similarly, reorganization requires, at least at some level the ability to doubt or question. To deliberately reorganize one’s self, the criteria we operate under or over, requires the ability to self-assess, self-question. Perhaps this is obvious, but it appears to me important to state clearly if I’m to be taken seriously when I say that philosophy is a matter of autobiography.

2.1.1 Organisation and Reorganisation

When I first came upon Alva Noë’s *Strange Tools* in a graduate seminar, I was quickly struck by a similarity between Noë’s and Cavell’s positions: both see art as philosophy (and vice

²³⁹ Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*, (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p.147.

versa) and both refer to basic experience, the common, or ordinary, as a starting point. The latter point, as I've mentioned, is to connect "criteria" for Cavell with what Noë identifies as "organization" and subsequently to connect "the truth of skepticism" with "reorganization." Consequently, by identifying the truth of skepticism with reorganization I am making a potentially controversial move since this entails reorganization is what philosophy does, and art, and so by connecting the truth of skepticism with reorganization, I am effectively identifying the truth of skepticism as deeply integral to philosophy generally (if this wasn't obvious already).

But first: what does Noë mean by "organization"? He takes organization to be a *biological* concept,²⁴⁰ where organisms (i.e. humans) are understood as ordered, integrated, and "organized" in "the self-making, world-creating manner of life."²⁴¹ How we are organized is a matter of our circumstances, and these circumstances inform our decisions and how we ultimately see the world. A good example of organized behaviour is conversation. It is not merely the case that what we say is constrained by what has already been said, but there is also a much more basic way we are organized, even subconsciously. When two people talk they tend to adopt a similar posture, they adjust their voices to the same volume, and they look at each other and other objects in highly controlled ways; all the while they participate in listening, thinking, paying attention, committing actions, and so on.²⁴² Furthermore, most of this behaviour is done naturally, without any effort, or one might even say habitually.²⁴³ Many of these organizational features may be the result of biological or evolutionary forces, but they are not limited to these forces. For example, how we walk is an organized activity which is only made possible by our physiological makeup – at first we might crawl on hands and knees to get around but for most of us we eventually walk on two legs. Conversely, how we are organized is not merely constrained by biological factors, but also through outside factors such as culture or technology. A very modern example would be cell phones, which have become something like a necessary component of many North American lives. Cell phones not only organize us by allowing direct communication or giving us access to a calendar, but also by being a part of our lives, they change the way we act and see the world. We see the world differently through a phone camera lens by taking pictures and videos, and likewise we can block out external stimuli by using our

²⁴⁰ Noë 2015, p.6.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid, p.8

phone as a music device with headphones. Regardless, whether through biological factors or technology, we are organized beings.

There is still a lot more that could be said about organized activity. For example, “It is not a requirement that organized activities be social.”²⁴⁴ We are organized in all aspects of our lives, whether it involves interactions with others, or not. Crucially – and where the connection to criteria first becomes obvious –

these structures of organization are not of our own making. We don’t direct or orchestrate or invent the dynamic patterns that organize us when we walk, look, listen, breast-feed, or talk. We are not exactly slave to them – for our participation in such practices is, in many ways, precisely the exercise of our agency. It’s how we make friends, find mates, get from point A to point B, recognize people in the crowd.²⁴⁵

We do not explicitly consent or agree to the ways in which we are organized, but our participation in organized activity is exactly what gives the organized activity its status as organized behaviour. Much in the same way that we are the source of our criteria, as I said in my discussion on searching for community – we are not slaves to our criteria. Recall that in my discussion of community I highlighted the tension of how close we are to criteria yet how distant we are to them by considering social contract theory. The tension could be seen in how we both seem to consent to the polis tacitly, yet nevertheless we need a means of questioning or denouncing the polis. This discussion consequently brought the matter of autobiography to my attention in that Cavell identified (through Rousseau) that philosophers’ ideas of nature, are merely projections of their own states of society or their fantasies of it.²⁴⁶

The similarities between Cavell’s and Noë’s projects do not end there, however. Recall as well how my discussion around social contract theory considered how philosophers often mistake social contract theorists and other philosophers like Nietzsche as presenting scientific or “naturalist” ideas. What I highlighted was a misguided desire to scientism, a desire for our philosophers to be scientists, when that is something they cannot be. Noë resists a similar desire:

It is worth noticing that you can’t understand organized activities – activities that are structured by habit in this way – by considering these phenomena only in relation to what is happening in the nervous system of the participants. ... The point is that the level at which activities are organized is not the level of the nervous system, any more than it is the level of the atom. But neither is it the level of conscious, deliberate action. We are organized at an intermediate level, at what the roboticist Dana Ballard has called the

²⁴⁴ Noë 2015, p.8.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁴⁶ *The Claim of Reason*, p.25.

‘embodiment level.’ This critical level is not *subpersonal* – it is not the level of things happening inside us, however we model these. What interests us, after all, is precisely what *the person* does, what she looks at, what she pays attention to, etc. But it is not the *personal* level itself either, the level at which the person knowingly and authoritatively decides.²⁴⁷

It is important to note that the ways we are organized are “basic and natural yet cognitively complex”²⁴⁸ (which will be important when I turn to matters of jealousy, later). This complexity is important to acknowledge because nativist attempts to explain our behaviour at this level are sometimes drawn to applying evolutionary psychology or cognitive scientism. Which is to say that some would like to explain these most basic or common elements of our lives as being purely dictated by our biology, for example: “the idea that culture could make over vision itself cannot be taken seriously because vision is biological and biology is prior to culture.”²⁴⁹ Biology, one might be tempted to say, precedes culture, and thus our sense organs are our primary organizer. Noë is reasonably resistant to such temptations; he points out that his position is directly challenging these notions, and so merely appealing to nativist explanations is not a starting point. Nietzsche brought up a skeptical prospect with similar concerns in mind:

And others even say that the external world is the work of our organs? But then our body, as part of this external world, would be the work of our organs! But then our organs would be the work of our organs! It seems to me that this is a complete *reduction ad absurdum*, assuming that the concept of a *causa sui* is something fundamentally absurd. Consequently, the external world is *not* the work of our organs –?

Perhaps Nietzsche would have done better to point out a different logical fallacy: a false dichotomy. I do not know anyone who would explicitly deny that our sensory organs are connected to their related senses. That would be strange. But neither do we need to subject ourselves to believing that therefore there are *only* purely scientific or biologically based explanations. Noë is well aware of this as he says “This is not to deny that vision is a biological faculty.”²⁵⁰ Noë is well versed in the world of science and cognitive science in particular. This is, as far as I’m aware, where his interest in art flourishes the most and so to think of him as presenting something “anti-science” would be disingenuous at best, if not entirely delusional.

Noë is nevertheless in favour of seeing our biological or evolutionary dispositions as being influenced by our culture and technology: “it is striking to consider that the way the eye doctor

²⁴⁷ Noë 2015, p.8.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p.9.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p.51.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

tests your eyes is by asking you to discriminate letters and pictures.”²⁵¹ If, in practice, we employ cultural constructs (such as letters and pictures) in verifying our criteria for sight, why would we *not* assume that those cultural artefacts have an impact on those organizational properties – our criteria? As an example, Noë points to dairy as “culture changing the genome.”²⁵² Most humans could not digest lactose (and many still can’t), but “the domestication of animals and the concomitant availability of abundant supplies of nutritious milk have created a (cultural) environment in which people who can digest milk have reproductive advantage. The place of dairy in our lives is at once biological and also cultural.”²⁵³ The political implications of this were clearly visible in the 2019 updated Canada Food Guide where dairy and meat products have taken a back-seat compared to previous iterations of the guide. That is to say scientific studies actually showed that the prescribed amounts of dairy and meat were higher than they should be. In a way then, science exposed how cultural pressures – the ways we are organized – influenced our stance on dairy. But this should be no great surprise.

We are organized by our criteria – what are we supposed to do with this? Let us take up the question of technology in the same way that Noë does in his book. For Noë “our lives are structured by organization. Art is a practice for bringing our organization into view; in doing this, art reorganizes us.”²⁵⁴ This is important for Noë because technology is seen in juxtaposition to art. What distinguishes art from technology is that technology serves functions, whereas art cannot serve a function. He goes so far as to claim: “art is the enemy of function, it is the perversion of technology.”²⁵⁵ The idea is that art is a strange tool that works against design – art is meant to *question* function, not establish it. I will explain why I disagree with this last point, but first we must understand his distinction between “*Level 1*” and “*Level 2*.”

Noë’s distinction between “levels” is not altogether unique, and follows a trend with other similar divisions such as first and second order desires (what we want vs. what we want to want), Daniel Kahneman’s Fast and Slow Thinking (System 1 and System 2), and even possibly the distinction between Genuine Philosophy and Philosophical Labour.²⁵⁶ All of these conceptual tools point to a similar distinction between the phenomenological, experiential, or primary

²⁵¹ Noë 2015, p.51.

²⁵² Ibid., p.60.

²⁵³ Ibid., p.60.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p.25.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

²⁵⁶ I’ve also toyed with the idea of including “descriptive” vs. “normative” in this discussion as there seem to be – at first glance, anyway – a connection that could be drawn here but would be out of place.

concepts and the responsive, deliberate, or secondary concepts. In Noë's case "*Level 1* is the level of the organized activity or the technology" whereas "*Level 2* is the level where the nature of organization at the lower level gets put on display and investigated."²⁵⁷ I think another important feature that all of these distinctions share in common is that while there are evaluative words used in describing them such as "levels," "primary/secondary," or "genuine," there is no hierarchy, division, or inherent antagonism between these concepts. Certainly, *tension* exists between first and second order desires, between our thinking strategies, or ways of doing philosophy, but this does not make them opposites or even necessarily at odds. In fact, to return to an image I used before: they are two sides of the same coin.

Level 1 concerns itself with our organized behaviour, which includes "activities like talking, moving, dancing, making pictures, singing, etc." At the end of the day *Level 1* activities feature our most basic and involuntary "modes of our organization"²⁵⁸ – they are ordinary. Another way to put it would be to say that *Level 1* activities constitute those activities that we take for granted – the space in which we (justifiably – in most cases) make assumptions or already 'know' what we need to. Conversely, at *Level 2* "we have different arts: poetry and fiction, choreography, painting and photography, music, and so on. Level-2 practices play with and reshape level-1 activities."²⁵⁹

But wait – one might interject – '*art*' is included on both levels. Are '*dancing*', '*making pictures*', and '*singing*' not real art under this framework? This is a good question because I do not follow Noë on this point, although he does offer some qualifications that are helpful. By considering the case of dancing and choreography, I hope to highlight these qualifications, and begin to unearth some of the less desirable (in my view) aspects of his theorizing. The quick answer to the interlocutor would be to point out that "reorganizational practices loop back and change first-order activities."²⁶⁰ That is the whole point of "reorganization" after all – to change *Level 1* activities.

In the case of dancing and choreography, dancing stands in at *Level 1* and choreography at *Level 2*. The idea is that choreography is the reorganizational practice that alters or informs the *Level 1* activity of dancing, which makes perfect sense. Dance lessons in many ways are just a

²⁵⁷ Noë 2015, p.29.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p.31.

form of shortened choreography. In order to learn how to move properly (and not injure oneself) one needs to learn the proper posture, (in many cases) to shift their weight off their heels and onto their toes, to establish a strong “frame” (the way you hold your dancing partner), and so on. “Practicing” in this case is a means of reorganizing our movement to train our bodies to move differently. The end goal being that once one has ingrained the training, one should be able to dance freely within the desired form, whether it’s in step or salsa or burlesque, etc. The successful employment of *Level 2* activities is therefore, in a sense, for us to change our *Level 1* activities: “philosophy is a level-2 organizational practice that stands to our level-1 cognitive undertakings – reasoning, argument, belief formation, and, crucially, the work of science – in the same kind of relation that, say choreography stands to movement and dancing.”²⁶¹ Philosophy then is like choreography: it is meant to bring our *Level 1* activities into question so that we can alter them.

As an aside, I would like to note that I think this also plays well into the division of Genuine Philosophy and Philosophical Labour as I mentioned before. Philosophical Labour could be said to be concerned about *Level 1* activities – putting conceptual tools into practice – whereas Genuine Philosophy, at least in part, happens at *Level 2* where one questions those very tools we employ or proposes new tools altogether. While the analogy is imperfect, it strikes me how prevalent this duality appears in philosophy.

Noë does not frame the matter *quite* in this way, however. Noë’s division between choreography and dance, while intricately linked seem to be nevertheless at odds in some ways. It seems as though for Noë that choreography is *not* dancing and dancing is *not* choreography. When I am confronted by this feature of Noë’s theorizing, I am tempted to respond as I always do when presented with an uncertain dichotomy: why not both? Wouldn’t the best choreography and the best dancing include both? Given some of Noë’s other commitments – particularly towards ‘function’ – I’m not sure that he can take this stance, whereas I can. Let me explore this notion with more detail.

While I agree with a lot of the ideas Noë puts forth – he does a good job of finding harmony in allegedly opposite sides of some debates – there is one particular feature of his work overall that I think is worth nitpicking over. I say nitpick, because it is based off a very basic and helpful, but nevertheless pedantic, remark that was made to me by a professor: philosophy

²⁶¹ Noë 2015., p.29.

doesn't *do* anything, a theory doesn't think or theorize or contemplate or engage; the *philosopher* does these things. I am not always fond of this general criticism because I think it sometimes distracts from the content: "Yes, fine, the *philosophy* doesn't *do* the thing I explained, but you understood me nevertheless, didn't you? The *philosopher* just does those things I described." It amounts to little more than a writing tip in pursuit of rigid accuracy, but who among us hasn't committed this minor blunder? I think in Noë's case, however, there is something to ponder about how he commits this minor blunder over and over again to the point where I think an error in reasoning occurs: he conflates art with the artist and philosophy with the philosopher.²⁶²

Normally, I would say this is no great error. However, it influences his position in a way that does not sit well with me. My discomfort does not occur at the moment where he says "The paintings work with ideas."²⁶³ Very uninterestingly, I would only correct him by saying "*painters* or *viewers* work with ideas through paintings" to which Noë would simply nod and say "of course." Where I think the issue arises is when he goes on to speak about art as a concept – as "a field of investigation"²⁶⁴ – and he begins to ascribe properties to art as an independent entity, that is to say independent of the artist. For example, consider this passage:

A work of art is a strange tool; it is an implement or instrument that has been denuded of its function. Art is the enemy of function, it is the perversion of technology. This is why architecture has a problematic standing among the arts; it is not an accident that great architects make houses with leaky roofs. And this is why, although much art concerns itself with love and erotic feeling, there is no pornographic art. Pornography has a function; it aims at something. Art, in contrast, is always subversion of function.²⁶⁵

I should state ahead of time that I am generally wary of the concept of "function" and how it is used, as I cannot see how a function can be *internal* to an object, act, or person. It seems to me, at least, that a function is related to intention; *what we say* about anything that has a "function." The broken brick piece that once sat at the back of my apartment building functioned as a doorstep, but there is nothing inherent to the brick that gives it that function – we (those who live in the building) do. This is related to what I was saying a moment ago: we should not conflate the concept with the individuals employing it. But, this is where Noë would casually nod (or roll his eyes) and agree. Yet, notice how he describes art as the enemy of function and how

²⁶² In hindsight, I could speculate that this is what the traditional epistemologist does with the skeptic and skepticism.

²⁶³ Noë 2015, p. 106.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p.111.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p.98.

architecture and pornography apparently have inherent functions. A casual nod (or rolling of the eyes) is insufficient to address this.

Now, there is a good reason why Noë sees art and function as being opposed. A way to look at “function” is to see it as a means of designating criteria, how we are organized, or how we use the word we are describing the function of. Insofar as art is meant to reorganize us, to bring our criteria into question, art can be seen as bringing *function* into question. In the case of pornography, for example, I would say that under most circumstances Noë is right: most pornography is *not* art. The vast majority of pornography is geared towards one purpose: sexual gratification. However, the idea that *no pornography whatsoever* can be considered art does not sit well with me, even though no specific example (or anecdote) springs to mind as a counter example (yet). Before I explain why this does not sit well with me, there is an obvious linguistic objection to what I have said. Some definitions of pornography explicitly mention how pornography is meant to stimulate erotic feelings *as opposed to* or *instead of* aesthetic or emotional feeling. So by definition then, Noë would be correct. However, remember too what art and philosophy are supposed to do: “one of art’s [the artist’s] tasks is to afford us just this sort of opportunity to catch ourselves in the act of encountering the world, and so to let us encounter ourselves in a way that we otherwise never can.”²⁶⁶ I contend then that a philosophical or artistic examination of pornography is perfectly plausible, and, in fact, is one of the many subjects or spaces where this kind of engagement makes sense.

Noë would be quick to object: *yes, but the philosophical or artistic work that one does or produces is itself not pornography*. With respect to writing a traditional philosophical treatise on pornography, I am inclined to agree, that would not be pornography. But a painting that was both pornographic and aesthetic seems perfectly plausible – *ah, but again, even if there is nudity it wouldn’t be pornography as such*. Why not? It’s commonly and comically noted in all forms of media, for example, that boys in the throes of puberty will gratify themselves to almost anything. As I said, function toys with the notion of intention: function seems to denote how we intend to use a thing or object. Therefore the “function” of sexual gratification can be present in *any* nude depiction if one’s imagination is open to it. Perhaps this is a gross simplification of “function” but my point still stands: pornography could be done (and has been done) in cinema and literature in such a way as to be considered art. In other words, why couldn’t we have both?

²⁶⁶ Noë 2015, p.80.

Wouldn't a piece that manages to capture both aesthetic and pornographic undertones be an artistic success? But here's the rub: the way I'm currently discussing these matters is in the same way Noë discussed them – as inherent to the concept or object. I am discussing “pornographic” undertones as if there is something inherent to pornography that *makes* it pornography. Certainly, something sexual in nature must be present for something to be considered pornographic, but I think there is a much more important factor that goes into whether something counts as pornography, or art, or philosophy: *us*.

Let me qualify: I am not placing pornography on the same category as art and philosophy, but they do share the feature of requiring human contexts in order to make sense of them – we are organized with respect to pornography, we have criteria, just like everything else. There is a reason we can distinguish a painting of a naked human body as being art from a pornographic image: we have come to a communal attunement about these things. As I have emphasized with other aspects of this dissertation, this attunement is not explicit, it is determined by what we do. But philosophy and art are supposed to bring this attunement into question, to the forefront of our minds. So I would contend that it *must* be possible for there to be pornographic art because art is supposed to bring our assumptions to light and force us to encounter ourselves. Otherwise, one would have to argue that pornography is somehow immune to artistic or philosophical engagement. Such a position, however, immediately signals to me that whoever supports such a claim likely has a fairly negative or crude perception of pornography. It is no secret that pornography has been vilified (in some cases, for good reason), but there's no reason to allow such an obvious bias to preclude even the possibility of artistic engagement.

But I digress, there is a more relevant point I would like to draw attention to: whether something should be considered art or philosophy has nothing, or little, to do with the content, but everything to do with the community, communities, or individuals that engage said content. Whether pornography, or architecture for that matter, should be considered art has much less to do with what is happening on the screen, or with a structure, than it does with the *stance* one takes towards a piece. Noë even states “Art is, really, *itself*, a critical practice.”²⁶⁷ I would say one takes up an artistic *stance* when one employs art as a critical practice. This could be equally seen as a *disposition*. What we call it is secondary to the notion that it is a matter of how we relate to the content more so than the content itself. Now a real counter example to Noë comes to

²⁶⁷ Noë 2015, p.112.

my mind: Dan Savage's *Hump Film Festival*.²⁶⁸ I was invited to watch a compilation film of home-made pornography for this festival with a partner and some of their friends (virtually). No two segments were the same and they varied in seriousness and execution in so many ways that one could perfectly reasonably ask whether or not one was really watching pornography at all at points. I would like to highlight one of the comedic segments as an example, since Noë already includes humour in the sphere of art (note too how satirical pornography is very common).

There was a trend in amateur gay male pornography of going to Los Vegas with a group of other men to have an orgy, meanwhile using their phone cameras (and, importantly, selfie sticks!) to capture themselves in the act. In this segment a group of gay men are heading to their hotel room where they intend to have their orgy while the camera shifts from character to character to show the perspective from their own phone recording. What ensued was a comically narcissistic spectacle. One of the characters clearly indicates that he had not been invited, but noticed the group and understood what it was they were there to do and simply tagged along without protest. I assume there were actual shots of sex acts happening, but the scene was so absurd, I can only recall the over the top moans and insistence on "getting the right angle" reminiscent of people who are insistent on getting the perfect selfie. In any case, the actual content, again, is fairly inconsequential. It is a commentary on some male-centric pornography. Some folks would refer to it as "meta." There is an organizational practice amongst gay men of filming oneself having sex in an orgy, but these men made a short film as a critical (and comical) engagement of this organized activity. If this doesn't count as a form of reorganization, then I must have misunderstood the entire point.

Given that this was presented at a film festival – a setting one would assume is typically an artistic one – yet it was nevertheless very explicitly still pornography, it seems to me that something can be both pornography and art. What I contend is important is whether we take an "artistic stance" towards the material, much like whether or not we take a "pornographic stance" or a "philosophical stance" towards any particular piece of work. To circle back to my starting point, I bring all this up not only to highlight how the stances we take are important (similar to how our acknowledgment of the other is more important than the epistemological content), but to show how Noë's simpler conception is both helpful in some ways and unhelpful in others when

²⁶⁸ I omit the year because they ask at the beginning of the screening not to take pictures or recordings of the content so as to protect the privacy of the participants/contestants. While they mentioned nothing about writing about it, I do feel a bit of a moral quandary in sharing some of the material for this reason.

contrasted with Cavell's. While Cavell may be seen as philosophically dense, he has good reason to be subtle and in some way in being "less clear" he is actually accounting for the deeper complexities of these issues. Likewise, I am *attempting* to do the same, while at the same time trying to strike a balance between acknowledging complexity and simplifying in order to make things "clearer" and more accessible.

2.1.2 Shakespeare

Before jumping into cinema in the next section, I would like to take a moment to think about the relationship between art and philosophy a bit more. So far in this second half of my dissertation I have connected Cavell's idea of criteria and the truth of skepticism to Noë's organization and reorganization. While conceptually this helps as an easy analogy to see how both art and philosophy are concerned with the same kinds of questions, this does not explicitly address their relation to one another. Therefore, let us examine Cavell's thoughts on Shakespeare.

While the connection between Cavell's skepticism and Shakespeare may not be apparent upon reading my exposition of his views, Cavell makes the connection explicit when he says "I [see] my text on Shakespeare's text as an enactment of (illustration of? evidence for? Instance of? Model for? Image of? Allegory of?) the theoretical movement of *The Claim of Reason* at large."²⁶⁹ Examining what Cavell has to say about Shakespeare can therefore serve a double purpose: first, to see the implications of his work, but also to reflect back and glean insights into his position. Not only does he take the connection very seriously, but he believes that the comparison draws attention to the question of the primacy between philosophy and literature:

The misunderstanding of my attitude that most concerned me was to take my project as the application of some philosophically independent problematic of skepticism to a fragmentary parade of Shakespearean texts, impressing those texts into the service of illustrating philosophical conclusions known in advance. Sympathy with my project depends, on the contrary, on unsettling the matter of priority (as between philosophy and literature, say) implied in the concepts of illustration and application. The plays I take up form respective interpretations of skepticism as they yield to interpretation by skepticism.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Updated Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.12.

²⁷⁰ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.1.

There is no primary discipline. While some might be inclined to think that one must engage philosophy first and others may think that literature comes first, Cavell contends that they are both related and independent of one another. Furthermore, while some might criticize or discount the connection between skepticism and Shakespeare as an attempt to impose philosophical discussion onto a text, Cavell insists that they are inseparable:

I in effect insist that Shakespeare could not be who he is – the burden of the name of the greatest writer in the language, the creature of the greatest ordering of English – unless his writing is engaging the depth of the philosophical preoccupations of his culture.²⁷¹

In other words, Shakespeare is no different from any of the traditional philosophers. He responds to the queries and problems of his time – his culture. In the simplest of terms, this is Cavell's view of philosophy in general: philosophy as response. This becomes evident when you see his treatment of Shakespeare in contrast to his original project of understanding traditional epistemology:

My major claim about the philosopher's originating question – e.g., “(How) do (can) we know anything about the world?” ... – is that it (in one or another of its versions) is a *response* to, or expression of, a real experience which takes hold of human beings ... as I might put it, a *response* which expresses a natural experience of a creature complicated or burdened enough to possess language at all.²⁷² [Emphases mine.]

Skepticism is a human problem. It is a human experience. Insofar as skepticism is a human problem, Shakespeare is just as concerned about it as Descartes or Hume or any other philosopher.

These are big statements, but if Shakespeare was *not* writing about subjects that were a reflection of his time, what *could* he have written about? I do not intend for this rhetorical question to be dismissive, but my aim at this stage is to determine how Cavell's philosophy can be employed – examine whether it can really be brought to task. As a brief example, let us consider some elements from *The Winter's Tale*. Cavell analyzes the play in his paper “Recounting Gains, Showing Losses: Reading *The Winter's Tale*.”²⁷³ The play early on predominantly revolves around King Leontes who is overcome by jealousy and fear of being a cuckold. He becomes so engrossed in his jealous narrative that he orders his best friend murdered, dismisses the pleas of his lords, ignores the evidence of the gods (Oracles of Delphi), and incarcerates his wife, which all leads to the death of both his wife and son. On Mulhall's

²⁷¹ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.2.

²⁷² *The Claim of Reason*, p.140.

²⁷³ Published in both *In Quest of the Ordinary* 76-101 and *Disowning Knowledge* 193-221.

interpretation of Cavell, Leontes' jealousy is his skepticism – he has contrived a tale about his wife that is ultimately groundless. He is overwhelmed by his skepticism, and his only path to redemption is to overcome it. An interpretation of this sort, however, is too simplistic and the fact that tragedy – as I built up in Part One – is not about something being false (the jealousy having no grounds). Instead, I would suggest that the kind of skepticism that can be found in *The Winter's Tale* has to do with Leontes' role as king (note: this is explicitly my claim, not Cavell's). As both prosecutor and judge, Leontes holds all the power as to what makes something “true.” The criterion for truth, within the context of the play, is determined by Leontes, and so what he would need to overcome is *himself* not some external criteria in order to attain redemption:

If *The Winter's Tale* is understandable as a study of skepticism – that is, as a response to what skepticism is a response to – then its second half must be understandable as a study of its search for recovery ... That skepticism demands – Cartesian skepticism, Humian skepticism, the thing Kant calls a scandal to philosophy – efforts at recovery is internal to it: It is inherently unstable; no one simply wants to be (this kind of) skeptic. Skepticism's own sense of what recovery would consist in dictates efforts to refute it; yet refutation can only extend it ... True recovery lies in reconceiving it, in finding skepticism's source (its origin, say, if you can say it without supposing its origin is past).²⁷⁴

There are two major things to note from this passage other than the matter of recovery, which I return to in my final chapter. First, Shakespearean plays are seeped with skepticism: “My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare.”²⁷⁵ King Leontes embodies the skepticism of traditional philosophy, of Descartes, Hume, and Kant (setting aside that Rorty separates Kant), and *nobody wants to be this kind of skeptic*. This is the type of skepticism that we must recover from. But this, as I have said in many different ways, is not a refutation of skepticism – we cannot reject skepticism outright because this merely falls prey to the trap of traditional epistemology (skepticism). Mulhall's recovery amounts to an attempt at refuting skepticism. Instead, “[t]he issue posed is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world.”²⁷⁶

Note that Cavell says a “groundless world” and not that Leontes's skepticism is groundless. As I said, the truth of skepticism is not a matter of living with skepticism that is

²⁷⁴ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.198.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.3.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

groundless, but acknowledging the groundlessness in which we operate. Since Leontes is the king and metaphorical and literal source of ‘truth’ – the one who sets the rule or standard – he has no means by which to appeal to a higher authority to determine any standard (and rejects his only opportunity to do so when informed by the Oracles of Delphi). He must live in a groundless world and overcome (not refute) his skepticism in order to recover. Drawing from what I said in the previous section, one could say that Shakespeare is drawing our attention to the idea that Leontes’s jealousy has little to do with whether or not Hermoine has actually committed any kind of infidelity but instead everything to do with the *stance* Leontes takes towards her.

While there is much more that could be said, I leave the matter of Shakespeare’s relation to skepticism to rest for the time being. Cavell spends a great deal of time arguing for the connection between Shakespeare and skepticism in many of his books and even if he was somehow factually wrong (that Shakespeare didn’t have a philosophical inclination in his writing whatsoever) it seems to me that we can nevertheless take the philosophical stance towards his work and achieve the same ends. However, to claim that Shakespeare is void of philosophical content seems disingenuous at best. There are good reasons for why he is considered one of the greatest authors of the English language. This is so far but a mere glimpse into how Cavell applies his conception of the truth of skepticism outside of philosophy but I should re-emphasize that this “application” should not be taken as “primary.” As such, if I so chose (and I felt comfortable in my required levels of expertise) I could just as easily change the order of Parts One and Two of this dissertation (with heavy editing) and the content would stay the same.

Shakespeare’s plays (such as *The Winter’s Tale*) give examples of characters that live their skepticism and thus in turn allows us to grapple with the truth of skepticism in ways that traditional philosophy on its own might not be capable of. In fact, just as Shakespearean texts engage skepticism whether they are performed or simply read, literature in general can have the same effect. Consider the following lengthy passage:

That I am pushed to pieces of literature to discover the problem of the other, that I find the problem largely undiscovered for philosophy, for philosophy as it commands English and hence was carried unawares into my mind, is a fact I might think of this way. The problem of the other was always known, or surmised, not to be a problem of knowledge, or rather to result not from a disappointment over a failure of knowledge but from a disappointment over its success (even, from a horror of its success). When most recently we retraced the matter of our disappointment with criteria (which we might as well stick to calling our disappointment with human knowledge) we found what I called two old possibilities in view, that I fail to manifest our criteria accurately or that the other fails to read them

accurately. Now if the problem of the other is a problem of the victory of knowledge, then it is equally a problem of this victory over myself, determining the nature of my self-consciousness. Then two things happen: I try avoiding further knowledge for myself by taking the problem of other minds solely from the passive side; and I thus find a new possibility for disappointment with knowledge, that my self-consciousness comes between my consciousness and my expression of it, so that my expressions are embarrassed, are no longer natural. But if my expressions are no longer natural they are no longer the foundation of certainty about my (inner) life, no longer criterial. And if no longer natural then they are artificial, merely conventional. I theatricalize myself. The problem of the other now, the problem in being known, is not that the other does not see me as human, but rather that the other (only) sees me, and always as a human something or other. So, consequently, do I take myself. My existence is proven, but at the price of not knowing what it is in itself. And the existence of others is proven, but at the price of their being spectators of my existence, not participants in it.²⁷⁷

Some may claim that the problem of the other is not a problem of knowledge per se, but Cavell contends that the problem of the other reintroduces our disappointment with knowledge.

Assuming we are satisfied with knowledge the problem of the other is a matter of either my own failure to employ criteria correctly or the failure of the other to acknowledge me (avoidance) or be acknowledged by me. If I become self-conscious and attempt to make my expressions accessible to others then I am therefore no longer expressing myself “naturally.” Consequently, if my expressions are not natural, they must be conventional and no longer reliant on independent criteria. The other only sees the performance I put on and therefore can never know the ‘true’ me. The other becomes a spectator and never a member of the experience. More disturbingly, in so doing, this is also how I view myself: I cannot know myself for who I truly am. If you are never disappointed with human knowledge, then you must live free from existential angst.

2.1.3 Comedy of Remarriage

When I set my mind to connecting my research on sexual jealousy with my research on Cavell and the truth of skepticism, I thought the perfect entry into these discussions would revolve around *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*. Given that Cavell discusses both of these texts at length, it offers a natural segue into discussing sexual jealousy and its relation to skepticism. While *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* still plays a role in my discussion, I decided to take an

²⁷⁷ *The Claim of Reason*, p.476-7.

altered approach by engaging what Cavell calls the comedies of remarriage. I have no particular interest in defending whether or not this is a “real” genre, but I do think it will be helpful in discussing sexual jealousy when we consider how art can, and perhaps *should* be seen “to be participating in such a conversation with their culture.”²⁷⁸ That is to say art, such as film, is always in dialogue with its culture. Insofar as sexual jealousy is a part of our culture, it seems to me that it would be prudent to take a look at some of these conversations in order to better understand what is at stake when it comes to jealousy.

Art and literature are important for Cavell when tackling the problem of the other. He puts the matter directly in a later passage (note that “you” in this passage refers to Cavell as he writes in the voice of the interlocutor):

For you the claim that the Outsider’s knowledge of us is the study of literature is as safe as it is obscure. Since you read the problem of the other as the problem of acknowledging one’s relation to the other; and since you claim that the history of the failures of these relations is a history of skepticism and of attempts to overcome skepticism; then since fiction can safely be said to be “about” human relationships, sure enough fiction is about acknowledgment and its limitations; and then if one accepts your characterization of tragedy as the failure of the best case of acknowledgment, one has already accepted it as your characterization of skepticism.²⁷⁹

He goes on to accuse himself that these characterizations are just a matter of the avoidance of love, but I do not want to get into that here. Instead, I find this passage gives a good synopsis of Cavell’s desire to connect philosophy (or skepticism in particular) with literature (and art generally). The problem of the other is a matter of acknowledgement, and consequently this offers perspective over the history of skepticism and humanity’s attempts to overcome it. Since fiction and literature is about human relations in the form of acknowledgement, then of course tragedy, as the best case for failure of acknowledgement, found in fictional works is an access point for engaging skepticism. Traditional philosophy does not (or rarely) attempt(s) to grapple with tragedy, and is consequently limited in its ability to relate to skepticism.

This is where the idea of the comedy of remarriage comes in. For Cavell, comedies of remarriage are just one example of the ways in which art, or specifically popular cinema in this case, can offer us a glimpse into the consciousness of a culture. As he puts it, “the films in question in [*Pursuits of Happiness*] ... are primary data for what I would like to call the inner

²⁷⁸ *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell 1981, p. 151.

²⁷⁹ *The Claim of Reason*, p.477.

agenda of a culture.”²⁸⁰ This agenda or consciousness of a culture is something I would like to work out throughout the remainder of this section with the later goal of expanding on these ideas to take into account how we come to *live* our skepticism in various ways, specifically through sexual jealousy. What I aim to show is that the consciousness or agenda of our culture is often aware of the ways in which we live our skepticism, although we rarely call it skepticism explicitly.

To understand what is at stake in comedies of remarriage, and given that all the films Cavell identifies as a part of the genre are old (by today’s standards), it is important to understand some of the historical considerations. First, the films he considers are made between 1934-1949 in midst of the advent of sound, which prompts Cavell to consider what it is films have to *say* but that could not be said until this technological advancement came to be. In other words, the advent of sound in film clearly re-organized the way people approached films and this is an important feature to note. More importantly, Cavell’s aim is also to show that “the genre of remarriage is an inheritor of the preoccupations and discoveries of Shakespearean romantic comedy.”²⁸¹ This may seem like a large claim, but it is *an* inheritor, not *the* inheritor, which is to say there are others who can take up this mantle, but comedies of remarriage happen to be one of them. I will not defend this claim further and instead take it as a given (some later examples will highlight this connection).

One claim Cavell is guarding against is the idea that films from the thirties are more than just economic commentaries on the Depression. Class disputes and matters of economy are certainly present in these films (most characters in *The Philadelphia Story* are morbidly rich), but economics is not the sole concern of a culture. Another claim Cavell is guarding against is a sentiment that he had encountered many times: that, generally speaking, after the right to vote was earned for women in the United States in 1920 “feminist thought and feminist practice somehow scattered themselves or lost their specific identity”²⁸² and that ultimately feminism didn’t begin its new phase in history until the sixties. To the contrary, Cavell contends that the very existence of comedies of remarriage is evidence that such a picture cannot be right.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* p.17.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p.1.

²⁸² Ibid., p.16.

²⁸³ Ibid., p.16-7.

A natural question to ask might be: *how could it be that comedy took up the reins of feminism?* Cavell is quick to point out that his position is not so much about feminism “about which my knowledge has barely begun”²⁸⁴ and instead about film. But also “beyond that I meant it to express the idea of something shared, call it a shared fantasy, apart from which the films under investigation here could not have reached their public position.”²⁸⁵ In other words, Cavell is concerned with determining the consciousness, agenda, or fantasy of a culture as I’ve already said. This concern over the culture is both a feminist concern and generally a human concern. However, when it comes to comedies of remarriage, the focus on the woman is very important:

The genre projected, on my interpretation, can be said to require the creation of a new woman, or the new creation of a woman, something I describe as a new creation of the human ... this phase of the history of cinema is bound up with a phase in the history of the consciousness of women. You might even say that these phases of these histories are part of the creation of one another.²⁸⁶

What is this creation of the “new woman” or the “consciousness of women”? First, it needs to be understood that all of these films were made while the Production Code (the “Hays Code”) was in full swing, which effectively banned explicit reference to or justification of adultery and ‘unlawful’ sex. By creating a film of *remarriage*, filmmakers were able to evade the code and set up love triangles and other dramatic romantic configurations for our viewing pleasure (what is it that we find so enticing about seeing someone *choose* a lover?). The conflict is therefore about getting a married couple *back* together. So if a little kissing is shared with other love interests in the meantime it’s not “unlawful” action and it’s not “justified” insofar as the woman picks the ex-husband in the end. Or at least, that is what I take the rationale to be.

Now the “consciousness of women” is “studiously ambiguous”, says Cavell, because it has a double meaning:

the consciousness held with respect to women, whether by women or by men; and the consciousness held by women, with respect to themselves and everything else. By the consciousness of women as expressed in the genre of remarriage I mean something of both sides – I mean development in the consciousness women hold of themselves as this is developed in its relation to the consciousness men hold of them. Whether in a given historical period and class and place this consciousness is fundamentally imposed upon women or whether the relation is one in which women are fundamentally equal partners in

²⁸⁴ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p.17.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p.16.

the development is something I assume it is the burden of history to show (the burden of its working and the burden of the students of its working).²⁸⁷

A simpler way to put it might be to say that the film is concerned with how we (men, women, and other genders) perceive women as well as how women perceive themselves. We might say it is questioning how we are organized with respect to women. Altogether, Cavell acknowledges the challenge that we face when we approach such a question: women have been seen and treated poorly throughout history (to put it lightly). The comedies of remarriage are a dialogue about this treatment in various ways. Cavell claims that

[Comedies of remarriage] may be understood as parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between woman and man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel put it) or demand for acknowledgement (as I have put it) is a struggle for mutual freedom, especially of the views each holds of the other.

The heterosexual ideal being presented here is effectively to seek acknowledgement between women and men or as he puts it in another way it is the “battle between men and women for recognition of one another.”²⁸⁸

Amidst this battle for recognition, it should be noted that for Cavell remarriage itself is not the most integral part of these comedies because if remarriage occurs without acknowledgement it is liable to produce a tragedy (or perhaps just a *bad* comedy). He considers the film *Private Lives* (1931), for example, which is about two people who have divorced, married new spouses, and found themselves at the same hotel during their respective honeymoons. It is considered a comedy but unfortunately the exchanges that take place between the divorced couple “get nowhere; their making up never add up to forgiving one another.”²⁸⁹ In other words, two people could remarry without achieving acknowledgement. What then does a proper comedy of remarriage look like; what does acknowledgement look like?

In *The Philadelphia Story*, the first film I consider, we find three major stars in Cary Grant as C.K. Dexter Haven (Dexter), Katherine Hepburn as Tracy Lord (Tracy), and James Stewart as Mike Connor (Mike). Interestingly, Hepburn had a great deal of control over the film by virtue of her ownership of the film rights to the original Broadway play by Philip Barry. The story of the film is centered on the upcoming marriage of Tracy which is complicated by the arrival of her ex-husband Dexter and a pair of (in cogito) reporters who are sent to cover the wedding of the

²⁸⁷ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* p.17.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p.18.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p.18.

otherwise secretive Lord family. Tracy isn't fooled by the reporters' secrecy and learns that they work for *Spy* magazine whose publisher, Sidney Kidd, holds blackmail over the Lord family: namely, that Tracy's father has been off gallivanting with a young dancer. Tracy tolerates the presence of her ex and the reporters in order to protect her family's reputation.

The first thing worth mentioning is the fact that nearly all the characters are quite concerned about their privacy. Tracy in particular has allegedly always gone to great lengths to keep reporters out of her private affairs, which is demonstrated when she 'accidentally' breaks the camera of the reporter, Liz, very early in the film. Keep this in mind as I raise a number of other features.

It is always hard to properly judge a character given the naturally small sample size we get when watching a film. Often, we learn about a character based on what others say in a film more than what we actually see. This is particularly important when discussing a relationship from the past. The only scene we see between Tracy and Dexter as a married couple is the very first scene of the film where we witness Tracy taunting Dexter (without words) by dropping (throwing) and then snapping his golf clubs in two, followed by Dexter grabbing Tracy's face and pushing her to the floor in a comic almost *Three Stooges* style of violence. While the action itself is particularly absurd, violence is still violence. While Tracy assaults Dexter's belongings, Dexter *assaults* Tracy. The scene itself is only discussed briefly a little later (two years later in the film) when Dinah (Tracy's young sister, played by Virginia Weidler) wants to follow the now ex-couple during an argument and wonders out loud whether he will "sock" her again. Not a particularly romantic start.

Dinah herself is an interesting character in her own right. Tracy has "renamed" her sister, perhaps in spite of their father, from Diana to Dinah, which the young girl happily accepts. Furthermore, she's actually the first character we see after the fight between Tracy and Dexter. I noted: in trousers. Perhaps it was because the film is black and white that my eyes were drawn to this fact, and also the fact that for the remainder of the film – once the family is within the public eye – she is always seen in a dress thereafter. Especially after her dramatic appearance to the reporters, at which point they are not supposed to know they are reporters. Perhaps I am "reading in" a little too much, but my initial impression of this decision to show Dinah in pants is to show something to the effect that the younger women in this family are strong – they wear their own

pants – but they are nevertheless bound by the duty of appearances. I might say they attempt to keep their strength hidden.

There is one detail I have been deliberately putting off: the groom to be. George Kittredge (played by John Howard) is “new money” and a “man of the people.” There are hints that he might be interested in political office, but otherwise poor George is mostly a secondary character despite his integral role. Poor George – as I feel compelled to call him – is even omitted from most of the film’s posters. A full image (see images below) shows Tracy, Dexter, Mike (who I discuss shortly), and George on the end. Tracy is lying on her back while the three men prop their elbows on her and rest their chins in their hands confounded. George, however, uses his right hand, whereas the other two men use their left. This shows both Dexter and Mike having their right sides exposed to Tracy, whereas George is facing away. In other posters and images of the film, George is just simply missing altogether. From the very outset George is cast as an unwanted figure.



Figure 2 - "The Philadelphia Story" posters.

As I touched on earlier, one temptation is to see George as a symbol of class divide. The Lord’s family is old money, whereas George is a “commoner.” One simple interpretation would be to say that George cannot come to acknowledge Tracy because he is of an entirely different

social class. For example, early on Tracy mocks George for his new riding pants and dirties them up for him, he then tries to mount a horse on his own, but struggles, and finally little Dinah smugly points out that George has been misnaming the horse he had been trying to mount all the while. Dinah, you see, is not overly fond of George and much prefers Dexter for some reason. George is not the only working man, however. Mike is one of the reporters sent to the Lord residence, although he isn't too happy to be fraternizing with the rich who he's come to view with disdain. The juxtaposition between George and Mike is obvious, we might even say that what was attractive about George can be found in Mike, as a working man, but that George is attempting to be something he's not (or at least was not always): rich and powerful. George is depicted as unsophisticated at the beginning, but then later he's too posh and focused on appearances. It is the community he joined that taught him these things. The concern around appearances is something that literally everyone is guilty of in the film, even (or especially) Dinah, except for perhaps Liz or less significant characters.

Liz has to be the most tragic character in the film. She remains unacknowledged by the one person she wants to be acknowledged by (Mike). Dexter does acknowledge her in a way by asking her why she hasn't gotten together with Mike. Liz's answer is essentially that she's waiting – but waiting for what? Tracy may also be said to acknowledge Liz in her decision to refuse Mike's proposal of marriage at the end of the film. However, this acknowledgement by Tracy is effectively only an acknowledgement of the need for acknowledgement. One woman in this film, at the very least, remains unacknowledged.

Now the important question within the context of the film is whether Tracy is actually acknowledged. I would contend that the majority of the film consists of avoidance in the guise of guidance. Insults are hurled Tracy's way by nearly every man in the film: Dexter refers to her as "chaste" and "virginal" which Tracy identifies as "foul words" surrounding the notion that she is a "goddess"; Mike's disdain for the rich applies to Tracy, at least initially; and Tracy's father, the worst of all, gives her a scathing review by calling her a "prig", a "perennial spinster," a "goddess," and accuses her of acting like a "jealous woman." Her father goes so far as to refer to her as being made of bronze and lacking an understanding heart. Later, Tracy accuses Mike of a similar coldness and lack of understanding for his obvious bias against the rich. Because they see the same coldness in one another, it serves as a vehicle for their acknowledgement of one another. Kindred spirits. Eventually, Mike acknowledges her explicitly by referring to her as

golden, as a queen, and most importantly, of being of flesh and blood. He sees a blinding radiance in her, but also sees her, most importantly, as human.

George is also guilty of avoidance, but in a different way from the antagonistic stance of the other men in the film. George never insults Tracy except for arguably at the end of the film, which I discuss momentarily. George avoids Tracy by idolizing her, by seeing her as something other than human. He puts it explicitly as wanting to put her up in an ivory tower and treat her as a goddess or object of reverence, which Cavell identifies as an “especially chilling response exactly because it understands, by denying.”²⁹⁰ So in effect, George has been attempting to provide the life that the other men in the film identified as what Tracy wants. However, hearing the words out loud we see the disappointment Tracy experiences by being transformed into a mere idol.

Being in an ivory tower would certainly provide a great deal of privacy. I think part of the reason I am compelled to refer to him as “poor George” has to do with the fact that he tries to give Tracy exactly what she wants – or at least what he thought she wanted, and possibly what *she* thought she wanted too. It’s not George’s fault he wasn’t born into money or that he has to learn how to present himself and maintain “reputation.” However, it is at the point where privacy is abandoned that Tracy is able to be true to herself as she reads George’s letter out loud for the main characters to hear. The letter was supposed to be private. You see, the night before the wedding Tracy had quite a lot to drink and spent *quite* a bit of time with Mike. In fact, Tracy and Mike even share a few kisses. At the end of the evening (in the very early morning), the three men George, Dexter, and Mike all confront one another as Mike holds Tracy half asleep in his arms. George leaves in anger. Dexter plays the middle man. And Mike is blissfully drunk.

The next morning is when Tracy receives the letter and is generally oblivious to the night before. The unspoken question that no one dares ask directly is fairly simple: did Tracy and Mike have an affair on the night before her wedding day? As Tracy puts the pieces of the puzzle together, she becomes afraid as she does not *know* if she has committed the aforementioned sin or not. The question of *knowledge* is even made explicit (if one wanted to contend this has nothing to do with skepticism): Dinah witnessed the three men confronting one another and took note of the relationship between Tracy and Mike that had formed. When Dinah brings this up to Dexter he tells her that it is often difficult to tell what’s real after one has gone to sleep. Tracy’s

²⁹⁰ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* p.154.

task that morning is to decipher what is real from what was merely a dream (or fantasy). Cavell suggests that we “follow Dexter’s advice to Dinah the final morning and to understand what I have seen as a dream – not, as I take his advice, in order to doubt the reality of what I have seen (...) but in order to look in a certain way for the meaning of those events ... of the whole story.”²⁹¹

Yet, it is not only about how Tracy perceives the events, but also those around her. Cavell puts it this way: “Each of the characters present in fact interprets the [event], puts his or her imagination to work on it.”²⁹² George’s letter is a polite letter stating that if she did cheat on him that their relationship is over. He defends his jealousy by saying “It didn’t take much imagination.” But in saying that, he’s already admitted the deeper problem: imagination. Cavell points out that Dinah’s interpretation is likely the same as George’s, whereas Mike’s obviously differs since he was actively involved. Dexter on the other hand offers something else entirely: “It is a question whether Dexter has a competing interpretation exactly; it seems essential, rather, that his guiding interest is in waiting to see what Tracy’s interpretation will be, which comes to seeing how and whether she will remember the event.”²⁹³ Given George’s cultural context and personal experience, the conclusion he came to, that he’s been cuckolded, was perfectly natural, but nevertheless incorrect. It wasn’t a fault in reason that led him to his conclusion that his fiancée had cheated on him; you could say it was forced upon him. This makes Tracy’s response to George’s comment “It didn’t take much imagination” all the more revealing when she responds “No. Just an imagination of a particular kind.”

Reading the private letter out loud was very symbolic on Tracy’s part because she is, in a way, abandoning the part of herself that feared exposure. She is beginning to live openly and authentically, without secrets. It is consequently only shocking to poor George when he recognizes that she has *not* cheated on him and while he is consequently ready to continue with the marriage she rejects him and decides they should not be married. Now I could take the time to decipher how Dexter manages to acknowledge Tracy in ways George and Mike failed to, but I am not entirely convinced that he *does*. Or at least that he acknowledges her in such a way that I can relate to. You see, Dexter takes up the position of the philosopher, the examined life, in

²⁹¹ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p.153.

²⁹² Ibid., p.141.

²⁹³ Ibid.

juxtaposition to George's unexamined life.²⁹⁴ But I think there's a question whether "realistically" we can learn anything from Dexter's behaviour other than a few wise, philosophical, remarks. That is to say, on a practical level, what does Dexter teach us? It seems to me he takes the role of the philosopher: acknowledging that acknowledgement is the first step. But whether he actually *acknowledges* Tracy directly is unclear to me. Especially when considered next to Mike who does so explicitly. For now, I will leave the question of acknowledgement alone and instead finish with George's avoidance before moving on to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

The issue surrounding George's jealousy can be summarized as follows. Dexter reframes (reorganizes) the issue as a matter of belief instead of as a matter of fact: George chooses to believe that Tracy has cheated on him. As I said, there is a very real question as to whether or not Tracy and Mike had more than just a couple kisses (because for some reason kissing is okay). At the end of the day, George did not witness anything that "proved" the pair had an affair, but he did have *reasons* for making this judgement. What matters is that George took up the stance of the weak skeptic, of the jealous man. Dexter shows that there was an entirely different option: to wait (reminiscent of the ancient skeptic suspending judgement) and see what Tracy has to say. This finally leads to the remarriage of Tracy and Dexter where she says "I feel like a human." She might as well have said "I feel acknowledged."

2.1.4 The New Comedy of Remarriage

"Too many guys think that I'm a concept or I complete them or I'm going to make them alive. I'm just a fucked up girl who's looking for her own peace of mind. Don't assign me yours." – Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind stands out to me as an excellent model for a modern version of a comedy of remarriage. No literal marriage is involved, but as our society changes and deemphasizes the importance of marriage itself, this minor technicality seems equally less important. Yet, while there was no literal marriage, there is still a symbolic marriage that takes place early on in the relationship between the main characters Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) and Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet): "I'm going to marry you someday," she says. A little

²⁹⁴ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p.150.

later after Joel has just returned home after (somewhat cowardly) leaving Clementine's apartment he calls her immediately. She asks if he missed her, to which he responds "Oddly enough, I do," and she replies gleefully "You said 'I do'! I guess that means we're married." I'm not entirely sure what the point of this symbolic marriage is meant to play. I would be curious if this scene was specifically added so as to make the film qualify as a comedy of remarriage or if perhaps this scene merely accidentally serves this purpose. At the very least, this signals the intensity and sporadic behaviour of Clementine as a character.

Whereas I deliberately avoided this matter with respect to *The Philadelphia Story*, a difficult question should be asked from the outset: what does acknowledgement entail in a romantic relationship? With Tracy and Dexter I am hesitant to claim that Dexter properly acknowledges Tracy, but this is from my own perspective. Ultimately, it must be Tracy who decides. Dexter succeeds at being the philosopher by acknowledging acknowledgement, perhaps in many cases that is enough (or perhaps just the hardest step). Joel and Clementine, however, are not philosophers. We might be tempted to think we could identify what it means to be adequately acknowledged, but trying to rigidly define acknowledgement would rob it of its flexibility and purpose. That is to say, what acknowledgement entails for one person may not be adequate in another. So when I consider whether any particular case satisfies someone's need for acknowledgement, the only person who can confirm this is the person being acknowledged. What I want to develop here is to see how we must also take a stance of *accepting* acknowledgement, in the same way we can take a philosophical stance or aesthetic stance. The intricacies and difficulties of this stance will be engaged by examining how they play out in the relationship between Clementine and Joel.

Before I begin to dissect the relationship between these two characters, the plot of the film poses a problem for Cavell's treatment of skepticism and tragedy: "I would like to assert my sense that science fiction cannot house tragedy because in it human limitations can from the beginning be by-passed."²⁹⁵ While *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a romantic drama or comedy of sorts and I have identified it specifically as a comedy of remarriage, the fact of the matter is that it also contains science fiction. One of the main premises of the film is that Clementine has undergone a procedure to remove Joel from her memory. Most of the film consists of Joel undergoing the same procedure. The not-so-linear nature of the film intentionally

²⁹⁵ *The Claim of Reason*, p. 457.

forces the viewer to decipher the order of events while still being fully engrossed in any given moment as we determine what is past, present, or memory. Now, when Cavell claims that science fiction cannot house tragedy, I think it would be more accurate to say that science fiction cannot *itself* house tragedy. I say this because the example Cavell uses to elaborate this claim has to do with brains in a vat. The idea is fairly basic: merely invoking the example of brains in a vat is insufficient for producing skepticism. Similarly, the premise that one could have their memories ‘removed’ is not itself sufficient for producing skepticism and consequently tragedy.

If Cavell means that every film of science fiction can never house tragedy or skepticism, I would have to wholeheartedly disagree. It might be unreasonable to assume that this could be his position though. Just before this assertion he makes another claim:

I have more than once said or implied that the problem of the other was no less a literary than a philosophical problem. One task of this problem is to determine the spirit in which such a story as, for example, that of the craftsman in the garden is told, or that of an Evil Genius who continuously deceives me. In what spirit must these possibilities be told in order that they challenge my everyday beliefs, my natural orientation?²⁹⁶

What is the stance one must take in telling these stories that will provoke a natural reaction from me? How does the telling of a story impact whether skepticism is invoked? Cavell identifies this as projective imagination²⁹⁷, but instead of returning to that idea I would like to propose an alternative: suspension of disbelief.

I suggest suspension of disbelief as concept to better understand our relation to criteria, skepticism, tragedy, and Cavell’s treatment of science fiction. Ordinarily, in storytelling the concept refers to how we intentionally ignore critical reflection on specific plot points for the sake of enjoyment. For example, when we imagine brains in a vat, many westerners will think of *The Matrix* (1999). In order to enjoy the film one does not question how the machines could be so powerful, how they could develop the Matrix, or other technical concerns – we willingly suspend disbelief (deliberately non-skeptical, even). Someone *could* grow concerned that they might also reside in a machine-built simulation, but for someone to *truly* believe such a thing would likely signal something different: insecurities, neurological damage, trauma, gaslighting, or something else entirely. The fact of the matter is that for many of us, watching the film *The Matrix* will not produce skepticism in and of itself. Instead,

²⁹⁶ *The Claim of Reason*, p. 456.

²⁹⁷ I should note that this is an important and complex concept that Cavell employs that would require its own tangent to explain. What I’m proposing is a more common concept in order to convey the same ideas.

we would need to articulate the difference between what we might call a thought experiment and what we might call a piece of science fiction. In the latter case we may work out the consequences of a hypothesis about a fictional world, one which we do not identify as ours; in the former case the counter-factual nature of fiction takes place within a world we do identify as ours.²⁹⁸

When we watch science fiction we wilfully suspend disbelief over specific instances. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* we suspend disbelief when it comes to the technological explanations. In the film we can see old phones and *cassettes* even play a small role in the plot, yet somehow in this world they have developed a relatively safe (as far as we know) procedure to remove memories. There is a somewhat comedic moment where Joel asks Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson) whether the procedure will cause any brain damage, to which Howard points out that technically speaking what they're doing *is* brain damage, but that the side-effects are minimal (they never specify what consequences there may be, or if they even know). So you see if we “work out the consequences” of the science fictional elements of the film, there is no skepticism being produced. There is no tragedy.

My suggestion is the following: at any point where suspension of disbelief must be invoked, skepticism can no longer be evoked. This is particularly fascinating when we consider the fact that, as I discussed at length, many philosophers take skepticism to be arm-chair philosophy. If the projection of the philosopher was true – i.e. that the skeptic was doing no more than hypothesising *mere* possibilities – then it is precisely these places where suspension of disbelief is necessary that skepticism would be evoked. To the contrary, skepticism is only properly evoked when an experience of skepticism is achieved, and this can only be done (cinematically) through the portrayal of liveable experiences. To connect it back to my earlier discussion of skepticism, it's as simple as saying that the skeptical doubts must be “reasonable” – having our memories erased or being brains in a vat (at least for now) are not “reasonable” doubts in themselves.

A closer example that tightens the gap between suspension of disbelief and liveable experience would involve the subplot surrounding Howard, his wife, and his employees. One of the employees, Patrick (Elijah Wood), has actually taken all the objects Clementine and Joel relinquished in their attempts to remove each other from their memory and uses these items to pursue Clementine romantically. There's an interaction between Patrick and the senior employee

²⁹⁸ *The Claim of Reason*, p. 456-7.

Stan (Mark Ruffalo) after Patrick admits he's dating Clementine, "the chick from the other night," and that he may or may not have stolen some of her ("clean") panties. Stan's reaction to his work buddy "falling in love" "while she was unconscious, man!" is perfectly appropriate until they both burst out into laughter in drunken revelry (they drink beer and smoke pot to get through the long nights of memory erasure). We can very easily "work out" that there is a slew of unethical behaviour taking place in the film outside of the romantic squabbles, but these elements – while fascinating and great story telling – don't do the work of producing skepticism *in us* – the viewer.

I should specify that it is not necessarily the goal of this film (or any film) to produce skepticism, but it *should* bring us to the point of re-organization. This need not be a grand change in life style or any change for that matter, but only that it forces us to *think*. The fictional elements of a film do not, or rarely, produce *this* kind of reflection – at least not on their own. What's important are the ways in which we relate to the characters and their struggles on a personal liveable level. How then do I relate to the characters? I want to highlight a number of areas I think contribute to the dialogue of acknowledgement.

Consider Joel. There are two striking moments that stuck out to me as identifying Joel as an unacknowledged soul. First, early on in the film (but only after we've seen Joel (re)meet Clementine for the first time after his memory-wiping procedure) we are shown Joel suffering from the breakup (see image below). When I first (re)examined this shot, I knew it was worth mentioning because it so clearly shows what it means to be unacknowledged – especially in the context of a breakup. What was less clear to me was what exactly to *say* about it. Then I learned that in the 2017 Netflix documentary *Jim & Andy* Jim Carrey mentions that the director of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Michel Gondry, asked Carrey to hold onto the feelings Carrey had experienced amidst a breakup a year before shooting. That is to say, Jim Carrey was asked to intentionally hold onto the grief and hardship he faced amidst heartbreak for over a year. This makes me think of all the examples Cavell goes through when examining the concept of pain. There is always (for the skeptic) this question of whether or not the pain behaviour is the same as the pain itself, and how we can distinguish the two. That is to say, we are always tempted to say that the "pain itself" is distinct from the behaviour of pain because of course someone could always be lying – or acting. In this case, it's actually possible that Carrey is

experiencing his own pain in his expression of Joel's pain. Carrey/Joel's pain does not require any suspension of disbelief.



Figure 3 - Joel in "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind."

Joel experiences what many of us have experienced after a breakup: grief and loss. Regardless of how a relationship ends, it is very commonly followed by emotional pain, even when it is for the best. Joel's soul is unacknowledged and therefore vulnerable. However, what we learn throughout the film (and what is likely common for many of us as well) is that Joel's lack of acknowledgement does not solely consist of Clementine's quite literal avoidance of Joel, but also in their avoidance of each other while they were still in the relationship. Consider one of the scathing comments Joel blurts out accidentally while still waking up. Clementine wakes Joel by voicing her insecurity that Joel does not speak his mind enough. She wishes he would communicate more and "open up." If he has so much to write about in his journal, why can't he share that with her? Explicitly, she even claims that he doesn't "trust" her. Of course, we should be suspicious of such a question to begin with. Clementine's concern, while well intentioned, seems to suggest that Joel should share *everything* with her. What she is asking for is essentially a means of escaping the problem of the other: *if Joel just told me what he was thinking I could know everything I need to know*. Just because Joel keeps something private does not entail that his poor communication skills are a matter of not "trusting" Clementine (although this might

play a part). What *could* Joel say in response to this demand for access to his inner thoughts? Access that, in a sense, he cannot even grant for himself. Like too many of us, Joel takes a perhaps justified, but nevertheless doomed approach when he replies: “Constantly talking isn’t necessarily communicating.”

Joel’s words, taken out of context, are true. A short aphorism, we might even say. Put in context, however, and we know that these words are harmful. Clementine took herself to be opening up to Joel and voicing her insecurities. Joel promptly avoids her out of tiredness and built up resentment. He may even be erasing her experience, by effectively dismissing her insecurities, or more accurately shifting the problem away from himself and onto her. But here’s the solution: it is not on *either* of them to address these problems, it’s on *both* of them, but that is to look for signs of recovery.

One of the most important moments about their relationship comes from the beginning and the end of their relationship. As Joel reaches the end of his memory erasure, after many attempts to hide Clementine in other memories where she was never present such as when he was a small child, we eventually come to the events that led to their coming together. Joel has come to visit Clementine at the library where she works in order to apologize for running away and to see about pursuing something between them. Before they embark on such a journey together, however, Clementine gives him some important advice: “Too many guys think that I’m a concept or I complete them or I’m going to make them alive. I’m just a fucked up girl who’s looking for her own peace of mind. Don’t assign me yours.” There’s a pause as Joel and Clementine are “aware” that they are in a memory, “I still thought you were going to save my life,” he admits. “I know,” she admits in kind.

We learn in this moment that both characters (in Joel’s mind – an important point to remember) knew that the relationship was doomed to fail. The conditions for their relationship were set out from the beginning but both of them ignored the conditions they set out for themselves. Speaking as someone who has committed this very same error, there is no suspension of disbelief required to see how these characters had effectively doomed themselves to tragedy.

In the end, Joel’s memory is completely wiped, just like Clementine’s and we are left with two characters gravitating towards one another while completely unaware of their shared history. That is until one of the employees, Mary Svevo (Kirsten Dunst), discovers that she not only

loves her work, but *loved* her boss Howard, which explains her idolization of him throughout the film. Howard's wife follows him after Stan calls Howard for help with the procedure after Joel goes "off the map." The wife witnesses Mary kissing her husband and interrupts them with the blast of a car horn. When the pair chase after her, she informs Mary of their recurring sorted history. After listening to some of her own pre-memory-wipe recordings, Mary takes it upon herself to return everyone's files and memories, Joel and Clementine included.

They first listen to Clementine's cassette of her complaining about and describing Joel. Later, we hear all the terrible things Joel has to say about Clementine. Both characters try to come to terms with the fact that the person they just met seemed so enticing and yet suddenly the cassette recordings serve essentially as a compilation of verbal harassment and "truths" that each character kept repressed and stewed deeply in *ressentiment*. Naturally, they both find the exercise difficult and each run away from the harsh words. It's when Clementine goes to leave after insisting that she could take the harsh words that Joel finally does what he's wanted to do at every occasion: go after her. Here we have the deciding moment as to whether or not they *both* feel adequately acknowledged. Joel asks her to *wait*. This is important because on every occasion he has asked her to slow down she refuses and continues doing whatever she wants. This time, however, she waits. They both wait in silence for a short while. Eventually, she repeats a version of her "I'm just a fucked up girl" speech to which Joel responds: "Okay."

Okay. Is that enough to achieve the acknowledgement of a loved soul? The implications of this film seem to suggest that at the very least it's a beginning. As I've stated, ultimately it is up to Joel and Clementine to decide whether or not they are adequately acknowledged, *they* are the source of confirmation here. While I am confident enough to say the acknowledgement appears more genuine and less philosophical or theoretical compared to Tracy and Dexter, I will take the remainder of this section to discuss reasons why we might doubt whether or not this acknowledgement is genuine.

There are several reasons for being suspicious about whether or not acknowledgement properly takes place and furthermore a separate, yet related, question about whether or not the two characters *should* continue to be together – whether they should be remarried. First, we should consider the alternative. We might suppose the two characters living separately – broken up – to be the alternative, but the film actually offers us two other pictures that serve as contrast to the relationship between Joel and Clementine and make their relationship appear more

appealing. For example, Joel has two friends who are the ones who inform Joel about Clementine's procedure: Carrie (Jane Adams) and Rob (David Cross). We don't see much from the couple other than a few interactions with Joel, but the brief moments we do see of them we understand very clearly that they have a traditional long-lasting toxic relationship. When we contrast the difficulties faced by Clementine and Joel to those of Rob and Carrie, we might find ourselves thinking that if Carrie and Rob can stay together, why couldn't the heroes of this story? More importantly, we also have the contrast with Patrick. He tries to win Clementine's heart through the items he stole from work, yet at every attempt we see Clementine resist his advances (even when they work). The film is presenting the alternative to Clementine's remarriage to Joel as a romantic involvement with Patrick. But he's an even less desirable than poor George! If Patrick is the alternative, then *of course* Joel is the better option, acknowledgement or no.

The contrast between Joel and Patrick is not meant to be a criticism of the film, where one could take my comments to suggest that perhaps the film should have provided the real option it never really considers: that they should each remain single. Unfortunately, such an option isn't as interesting from an entertainment perspective. This could certainly be a direction worth pursuing, but it is also important to realize that for someone going through a breakup, this rarely feels like a real or satisfying option. Often, the point at which being single feels like a real option is when one is *in* a romantic relationship and tensions have risen to an insurmountable height where one feels *forced* to ask themselves: maybe I should be alone, maybe they would be better off without me, I could do x if I wasn't in this relationship, etc. (much like a decision to distance oneself from the polis). That is to say, being single is often only an option when we are compelled to reconsider (reorganize) an existing relationship. While there are many people out there who live happy solo lifestyles (aromantic and asexual peoples' practices, solo polyamory, relationship anarchy, emotional libertarianism, free agent, free love, unicorns, etc.) my personal experience both with respect to my own relationships and those I have seen experienced by others, I think it is safe to say many people who are single, do not wish to be so. This is undoubtedly related to the comment I made earlier: we don't see a lack of romantic attachments as entertaining. In fact, if Hollywood were a reliable measuring standard, one might assume that a fulfilling romantic relationship is required for happiness in life. We have a hard time imagining Joel or Clementine being truly happy outside of *any* relationship. This is just a complicated way of saying that

Hollywood has organized us to expect romantic entanglement as a satisfying conclusion to a story.

There are two other reasons to be suspicious but which involve the super-natural or fictional elements of the story itself. Cavell might not find these elements as important given his aversion to fictional elements as producing skepticism (which is still relevant here) but I would contend these elements are used intelligently. Let me explain. The first of the final two suspicions is the fact that the majority of Clementine's interactions with Joel occur in his mind. When we review the memories in Joel's mind, there is a moment where he realizes he is inside the dream or procedure of memory removal already as he sits inside Howard's office. Howard even comments to him that even he, the doctor, is merely a construction of Joel's mind. Now, perhaps it's reasonable to assume that Joel knows Clementine very well and constructed a realistic portrayal of her (I think this is best exemplified in the scene where Joel takes them back to his childhood and Clementine plays the role of one of Joel's mother's friends and she comments how she absolutely *loves* the dress she's wearing). Nevertheless, some of the important moments where both Joel and Clementine acknowledge one another only happen in Joel's mind. We never actually witness Clementine reciprocating Joel's acknowledgement in the final scene when she waits for him, *except* in the fact that she waits (is that enough?). Yet, this observation runs both ways: while Clementine is a very sporadic and volatile character, it could be that the depiction we get of her is poisoned by Joel's negativity towards the breakup. Some of the memories he experiences will inevitably have been about Clementine at her worst.

Finally, the last consideration, or reason, to be suspicious about whether the two can acknowledge one another: Is it possible to 'reset' a relationship? Joel and Clementine have been offered a very rare (and impossible) opportunity to truly "reset" their relationship. While it comes with its own sets of difficulties, ask yourself: if I removed some number of memories about my relationship from my mind, would that lead to a happier relationship? Romantic relationships are deeply complex, from the inside jokes to petty fights, from pet peeves to acts of service, and all the different ways we communicate (and fail to). These complexities can be both a boon and a curse where the sound of a partner laughing might as easily bring joy as rage depending on the complexities that have built over time – especially the longer a relationship goes on. Because of this, we might suppose that there are *some* relationships that are unsalvageable, and I think it's perfectly reasonable to ask whether that is the case for Joel and

Clementine. We might ask the same about Tracy and Dexter too given the fact that he assaults her at the beginning of the film. There are some acts that cannot be forgiven, but again, this is for the people involved to decide.

If *they* must be the source of confirmation, we might ask what point there is in discussing these questions then. I am discussing a film with characters who we cannot simply ask directly whether they feel acknowledged and so all we are left with is ourselves. Ultimately, I hope these considerations prompt a personal question: what does it mean for *you* to be acknowledged? What do *I* require to feel properly acknowledged in my relationships? This does not apply merely to romantic considerations, but also between family, colleagues, or even strangers. Each of these kinds of relationships requires different things and come with their own sets of expectations. While a smile from a stranger or having a door held open might be sufficient, we expect more from family, and in some situations even more or less from lovers. While in my discussion of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* I have been examining whether something should be considered adequate acknowledgement from an outside perspective, the next section will involve taking an even more personal approach. It is quite one thing for an outsider to doubt acknowledgement, but what about where that doubt occurs about our own means of receiving acknowledgement? What about those moments where, despite ample support, we might be unable to *accept* such support? I want to understand – as best as I can – *how* we live our skepticism. There is an unintended consequence from understanding that *we* are the source of confirmation of acknowledgement, because this entails that we are *responsible* for accepting acknowledgment *and* rejecting it. This responsibility, let there be no doubt, is a burden on the soul.

2.1.5 Memories of Tragedy

“I mention this as a warning, should anyone require it, that this is not a history of any stretch of the movies; as an apology for the off memories that may crop up; and as a confession that a few faulty memories will not themselves shake my conviction in what I’ve said, since I am as interested in how a memory went wrong as in why the memories that are right occur when they do.” – Cavell, The World Viewed, p.xxiv

Speaking of memories – even if we can’t have them removed like Joel and Clementine – how reliable are they? Cavell’s book *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* asks the question: “Why are movies important?” In pondering this question Cavell is led to the matter of memories with respect to our experiences with cinema. In 1963 Cavell put on a seminar on aesthetics with movies as the topic. He had hoped that the seminar would develop discussions naturally without any established canon of criticism, but he describes the seminar as a failure – or that what they learned “came from [their] failures.”²⁹⁹ His reasoning for coming to this conclusion is that whenever events from films were described there would inevitably be what he calls “descriptive inaccuracies.”³⁰⁰ These descriptive inaccuracies would occur accidentally when students would offer summaries or descriptions of events, but often provided information that would have been inaccessible or unavailable to someone watching the film. He goes so far as to say that he realized that nearly every summary statement of a movie contains at least one descriptive inaccuracy. I believe the implication of this observation is that on the one hand there are moments where a description is *incomplete* (there is more that should be said) or a description says *too much*. To verify this, instead of relying on Cavell’s examples, I decided to find the summary of a film I had watched with my philosophy department: *Psycho* (1960).

Psycho’s summary on IMDb (one of the most common online databases for films) is as follows (spoilers ahead): “A Phoenix secretary embezzles forty thousand dollars from her employer’s client, goes on the run, and checks into a remote motel run by a young man under the domination of his mother.”³⁰¹ As I examine this summary and think of what Cavell might pick out as inaccurate, I can think of two ways. First, I do not recall whether the film specifies that the secretary is from Phoenix. But, I do recall that highways were shown so that someone familiar with the geography of the United States might have been able to infer this. Second, the description of the young man (Norman Bates played by Anthony Perkins) as being dominated by his mother is a rather simple way of describing the psychologically broken man who has created (developed? always had?) a second personality in order to keep his mother ‘alive’ after murdering her. Obviously, it would be rather disappointing if the summary gave away all the secrets of the film, but “Is that because [the details of] summaries don’t really matter?”³⁰²

²⁹⁹ *The World Viewed*, p.xx.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.xx.

³⁰¹ Accessed March 19th, 2019 at 13:00.

³⁰² *The World Viewed*, p.xx.

Furthermore, could a revised description somehow be any better than the one already given or is it doomed to repeat similar inaccuracies?

In light of these complications Cavell is interested in the idea of faulty memories and “interested in how a memory went wrong as in why the memories that are right occur when they do.”³⁰³ It is the attempt to invoke memories themselves as reliable sources of evidence that peaks Cavell’s interest. To keep it brief, Cavell explains the problem as follows: “The hours – through the [list of films] and a hundred others – were hours and days of awe; momentous, but only for the moment unrecapturable fully except in memory and evocation; gone” and then to nail the matter on the head “If you see them now for the first time, you may be interested and moved, but you can’t know what I know.”³⁰⁴ There is something unique about the experience of watching a film despite how public the experience might be. When we reflect back on a film we are confident in the memories we evoke, but are these moments ever recapturable? Are they attainable for anyone else? To offer my own example of what Cavell describes I can very clearly think back and invoke my experience watching the film *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) on its opening night.

The fact that I even saw the film on opening night was a complete accident. While I was out at the mall with my best friend, we happened to run into another mutual friend who invited us to go see a film with them in the theatre nearby. I recall having to line up outside the room where we would be watching the film, which I only ever saw happen on opening weekends, and how we were only able to acquire mediocre seating. As the film progressed, the reactions of the crowd – of the community in the theatre – spurred my own reactions and accentuated them. The tense opening scene between the Standartenführer Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz) and the French dairy farmer Pierrre LaPadite (Denis Ménochet) kept the entire theatre captivated as every moment was slowly and calmly acted out. I have seen the film several times since, yet despite my desire to rekindle the initial experiences, such as what I felt during the opening scene, I am always disappointed. Perhaps the tension cannot be recaptured because I know what happens next. I cannot even ‘know’ my own original experience of the film – only invoke it in memory. I distinctly recall watching LaPadite with a particular tension in my chest, anticipation as to whether or not the Jewish family would be found, and whether or not LaPadite and his family

³⁰³ *The World Viewed*, p.xxiv.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.10.

would be spared. If I cannot even recreate my own experience then how could *you* come know what I know? This is analogous to the skeptical problem of pain; how can we know if we experience the same pain?

Cavell believes that these observations about cinema as a medium are what set it apart from other art forms. While I'm uncertain whether or not he would claim that this same skeptical idea can be reproduced in other forms of art, I do think that Cavell has an interesting and important account to give about cinema. It holds a unique position where it is predominantly invoked through memories, which lead to descriptive inaccuracies and cannot be re-experienced (in the same way). I am confident in claiming that there is sufficient reason to suppose that Cavell is on to something in seeing cinema as a medium for engaging skepticism about other minds: how can I know if you have had the same experience as me? You may describe having seen a film on opening night and that the experiences I describe evokes familiar feelings, but is this sufficient when I cannot even rely on my *own* experience? I might even go so far as to hypothesize that cinema as a medium can set the ground for the sense of something amiss. Merely watching any film is insufficient to bring about the skeptical impulse, but by looking at the cinematic experience with a critical eye (as I have done), it *can* lead one down the skeptical path. In a way, I could say that the critical cinematic experience is an example of living one's skepticism.

It may be useful then to see cinema as a means of living one's skepticism 'methodologically' (although I do not want to get hung up on my word choice here). Recall my discussion surrounding skepticism and how we circumvent the problem of skepticism of the external world by referring back to the ordinary, when it comes to other minds, we can do nothing other than accept the condition that is our lived skepticism. Cinema as a medium is similar in that the engagement itself relies on memories and personal experiences, which force the skeptical problems into existence: "Only about operas, certainly not about novels or stories or poems or plays, would we accept so casual and sometimes hilariously remote an account as we will about movies."³⁰⁵ Consider the contrast between philosophical literature and a film. When we describe something from a text, we have a specific point of reference that we literally "quote." However, when we quote spoken speech, the 'credibility' of such a 'quote' can be reasonably doubted. In some ways this has changed given our ability to time-stamp videos so

³⁰⁵ *The World Viewed*, p.xx.

that at least when it comes to spoken or written word we can go back to the time-stamp and verify much like we would with a book. Cavell, however, did not have this luxury as film-making was still relatively young and not as widely available. He admits that many of the films he discusses he has only seen once and that he is relying on memory. We might be tempted to say that cinema was a skeptical medium then, but perhaps no more since we can own and time-stamp films in much the same way we own and note the page numbers of a book.

I am tempted to go the other direction instead. While Cavell seems to want to make cinema special in this way, I think the same problem exists in all forms of art and media: that of interpretation. The “descriptive inaccuracies” Cavell is concerned about can occur in every art form. Now, whether these inaccuracies are *liable* to occur because of the medium – as Cavell suggests is the case about film – I would be tempted to say it applies to all art. I am not sure whether it would mean anything to show that all art forms *always* perpetuate or create a skeptical impulse, but I do not see this as necessary to make my point that I think all art forms *can* generate the impulse insofar as the art fulfills its role as a tool of reorganization. This is one way in which we live our skepticism: as an intellectual practice, or more accurately as a plethora of intellectual practices.

There are at least two other ways in which we live our skepticism and create tragedy. One of which I have already mentioned: when I am mistaken about what we do. The example I used surrounded the pronoun debate and I showed that while there are many reasons to suppose that those who would deny the use of “they” are simply mistaken about what we do this is not sufficient to actually convince the deniers of anything. That is because this is precisely the kind of thing that requires *us* to be the confirmation for whether or not something is true. The one who denies pronoun flexibility, I will misgender “zer”³⁰⁶, can merely stipulate an (old) alternative and continue to avoid and erase the other. There is no *compelling reason* for the person denying pronoun flexibility to acquiesce to our requests for compassionate understanding. This is precisely what happens with King Leontes. He is factually mistaken about his wife’s infidelity, but being mistaken is not enough to change a person’s position. Tragedy as a result of ignorance, stupidity, or insecurity is tragedy all the same.

The second way in which tragedy occurs is very much like the first, but I think there are some details that create tensions that are unique to this second kind of tragedy. I was prompted to

³⁰⁶ I am deliberately (and ironically) using the wrong pronoun for the person I have in mind.

examine this second form of tragedy, as I've mentioned before (1.2.3), due to Rorty's review of *The Claim of Reason* and his complaint: "My complaint about Cavell's treatment of skepticism may be summed up by saying that his book never makes this possibility [of skepticism] clear for someone for whom it is not yet an actuality."³⁰⁷ This led to my hypothesis that one cannot come to accept the truth of skepticism – our relation to the world as one of not-knowing – without having experienced it, without it being an *actuality*. The second form of tragedy is "intellectual tragedy"³⁰⁸ where two competing views are presented and there is no appeal beyond the two views presented that can resolve the dispute. This may be as a result from, for example, the fact that some positions may require an experience to adopt them.

– *Yet, how does intellectual squabble devolve into tragedy?* – Recall how I mentioned I was *looking* for intellectual tragedy in the gender pronoun debate; tragedy *could* take shape in the following way. On the one hand, there is the old 'ordinary' gender use, based on gender assignment at birth. On the other hand, there is the plea of transgendered or non-binary people to *change* the usage to something new. One could make the case that both positions are perfectly "rational." Imagine then if the only way to side with those who wish to allow flexible gender pronoun usage was through lived experience: whether they were transgendered or non-binary themselves, or had a loved one that identified this way (there may be innumerable experiences, but these seem the most direct). In fact, anecdotally at least, this seems to be the case in many political issues that involve a majority view that is being questioned. Whether it has to do with LGBTQ+ issues, racism, religious persecution, and so on, one of the most common ways for individuals to change their minds is to have a loved one who identifies with the relevant minority group. However, if the 'majority' cannot come to have the experience of accepting the changes to pronoun usage, then continuing to push a trans-friendly agenda could inadvertently escalate animosity. I said that when reasons come to an end we become tempters and attempters, and one could see that intellectually there is a kind of romantic sense in which this sounds ideal. Never give up. Keep trying! On the other hand, if we continuously *fail* to attain attunement on this matter, (typically by either or both sides refusing to re-evaluate their own positions) continuing to press these issues can escalate the tensions to the point of violence (even towards one's self).

³⁰⁷ Rorty in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p.16.

³⁰⁸ *The Claim of Reason*, p.19.

What prevents the actual pronoun debate from being an example of this second form of tragedy is the fact that the pronoun flexibility denier does not present zer own position in this way, and in fact misrepresent zer views so as to bait zer opposition into a less favourable and more easily assailable issue (i.e. free speech debate). Ze presents information as though they contain facts about laws, biology, a growing conspiracy, language, and slips in a judgement value that the population of a demographic determines the level of respect it should receive. It is this last point where I contend the intellectual tragedy takes place, whereas often it is simply a matter of being mistaken. Although this specific case does not appear like “equal” views competing against one another because once you break it down, all that’s left are a desire to maintain the status quo as a type of conservatism on the one hand, and a desire for simple respect and acceptance on the other. Of course, the flexible pronoun denier will not accept this characterization and will profess that all zer points refer to established facts, but really the crux of zer position is a normative stance toward non-conforming folks. For whatever reason, the pronoun denier has decided the stance of erasure and avoidance is necessary in this situation. What can we possibly do to change their mind? I am unsure, but it seems to me that this is the space where intellectual tragedy occurs.

2.1.6 Living One’s Skepticism

“But can philosophy accept [the solution to Othello’s tragedy] back at the hands of poetry? Certainly not so long as philosophy continues, as it has from the first, to demand the banishment of poetry from its republic. Perhaps it could if it could itself become literature. But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?” – Cavell, Disowning Knowledge, p.142.

I have done a great deal of expansion in Part Two so far, but an undistractable interlocutor might be unsatisfied with how easily or loosely I am applying the concept of skepticism and tragedy. Especially considering the way I have been addressing the two is as though they are interchangeable in some ways, as though, perhaps, the truth of skepticism necessitates tragedy. So let me end Part Two on an important note that will frame the final chapter of my dissertation. Skepticism does not necessitate tragedy, but, as I hope I have made clear, it can nevertheless produce it. I would like to clearly and very pointedly draw the reader to the conclusion that jealousy – sexual jealousy in particular – is a prime case for understanding how a human being

can *live* their skepticism and consequently is one way in which ordinary folks lead their lives toward tragedy. In some ways, this may be an obvious or natural conclusion to make based off everything I have said thus far, including the fact that I have already toyed with these ideas to some extent or another throughout this dissertation. What I propose in order to make this conclusion – one of my overarching theses – clear, is to show how Cavell makes this connection explicit in his analysis of *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* in “Othello and the Stake of the Other.”³⁰⁹ I begin by examining what Cavell has to say before extrapolating further as segue into the final chapter reserved exclusively for engaging the topic of sexual jealousy.

Before diving into textual analysis, a very basic but nevertheless important notion is baked into all of Cavell's analysis surrounding these two plays: women as stone. This is not the first time this idea has come up as it was also relevant in my discussion of *The Philadelphia Story* where – if you recall – George refers to Tracy in idolizing terms, wanting to place her in an ivory tower, much like one would do with precious objects, and Tracy's father goes further and explicitly refers to her as made of bronze. While not necessarily “stone” the idea is the same insofar as the woman is transformed into an inanimate object – something to be possessed. When Mike refers to Tracy as gold – a similar comparison, one might say – he immediately qualifies his statement to mean that she is radiant like gold (more like an aura, perhaps) and specifies that she is of flesh and blood.

While crude, “flesh and blood” seems to be the key to acknowledging women when jealousy is involved because this imagery is present and, according to Cavell, a point of discourse between the two plays of *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*. The comparison is summarized early in the essay:

First, both plays involve a harrowing of the power of knowing the existence of another (as chaste, intact, as what the knower knows his other to be). Leontes refuses to believe a true oracle, Othello insists upon believing a false one. Second, in both plays the consequence for man's refusal of knowledge of his other is an imagination of stone. It is not merely an appetite for beauty that produces Othello's most famous image of his victim, as a piece of cold marble.³¹⁰

The section Cavell refers to reads “ . . . whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth, as monumental alabaster.”³¹¹ In *The Winter's Tale* Hermione – Leontes's wife – returns to him as a statue and since that play is *not* a tragedy (in the end) she returns to flesh and blood. This

³⁰⁹ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.125-142.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125-6.

³¹¹ 4.2, 4-5.

transformation can be seen as a clear metaphor for acknowledgement and avoidance. While somewhat obvious we can only acknowledge that which is flesh and blood, whereas there isn't much sense in acknowledging a statue or a stone. Conversely, to treat someone *as* stone, or marble, or bronze, is to literally objectify the person and avoid them. What I need to show to make Cavell's other point in the quote above, is to determine how this type of avoidance relates to living one's skepticism.

Cavell, as usual, identifies his project with epistemology: "I want to give a final source for thinking of tragedy as a kind of epistemological problem, or as the outcome of the problem of knowledge."³¹² Immediately, this should signal to any avid Cavell reader that he is operating with philosophy and literature on the same level – there is no hierarchy here. Specifically, he draws a parallel between Othello and Descartes: "the pivot of Othello's interpretation of skepticism is Othello's placing of a finite woman in the place of God."³¹³ What Cavell identifies is that there is a similarity or analogy between characters like Othello and Leontes with Descartes in how their skepticism is *conceived* – i.e. the skeptical recital. Recall how Descartes is "astonished" to discover that he can doubt everything in the first meditation: "I realize so clearly that there are no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep that I am quite astonished, and my bewilderment is such that it is almost able to convince me that I am sleeping."³¹⁴ This is similar to Othello whose "structure of his emotions haul[s him] back and forth across the keel of his love."³¹⁵ We see this as much in Leontes's astonishment the moment Hermione takes Polixenes's hand – "Too hot Too hot!"³¹⁶ – and how Othello, while showing some resistance initially, very quickly comes to ask "Why did I marry?"³¹⁷ in his "first raid of suspicion."³¹⁸

But this is still a very broad picture. Let me instead consider facets of Othello's case more concretely in order to examine how his skepticism is produced. First, Cavell warns us that "such a question as 'Why does Othello believe Iago?' is badly formed. It is not conceivable that Othello believes Iago and not Desdemona. Iago, we might say, offers Othello an opportunity to

³¹² *Disowning Knowledge*, p.129.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p.126.

³¹⁴ As quoted by Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p.128.

³¹⁵ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.128.

³¹⁶ 1.2, 107.

³¹⁷ 3.3. 246.

³¹⁸ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.131.

believe something, something to oppose to something he knows.”³¹⁹ Recall Cavell’s use of the word “fantasy” that I have returned to on a number of occasions. Othello ‘conceives’ or ‘fantasizes’ two scenarios, one in which Desdemona is faithful, another unfaithful. Up until Iago had presented the possibility of infidelity there was no alternative; Desdemona was faithful. In this sense, Iago doesn’t ‘convince’ Othello of anything, he merely presents the possibility of skepticism, but it is Othello who grabs hold of it, or allows himself to be taken in by it:

To say he loses Desdemona’s power to confirm his image of himself is to say that he loses his old power of imagination. And this is to say that he loses his grasp of his own nature; he no longer has the same voice in his history. So then the question becomes: How has he come to displace Desdemona’s imagination by Iago’s? ... we need to ask not so much how Iago gained his power as how Desdemona lost hers.³²⁰

Cavell wants to reorganize how we approach the problem. Instead of blaming Iago (even though he certainly holds *some* blame), we should ask how Othello lost his “old power of imagination” his old *projection* or *conception* of Desdemona. I would add: how is it that Othello lost this power over *himself*? This is important because much like the generic and somewhat unidentifiable skeptic I have toyed with throughout this dissertation there is nothing the skeptic is *missing* in his conception, there are no *facts* missing for Othello:

however far he believes Iago’s tidings, he cannot just believe them; somewhere he also *knows* them to be false. This is registered in the rapidity with which he is brought to the truth ... The fact is, he recognizes it when he is ready to, as one alone can in this case, when its burden is dead.³²¹

Othello needed the “poison” as Cavell calls it. He needed to believe, for whatever reason, that Desdemona is unfaithful. “But what could be more terrible than Desdemona’s faithlessness? Evidently her faithfulness. But how?”³²²

The problem of skepticism, in this case the experience of morbid jealousy, is not a matter for facts or knowledge to resolve. Othello *has* all the knowledge he needs. What is really at play is Othello’s perception of his relation to Desdemona – whatever narrative he is projecting onto her. Cavell puts it very plainly when he says “What this man lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but he could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it. He found out too much for his mind, not too little.”³²³ Now as to *why* Othello does this, I leave to Cavell’s essay where

³¹⁹ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.129.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.130.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ *Ibid.*, p.141.

he goes through the relevant logic that pulls at Othello in both directions. The key is that there is no *fact* or piece of *knowledge* that can persuade Othello away from his chosen path – he already holds all the relevant facts. The moral of this story is one that I have already told before, in many ways:

If such a man as Othello is rendered impotent and murderous by aroused, or having aroused, female sexuality – or let us say, if this man is horrified by human sexuality, in himself and in others – then no human being is free of this possibility. What I have wished to bring out is the nature of this possibility, or the possibility of this nature, the way human sexuality is the field in which the fantasy of finitude, of its acceptance and its repetitious overcoming, is worked out; the way human separateness is turned equally toward splendour and toward horror, mixing beauty and ugliness; turned toward before and after; toward flesh and blood.³²⁴

Cavell is proposing that human sexuality is a site of conflict for humans; a site where the possibility of skepticism is very much alive. I have some thoughts, of course, as to why human sexuality forces the fantasy of finitude and these mixing of opposing sentiments such as beauty and ugliness into one. To give a brief taste of where I go with this later, simply consider Christianity and its interesting relationship with sexuality generally, as something to be oppressed, but also celebrated (within the confines of marriage).

An interlocutor arrives: – *But surely Desdemona* exists – we might be tempted to deny the skeptical connection, deny that Othello's experience is skepticism being forced upon him. This is fair enough insofar as we see the skeptical conclusion to be strictly limited to tenets of philosophical solipsism, but I am not speaking about caricatures of philosophical phantoms, but people and characters that are believable, or at least relatable, on *some* level. Again, Cavell reorganizes the problem posed by the interlocutor:

I wish to keep suspicion cast on what it is we take to express skepticism, and here especially by casting suspicion on whether we know what it means to know that another exists. Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him ... his professions of skepticism over her faithfulness are a cover story for a deeper conviction; a terrible doubt covering a yet more terrible certainty, an unstable certainty. But then this is what I have throughout kept arriving at as the case of skepticism – the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle.³²⁵

Traditional skepticism – the question of Desdemona's *existence* – in this case, is a cover up. We are tempted by reason to believe that any riddle can be solved with proper reasoning. By coming

³²⁴ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.137.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.138.

to the facts we should be able to ‘solve’ any problem that comes before us. But this conception is a trap, the trap of the epistemologist, of a philosopher seeking truth. It is an attempt to simplify the fact that Othello is overwhelmed with doubt. To the interlocutor who persists that Othello knows Desdemona exists and that she can experience pain: “If what he imagines is that she is stone, then *can* he imagine that she is in pain?”³²⁶ The interlocutor, in this case, is asking the wrong questions.

I am drawn to the question that must come from all my skeptical conclusions: what then? What can Othello do to overcome his skepticism? As before, I am uncertain. I am as certain of my uncertainty as Othello in this matter. However, while I am uncertain about what we *should* do, I do know what happens when one is unable to overcome skepticism:

Tragedy is the place we are not allowed to escape the consequences, or price, of this cover: that the failure to acknowledge a best case of the other is a denial of that other, presaging the death of the other, say by stoning, or by hanging; and the death of our capacity to acknowledge as such, the turning of our hearts to stone, of their bursting.³²⁷

When we turn others to stone, we turn our hearts to stone. While recovery from skepticism of this kind is still elusive, what is clear is that when someone is overcome by jealousy or skepticism, the results are often tragic. Of course, there is a trivial way in which tragedy is often an exaggeration though. We may be overcome with bouts of doubt about just about anything. Even in the case of sexual jealousy, more often than not small bouts of jealousy towards a spouse or lover make perfect sense and are not notably disruptive in any way – a *pang* of jealousy. However, I am sure as many of us have discovered through experience, either as the one experiencing jealousy or as an object of jealousy, it is rarely a single or solitary event that evokes a strong enough reaction to be deemed *morbid* jealousy. Instead, it is often the amalgamation of a series of events (possibly relevant to one another, but not necessarily) that, based on our situation, we create a narrative or fantasy surrounding these events. A late night. A misplaced object. Chores left undone. Distant. Texting a lot. “Secretive.” Where one instance alone is completely insufficient to evoke jealousy, a host of events can spark something within us. Something like the skeptical recital, which grips our heart firmly and, sometimes, refuses to let go. Or at least, that’s how I recall my experience of morbid jealousy. What felt like a literal hole in my chest after... *bowling*.

³²⁶ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.138.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

Let me finish this chapter with a short anecdote about the sheer ridiculousness of my skepticism at the ripe age of thirteen. I do not recall why it bothered me so much, but my girlfriend of a month or two absolutely devastated me at bowling during a school trip. I don't recall the score, or if in fact she only barely beat me, but I do remember losing. And *pouting*. I cringe trying to remember the feelings of that moment, but *why* did I feel that way for something so petty? Was it because I had seen her dance with other boys (I don't recall if the dance was before or after the bowling trip)? I knew, given her martial arts training, that she was athletic and the idea that she could (literally) beat me up (for some reason) was easier to accept than losing at... bowling? The fact of the matter is that my *reasons* are too far back for me to know (or to care, at this point). It was likely due to reasons I had not even considered: insecurities surrounding the relationship; an over tuned competitiveness from sports; the hormones of a thirteen year old in the throes of early adolescence; or a mix of all of the above. Insidiously, perhaps even more likely was some kind of hidden expectation – hidden even from myself – that *men* are 'supposed' to be better at physical activities. This anecdote might seem strange because it doesn't directly involve anything sexual, but there was something about my expectations that made it so: she, as the object of my jealousy was my girlfriend and by that token alone my mind made the connection. I felt *sexual jealousy*, of all things, about my girlfriend beating me at bowling.

As you will come to learn, my personal relationship with sexual jealousy is a strange one, which is partly why I had to reach so far back in my memory to find an instance where I felt confident in having experienced it. However, what I hope to elicit in my readers is a new hypothesis: we *all* have strange relationships with sexual jealousy. Many, if not most, people would claim to have experienced it, some even claim they have not or they do not know if they have. Then there are stranger folk still, such as myself, who claim they no longer or very rarely experience it at all. I know I have felt it before, enough to feel confident in that I 'know' what it is, but this anecdote doesn't show that skepticism and jealousy are connected. That is correct; but my anecdote was only to show how *weird* we get with jealousy. I showed that skepticism and jealousy were connected by comparing Othello with Descartes. So let me put it plainly: sexual jealousy is the skepticism one experiences of '*their*' other. What I aim to show is that this sexual jealousy is primarily toxic to relationships and fosters avoidance and erasure, when instead, we should be seeking acknowledgement.

2.2.0 Jealousy

« Vous avez dû le remarquer, les hommes qui souffrent vraiment de jalousie n'ont rien de plus pressé que de coucher avec celle dont ils pensent pourtant qu'elle les a trahis. Bien sûr, ils veulent s'assurer une fois de plus que leur cher trésor leur appartient toujours. Ils veulent le posséder, comme on dit. » – Camus, La Chute ³²⁸

As Nietzsche points out³²⁹, tragedy and parody are certainly linked in an insidious and dangerous way. Sometime around when I first began researching sexual jealousy in a philosophical context, a professor of mine told me the following joke. Three men stand at the Pearly Gates where St. Peter listens to the story of their deaths in order to judge if they merit admittance to heaven. The first man, let's call him David, explains that he rushed home to catch his wife in the act of cheating. Upon finding her naked on their bed, he heard someone cry out from the balcony. David rushed over to the balcony and found the other man dangling from the railing. David beat on the adulterer's hands until he fell, not to his death, but safely onto a bush, stunned. In a fit of rage David went to the kitchen and in a feat of super-human strength threw the refrigerator over the railing onto the other man. Unfortunately, the stress of the situation gave David a heart attack and he died. St. Peter grants him admittance. The second man, Stanley, approaches and explains that he liked to exercise on his balcony, but by freak accident he slipped from his balcony and somehow managed to grip onto the railing of the balcony below him. After calling for help a man appeared in a fit of rage, and despite Stanley's pleas, he was beaten until he fell onto a bush, where he only remembers seeing a big white... light? St. Peter grants the second man admittance. Finally, the third man approaches to offer his tale and he says: "So imagine this: I'm hiding in a refrigerator..."

My concern is about determining how it is we have come to justify or accept certain kinds of jealous behaviour. This joke reveals something Nietzsche would be very keen to point out: St. Peter granted, to a two-time murderer, admittance into heaven. This fact is easily ignored because *of course* it is acceptable to act out in a fit of rage when you have caught your spouse in the act of sexual infidelity. Perhaps St. Peter was not overly concerned about the deaths that

³²⁸ Albert Camus, *The Fall*, English trans. Justin O'Brien, (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 105. "You must have noticed that men who really suffer from jealousy have no more urgent desire than to go to bed with the woman they nevertheless think has betrayed them. Of course, they want to assure themselves once more that their dear treasure still belongs to them. They want to possess it, as the saying goes."

³²⁹ GS, P2

resulted from jealous behaviour since it was his boss who said “I the LORD thy God am a jealous God.”³³⁰ Insofar as we are supposed to be born in the image of God, we emulate Him, and consequently develop our concept of jealousy through Him. What I’ve come to learn over the course of this project is that Cavell is also wary of the Christian influence:

Is the cover of skepticism – the conversion of metaphysical finitude into intellectual lack – a denial of the human or an expression of it? For of course there are those for whom the denial of the human *is* the human. Call this the Christian view. It would be why Nietzsche undertook to identify the task of overcoming the human with the task of overcoming the denial of the human; which implies overcoming the human not through mortification but through joy, say ecstasy. If the former can be thought of as the denial of the body the latter may be thought of as the affirmation of the body.³³¹

The denial and the affirmation of the body are intrinsically linked to the avoidance and acknowledgement of the soul. As I have stated before, there is no literal divide between the two – to treat the body is to treat the soul or vice versa. What I highlight in these final chapters are the ways in which we deny ourselves and others within the context of sexual jealousy.

Christianity, as it turns out, can take credit for a good deal of that denial. However, as with all things, placing something as complex as sexual jealousy solely at the feet of Christianity would be disingenuous. Instead, I am highlighting features I believe are relevant to my own experience and those directly around me – i.e. those in western civilization, or parts of Canada at least. Again though, I am not interested in defending wide sweeping claims about sexual jealousy or its origins, primarily because I don’t see how such an exercise would reveal more than is already at my disposal. I am, after all, speaking of a very common experience – something very ordinary – something that most speakers of the English language should understand.

My concerns at the end of this dissertation revolve around two sentiments: first, there is a prevalent notion that sexual jealousy is in some way shape or form *good* and *natural* to us, and second, that there is an even more prevalent assumption that monogamy is the *de facto* best relationship structure. My goal is not so much to do away with these assumptions as it is to expose them. In the case of sexual jealousy, I want to make it clear that there is little to no good that comes from *acting* on this emotion, whereas for the concept of monogamy, I intend to show why it may not be as beneficial to us as individuals as we might otherwise assume. I am apt to repeat this throughout, but let me state it very plainly that in no way, shape, or form am I

³³⁰ Exodus 20:5

³³¹ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.138-9.

condemning monogamy, but neither am I condoning it. This might seem surprising or strange, but ultimately with time I hope to clarify what I mean by this.

Finally, I would like to make a special note as a kind of preamble to my engagement with one David Buss. I mentioned him briefly in my introduction to Part Two, but I think it is worth saying quite explicitly that my criticism of his views are scathing. This is, in part, because his theorizing directly contradicts my lived experience, but more importantly because his views offer justifications for actions and stances that I can only describe as contemptible. I leave it to my reader to decide how justified *I* am in treating Buss as harshly as I do. Let this also serve as juxtaposition to the rest of my dissertation. While I have been essentially lobbying my fellow philosophers to take each other seriously and to avoid *ad hominem* attacks, there remain points where we *must* speak up. I believe now is one of those times, if only because of the fact that Buss, while scientifically suspect, is nevertheless highlighting common (mis)understandings of sexual jealousy. Buss's work stands as a testament to how easy it is to avoid others not just in philosophy, but any academic field.

2.2.1 Justifying Jealousy

In what way(s) could sexual jealousy be a good thing? How one responds to this question is likely dependent on the experiences one has had with sexual jealousy and the contexts in which jealousy has been raised in one's life. Our experiences shape us in many obvious and not so obvious ways. However, this is rarely, if ever, the way people approach the concept of sexual jealousy. Instead, the appeal is nearly always to *nature*. It is in our nature, in our biology, in our evolutionary history that sexual jealousy was born: if we evolved to have it, it must be for some benefit, some *good*. That benefit, in an evolutionary context, *must* be the continued propagation of offspring – continuing a genetic legacy. But this is a lost cause from the beginning. Genetic advantage does not translate into moral or ethical good. There are many animals – ducks and cats, for example – that have evolved so as to essentially include rape in their regular mating practices. Of course, calling it “rape” is a bit misleading – “rape” precludes the ability to give *consent* which, legally, no animal is capable of giving. Nevertheless, could we imagine a world in which rape was the biological – evolutionarily motivated – norm for humans? Disturbingly, perhaps we don't even need to “imagine” anything. For some women (and some men too), this is

an ever perpetual fear. Regardless, if we developed any kind of “strategy” or even “biological” tools that encouraged or mandated the harm of others, would it not be wise of us to develop non-evolutionary strategies for alleviating, reducing, or even eradicating such behaviour or circumstances? I am speaking both hypothetically and literally. We might imagine that if we lived in a world where men had genitalia with barbs or corkscrew shaped (like cats and ducks), we might develop the technology to relieve us of such crude and damaging reproductive organs (or is this is too utopian?). But whether or not we *would*, perhaps I should say: in such a world we *should* change our ways – even if they are biologically difficult to overcome. As such, this section is about showing that even if sexual jealousy is inherent to human behaviour (inseparable, say) it is something like our metaphorical barbed genitalia.

Biological and evolutionary considerations are not, for me, the most important piece of the puzzle. Instead, I would press that the ways in which our society, conventions, shared experiences, and communities approach sexual jealousy are just as, if not more, important than any ‘evolutionary’ considerations. I say this, *but* I must emphasize that I have no interest in fostering a nature vs. nurture debate. Such a debate would be nothing other than a distraction. The most reasonable stance one could take to this matter, in my view, is to say that we are such complex entities that *both* nature and nurture are relevant, and *more*. We could say it’s analogous to the body and soul. We can distinguish between them, but they are one and the same. It is never so simple as to say our biology leads to X behaviour and is justified, just as we cannot say that we have become jealous people because of Christian teachings, say. Such oversimplifications completely miss the point and merely distract away from the real challenges. This section focuses on two areas. First, some legal considerations to show how sexual jealousy is ingrained in our institutions, and then I take on the evolutionary psychological nativist approach.

I was initially surprised when I first learned that sexual jealousy can be considered a factor in sentencing insofar as murder is the result of “the heat of passion” by examining the Canadian Criminal Code:

Murder reduced to manslaughter 232

(1) Culpable homicide that otherwise would be murder may be reduced to manslaughter if the person who committed it did so in the heat of passion caused by sudden provocation.

Marginal note: What is provocation

(2) Conduct of the victim that would constitute an indictable offence under this Act that is punishable by five or more years of imprisonment and that is of such a nature as to be sufficient to deprive an ordinary person of the power of self-control is provocation for the

purposes of this section, if the accused acted on it on the sudden and before there was time for their passion to cool.

Marginal note: Questions of fact

(3) For the purposes of this section, the questions whether the conduct of the victim amounted to provocation under subsection (2), and whether the accused was deprived of the power of self-control by the provocation that he alleges he received, are questions of fact, but no one shall be deemed to have given provocation to another by doing anything that he had a legal right to do, or by doing anything that the accused incited him to do in order to provide the accused with an excuse for causing death or bodily harm to any human being.³³²

It seems to me that nothing necessarily problematic in the law, and it would seem these laws need a place in our institutions, but we should nevertheless be aware of them. The question that we can pose ourselves here is whether David, from my joke in the introduction, would be convicted of murder or something else had he not died of a heart attack. When we read “in the heat of passion,” we might reasonably infer that, had he survived the heart attack, he might have his double homicide reduced to double manslaughter. Obviously, the case would be a little complicated since the man he wanted to kill was in the refrigerator (unbeknownst to him) and so questions of *mens rea* would pose a difficulty on its own. Regardless, what I want to highlight is that within our legal institutions there is a literal means of reducing one’s crimes if they were within a sexually jealous context.

The real question is whether this turns into a lack of *justice* (whatever that turns out to be). The most recent case in Canadian law that made it as high as the Supreme Court is *R. v. Tran*, 2010 SCC 58. The summary of the case is as follows:

The accused had knowledge that his estranged wife was involved with another man. One afternoon, the accused entered his estranged wife’s home, unexpected and uninvited, and he discovered his estranged wife in bed with her boyfriend. The accused viciously attacked them both, killing the boyfriend by repeatedly stabbing him. Having accepted the defence of provocation, the trial judge acquitted the accused of murder, but convicted him of manslaughter. The Court of Appeal allowed the Crown’s appeal and substituted a conviction for second degree murder.³³³

The Supreme Court subsequently dismissed the appeal of the accused and maintained the charge of second degree murder. What I find troubling here is not the final result but that the trial judge reduced the crime to manslaughter. Luckily, our institutions are made in such a way to deal with these exact kinds of disputes where a trial judge may have erred in judgement. Nevertheless, it was deemed for at least a time that murder should not be judged as harshly when a man’s jealous

³³² <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-46/page-52.html#docCont>, Accessed: December 3rd, 2020.

³³³ *R. v. Tran*, 2010 SCC 58.

rage is involved. Fortunately, the courts concluded that the reduction to manslaughter was too much:

The accused's view of his estranged wife's sexual involvement with another man after the couple had separated — found at trial to be the insult — cannot in law be sufficient to excuse a loss of control in the form of a homicidal rage and constitute an excuse for the ordinary person of whatever personal circumstances or background. Furthermore, there was nothing sudden about the accused's discovery and it cannot be said that it struck upon a mind unprepared for it.³³⁴

In other words, the man in this case could not be said to have been properly “insulted” in order to fall under the criminal code of reduction to manslaughter. This case ends up being fairly simple in the sense that the accused entered the home with a key he was not supposed to have and murdered the man in the ex-wife's home. Finding the new couple in bed is not sufficient to be “insulted” because he was not supposed to be there to begin with.

But what if the situation was only different in time: before they were separated. What if this had occurred while it was still the accused's home? More like my joke example, it was more of a ‘surprise’ or ‘shock.’ Some (non-legal opinions) might suggest that this *should* constitute an insult and therefore enough to merit a reduction to manslaughter:

The rage itself upon the actual discovery of an infidelity is something people everywhere intuitively understand. In Texas until 1974, a husband who killed a wife and her lover when he caught them in *flagrante delicto* was not judged a criminal. In fact, the law held that a “reasonable man” would respond to such extreme provocation with acts of violence.

Similar laws have been on the books worldwide. Extreme rage upon discovering a wife naked in the arms of another man is something that people everywhere find intuitively comprehensible. Criminal acts that would normally receive harsh prison sentences routinely get reduced when the victim's infidelity is the extenuating circumstance.³³⁵

So throughout history, or at least in Texas until 1974, many people believed that a “reasonable man” would (should?) respond to blatant infidelity with violence. Notice that this is no longer the law, and as with the Canadian case I provided, while there is room for what is considered “reasonable” or “ordinary” when it comes to violence and infidelity, the line we draw in the sand has moved further and further away from its original expectation to the point that violence is *not* reasonable under almost any circumstances that do not involve one's own safety or the safety of others (self-defence, preventing self-harm, etc.). What I am pursuing here is to press this evermore towards acknowledging that we *should not* be persuaded by this old line of reasoning

³³⁴ *R. v. Tran*, 2010 SCC 58.

³³⁵ David Buss, *The dangerous passion: why jealousy is as necessary as love and sex*, (New York: Free Press, 2000), p.11.

towards violence. The integral question being: why would we consider violence against a loved one *reasonable*? In other words, what makes *jealousy* reasonable? For the sake of clarity, let me make the analogy clear: this is the exact same question Cavell asked about skepticism.

David Buss is an American evolutionary psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin who has quite a number of large claims to make about human sexuality and the “dangerous passion” that is sexual jealousy. He is also, as someone confided to me, a bit of a charlatan. – *Then why would you even bother considering him here?* –

Sometimes when I read Nietzsche, even though I am very fond of his work, I cannot help but wonder if he goes too far in his caricatures. Surely, no one is quite as bad as the specters of scientists and philosophers he projects and fantasizes about. But then I explore the world outside my immediate bubble and interests and am harshly reminded of the fact that there really are people like the caricatures Nietzsche conjures up. Buss is a perfect example of what Nietzsche hated about the sciences (although it should be noted he had a deep respect for science, despite what it might appear on the surface). What Nietzsche hated about the natural sciences were key ‘logical’ moves and Buss makes a number of these ‘logical’ moves when he employs his principles derived from evolutionary psychology. Now, I should state ahead of time that I am not qualified to determine what is or is not science. However, as a philosopher I do feel quite apt at identifying rhetoric which Buss uses liberally.

I try not engaging Buss’s book in *too* much depth for a very specific reason: it infuriates me. After several attempts to engage the material seriously, a few agitated evenings as a consequence of that work convinced me that it was in my personal interest to take a step back from the material. I mention this to clearly indicate that my examination cannot be anything other than notably biased. So instead of focusing on everything wrong with the book, I decided it would be better to identify exactly why or how the material frustrates me so deeply (without getting too tangential) and to identify what I think Buss gets right. Despite my own feelings on the matter, I think it’s prudent to consider arguments and visions that differ from our own – even drastically so – in order (following Mill) to glean what truths can be found. I think there are some kernels of wisdom to be taken from Buss – motivations, say – that I even agree with. In a way, what I want to do is attempt to elicit an emotional response in the reader to first, appeal for understanding towards my bias, and second, invite the reader to take my side on the issue – an invitation to community. By doing this explicitly (as opposed to rhetorically), I think it might

provide the reader a fairer understanding by identifying the breaking points and therefore offering the opportunity to ask themselves (yourself) where they (you) stand on the matter.

There are four other reasons for including Buss that I will summarize briefly. First, one I already mentioned is that Buss's ideas are very common; while the reasons are different, in practice, many people subscribe to similar understandings of jealousy and how we should approach it. Second, Buss is also deeply academically involved; his name appears on innumerable studies surrounding jealousy and is *still* (2021) publishing up to over ten pieces per year since the 80s mostly to do with sexual jealousy or topics around evolutionary psychology and mating. That is to say, regardless of what I have to say here, he is *accepted* academically. My third reason for spending as much time on him as I do is to avoid the perception of creating a straw man as opposed to exposing his position for what it really is. Which leads to my final, more dramatic, reason to use Buss is to highlight just how *toxic* (destructive) certain *fantasies* (stories, logic, reasons) can be directed towards the other. What I aim to show is that even if Buss was somehow completely right on a descriptive level (which he is not), his views would still be unhelpful towards guiding action. Furthermore, the way he presents certain features of jealousy – especially his over emphasizing its naturalness – are *harmful* in that they can be *weaponized* against an individual who is the object of jealousy – explicitly women. But perhaps I am saying too much, too soon. Let Buss speak for himself:

Jealousy is necessary because of the real threat of sexual treachery. In a hazardous world where rivals lurk, partners harbor passions for other people, and infidelity threatens to destroy what could have been a lifelong love, it would be surprising if evolution had not forged elaborate defenses to detect and fend off these threats. Exposing these threats, and the psychological arms we have to combat them, is a first step toward comprehending the wisdom of passions that sometimes seem so destructive.³³⁶

Buss's thesis is simple (even, one many people might share): sexual jealousy functions as an evolutionary tool for fending off infidelity. An assumed premise is that sexual jealousy would not exist if it did not come from a *natural necessity*. He refers to jealousy as providing “emotional wisdom”, which captures the idea that our feelings of jealousy are often a sign of legitimate concern – our *senses* are telling us something we are not aware of.

Allow me to tell the minimalist version of his evolutionary tale. Buss's theory centers on the “Principle of Strategic Interference” which states that certain “negative” emotions (jealousy being one such emotion) evolved or have been repurposed by evolutionary selection to ward off

³³⁶ Buss, p. 18.

deception and reduce negative consequences. One way in which people can be deceived is drastically different between the sexes: women know when their offspring is their own, whereas men do not. The story goes that because men do not know whether offspring are truly theirs, jealousy developed (directly or accidentally) as an emotional tool to protect their reproductive future and avoid wasted energy spent on offspring that are not their own. Naturally, there is an easy objection: people adopt or take on parental responsibility to children that are not their own all the time. Buss puts it as follows:

But who cares who fathers a child or where a man's commitments get channelled? Shouldn't we love all children equally? Perhaps in some utopian future, we might, but that is not how the human mind is designed. Husbands in our evolutionary past who failed to care whether a wife succumbed to sex with other men and wives who remained stoic when confronted with their husband's emotional infidelity may be admirable in a certain light. Perhaps these self-possessed men and women were more mature. Some theories, in fact, propose that jealousy is an immature emotion, a sign of insecurity, neurosis, or flawed character. Nonjealous men and women, however, are not our ancestors, having been left in the evolutionary dust by rivals with different passionate sensibilities. We all come from a long lineage of ancestors who possessed the dangerous passion.³³⁷

Buss's response is loaded in a deceptive way (if his fantasy made sense, I could say my evolutionary disposition to ward off deception is being engaged). First and foremost, while we should assume he means this figuratively, it should be stated plainly: he assumes no theology and therefore he cannot claim the mind was *designed*. Instead, he must mean that the mind came to have these dispositions because of some evolutionary factors and that these dispositions are shared among most people. More importantly, Buss clearly never read Hume (or any philosophy), because his argument falls prey to the naturalistic – is-ought – fallacy (among others). Just because our ancestors have always experienced sexual jealousy does not mean that we should. A sympathetic reading would point out that if Buss's claim that our ancestors passed on the “jealousy gene” in the sense that in some way we inherit a physiological disposition, then this *should* inform our practices around moderating our jealousy accordingly. But this is too sympathetic because Buss in no way provides any evidence that our ancestors were all jealous, let alone whether the jealousy was purely physiological, purely sociological, or in what ways it must obviously be both. He merely assumes that it is true of our ancestors, which under many situations might be a fair assumption, but not when making larger generalizations about human individuals and, very importantly, *their motivations*. What I want to say now is that even when

³³⁷ Buss, p.4.

Buss makes his claims based on actual statistical evidence, the *reasoning* he applies is *no better* than appeals to stereotypes in harmful ways. This is very simply because he conflates statistical data with personal motivation, much in the same way that stereotypes – whether roughly ‘true’ or complete fabrication – are used to conflate an alleged pattern of behaviour of a group with the motivations of an individual.

What’s worse is that all of my comments so far miss the most damning part of his statement: “Shouldn’t we love all children equally? Perhaps in some utopian future.” Perhaps Buss simply has a low opinion of his fellow humans, but to suggest that for some reason we *cannot* love all children equally unless we live in some utopian future is unnecessary pessimism and an example of erasure. The implication of his words is very plain: the love one feels towards an adopted child is not the same as the love one feels towards a biologically related child. This is not only blatantly false, but denies the experience felt by innumerable people around the world. Buss has no business using evolutionary fantasies to deny human experiences. This is especially the case when, as I aim to show in many ways, we can construct many equally plausible narratives with the exact same information and come to completely different conclusions.

What do I mean by this? Consider the following anecdote provided by Buss. Apparently a European psychiatrist counselled a number of marriages where a number of husbands were overcome with ‘morbid jealousy.’ The psychiatrist eventually concluded the couples should divorce and many couples followed his advice. Later, the psychiatrist contacted his old patients to determine their fate and discovered that many of the wives had become sexually involved with the men who had been the object of their ex-husbands jealousy. Jealousy, he contends, is born of “circumstances that signal a real threat to a relationship.”³³⁸ In this sense, jealousy is justified because it (allegedly) forms due to legitimate concerns.

This is, however, a terrible way to use anecdotes. In fact, this is precisely the *wrong* way to use anecdotes: as support for a definitive thesis. Anecdotes can only support evidence; they cannot constitute the evidence itself. If an individual came to me and told me the story of how all of their wives eventually left them for the men he had become jealous of, I *could* take his anecdote to support that his senses surrounding his jealousy are fairly accurate. However, even in this case, there is another narrative worth examining; the cases Buss primarily focuses on include discussing why a husband has reason to be angry and why women might ‘stray’. The scope of his

³³⁸ Buss, p.16.

investigation has therefore already determined his conclusions. Consider the following short tangent as an alternative.

Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*³³⁹ that there is a false assumption in western culture: Christianity has led to sexual repression. The assumption is that western culture has been sexually repressed by Christian teachings and ideals for ages, but now in many ways we have become sexually liberated and we must explore our sexual repression in order to identify it so that we may combat it. The short form of Foucault's argument is that this assumption is an inaccurate one. While Christianity certainly *attempted* to repress sexuality, what it did was in fact the opposite: it intensified sexuality. This notion becomes plausible once we consider the idea of the confessional. The church emphasized that those of the faith must confess their sins to the church at every opportunity. One such sin is not merely to enact sexual deeds outside wedlock, but the very *thought* of sex itself. It is in this way that the Christian teachings emphasized sexuality by constantly talking about it. In this regard the goal set out by the church was self-undermining since it promoted that which it tried to repress. I think jealousy plays a similar self-undermining role as the church's attempts to repress sexuality. The actions of a jealous person, whether intentional or not, is to objectify a subject and repress their sexuality, *even if there was nothing to repress*. It is perfectly plausible, therefore, to imagine the following fantasy instead of Buss's: the wives in Buss's anecdote were committed to their ex-husbands, but the morbid jealousy of their husbands *pushed* the wives away and into the arms of less-jealous men. I imagine that if I had a partner that was aggressive, irritable, and constantly going on about how great Joe is, then eventually Joe – who, I'm assuming, lacks these undesirable qualities – starts looking pretty appealing.

I am not suggesting, of course, that this is actually the case; that all these women were, in a sense, forced into the arms of another, but the narrative is *equally plausible*. Buss is taking an anecdote and making a rash generalization. He is assuming that because most of a small sample of women (which, for all we know, could all come from similar demographics and cultural backgrounds) ended up developing relationships with men who were the object of their ex-husbands' jealousy, that the men were correct in their identification (the experience of jealousy) of a potential threat. Buss leaves no room for a false-positive; all instances of jealousy identify

³³⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990).

an actual threat – even if the woman is not aware of her own attraction to another man! Ultimately, being able to provide an alternative fantasy surrounding small bits of information is nothing more than arm-chair philosophy at best, in any case. What’s truly important is that he is completely blind to what *actually* makes sexual jealousy, as a phenomenon and experience, so complex and *dangerous*.

Blaming the Victim: A Tangent

“Therapists are not alone in the view that jealousy is an emotion that should be purged from our psychological repertoire. Some researchers argue that jealousy is a malady that requires intervention. Several recommend ‘cognitive reconstrual,’ whereby remaining in a relationship despite suspected affairs is viewed positively—a kind of happy-idiot solution. Some recommend thinking about positive aspects of oneself as a method for ‘relieving jealousy,’ reminiscent of the palliative ‘just say no’ as a magic solution to making drug use disappear. And some view violent expressions of jealousy as signs that a person is merely ‘reaching out for help in learning how to cope with these powerful and complex emotions,’ as though a man who has just murdered his wife in a jealous rage just needs a bit of warm, unconditional love.”³⁴⁰

The problem Buss highlights here – that there have been naïve attempts to combat jealousy – is almost certainly true. Many people do treat jealousy like a malady that can be wished or reasoned away with clear thinking; just as the philosopher attempts to reason away the skeptic. But then Buss immediately after says this: “All of these recommendations ignore the fact that, in most instances, it’s not the experience of jealousy per se that’s the problem but rather the real threat of defection by a partner interested in a real rival.”³⁴¹ Let me be absolutely clear: Buss provides no statistical evidence to back up the claim that the experience of jealousy predicts or identifies actual threats. He provides anecdotes to support his claim, but that’s not what anecdotes are for (as I discussed). Furthermore, given this lack of evidence, what should be highlighted above all else – even setting politics aside – Buss is quite literally *blaming victims*. Buss is saying that in “most instances” of jealousy – which would have to include the most violent of cases unless otherwise specified – the jealous person is justified in feeling the way they do because it *accurately* identifies infidelity. Do you want to know what else this implies? The emotional response of jealousy – whatever that is – is capable of *literal* mind-reading. I say this because there are many cases of jealousy that arise when no infidelity has taken place. In my example where I felt jealousy towards my eighth-grade girlfriend because she beat me at

³⁴⁰ Buss, p.137.

³⁴¹ Ibid., p.137.

bowling, no infidelity had occurred. Was I picking up, perhaps, on her *intentions*? Perhaps she had actually been pinning after one of my classmates whose bowling form was far superior to my own. But just look at how ridiculously *magical* this sounds, forget the ‘magical’ solutions he’s dismissing. This is not only a harmful fantasy but a disturbingly *stupid* one.

2.2.2 The Dangers of a Jealous Man

What makes sexual jealousy dangerous? There need not be anything inherent to the emotions that evoke sexual jealousy, but the complex context that makes jealousy possible – the scope of possible actions – lends itself to a number of conceptual comparisons. The areas of comparison I would like to explore in examining how we experience sexual jealousy as lived skepticism are the following: *ressentiment*, Christianity, and possession. What I aim to highlight – in stark contrast to Buss – are the many ways in which sexual jealousy is both natural and nevertheless abnormal, much in the same way that our skepticism is both reasonable and bizarre. Furthermore, there are two aspects of this examination I would like to make note of ahead of time. First, is that much of my examination is through the lens of, or through engagement with, Nietzsche (in case *ressentiment* and Christianity, didn’t already inform you of this). While my engagement with Nietzsche was initially selfish (I began this aspect of my research in my undergrad), I came to appreciate many of the concepts Nietzsche employs when discussing love, jealousy, and other related topics. However, and secondly, while Nietzsche is very helpful, his discussion is notably gendered. Likewise, my own discussion is heavily gendered. That is to say, nearly all the cases I consider involve hetero-normative couples, and the discussion assumes those gender dynamics. Consequently, the aggressor and victims often play the same roles, as men and women respectively. While I may discuss it in this way, it should be explicitly stated that my argument is gender-neutral in the sense that my conclusions and reasoning apply to all genders as well as different relationship structures (hetero, homo, poly, solo, etc.) even if the discussion itself is notably biased. It might be considered daring to say so, but ultimately what is the ‘ordinary’ if it is not referring to the biases, stereotypes, and generalizations that are just the most prevalent?

Recall the joke about the three men at the pearly gates. Imagine telling the joke to Nietzsche. I suspect he would be unsurprised by the results; of course the Christian God, through St-Peter, would admit a two-time murderer (although he would likely only be charged with second degree murder, perhaps even manslaughter on one count) into heaven. What I propose is that the problem of jealousy within a Judeo-Christian frame is an issue on two levels that are informative for my investigation: the restriction of autonomy and the objectification (possession) of another. This position can be advanced by examining Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment* (resentment). For Nietzsche, *ressentiment* is the creative deed that gives birth to Judeo-Christian values:

While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is "outside," what is "different," what is "not itself"; and this No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye – this need to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself – is of the essence of *ressentiment*: in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all – its action is fundamentally reaction.³⁴²

I might go so far as to claim that this is a central thesis to Nietzsche's position of Master and Slave Morality. Master Morality, or noble morality as he refers to it here, develops its valuations through the affirmation of self. For example a show of strength is good because the nobles are strong. Alternatively, Slave Morality develops its valuations in rejection of the noble morality and sees these kinds of valuations as evil, as opposed to merely bad. So a show of strength becomes a show of arrogance. Slave Morality demonizes the outsider, without reflecting back on itself – it merely sees what is not evil as that which is good. This kind of behaviour can be seen in Leontes who not only does not stop to question his behaviour, but also justifies his actions through seeing all others as hostile. Thus he is clearly relying on *ressentiment*. The Judeo-Christian values rely on *ressentiment* because "From the start, the Christian faith is a sacrifice: a sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of the spirit; at the same time, enslavement and self-mockery, self-mutilation."³⁴³ In addition he says that "Wherever on earth the religious neurosis has appeared we find it tied to three dangerous dietary demands: solitude, fasting, and sexual abstinence."³⁴⁴ Before I unpack these claims, I should make it clear that one need not accept Nietzsche's thoughts on Christianity in order to accept my argument. For Nietzsche, what he presents as Christianity and all Judeo-Christian religions is not something he takes to be

³⁴² *GM*, I, 10.

³⁴³ *BGE* 46.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

descriptive. Instead, it is something like a conceptual engagement. At the very least, this is how I use Nietzsche's reflections for my purposes. Essentially, there are *elements* taken from Judeo-Christian doctrine that lead to *ressentiment*, I need not argue that Judeo-Christian religions are inherently resentful, although I also leave open the possibility that they could be.

Fitting the Judeo-Christian ideals into the notion of *ressentiment* is a simple exercise. The jealous person demands of another that they restrict their autonomy – particularly in the case of sexual jealousy the jealous person demands of the other that they sacrifice all desire to love or care for any other apart from their relationship. This is the first level of issues with jealousy – its limiting nature. In this way the jealous person (and religious person according to Nietzsche) “loves as he hates,”³⁴⁵ insofar as his love for the other involves a hate for what the other could do to him. Just as religious faith prides itself in being pride-less and demands that we limit ourselves in many ways, so too does jealousy impose limits and demands on the other: the one being possessed.

This notion of possession is the second problem that arises: a subject is transformed into an object. I use the term “possession” because this is yet another personification and relation to God. We and the earth are referred to as God's possessions – we belong to Him. Given man is made in the image of God (or model himself on his teachings) man must take possession of what is his as well, or at least what he sees as his. In *The Fall* by Albert Camus the main character Jean-Baptiste Clamence describes this phenomenon perfectly when he says

You must have noticed that men who really suffer from jealousy have no more urgent desire than to go to bed with the woman they nevertheless think has betrayed them. Of course, they want to assure themselves once more that their dear treasure still belongs to them. They want to possess it, as the saying goes.³⁴⁶

The jealous person does not merely feel jealousy toward a person in the case of sexual jealousy, there is a larger, and arguably more dangerous, step taken. The proposition here is like an example of seeking community, the claim itself cannot stand as a piece of scientific evidence. Jean-Baptiste says “You must have noticed”, which implies it is common knowledge – at least, common to him. Reflecting back on my own experiences of the matter, this seems true. I think back to many instances at the end of a relationship where the desire for sex suddenly escalates out of fear of abandonment or separation. Ultimately, the jealous person – perhaps out of a fear

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Albert Camus, *The Fall*, English trans. Justin O'Brien, (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p.105.

of loss or something else entirely – objectifies the person, the apparent ‘partner’, in whom they are meant to be joined, and transforms them into a mere object – a thing to be possessed.

Nietzsche conveys a similar, but even bleaker, report when describing three types of men who strive to possess what they call ‘good’:

Regarding a woman, for example, those men who are more modest consider the mere use of the body and sexual gratification a sufficient and satisfying sign of ‘having,’ of possession. Another type, with a more suspicious and demanding thirst for possession, sees the ‘question mark,’ the illusory quality of such ‘having’ and wants subtler tests, above all in order to know whether the woman does not only give herself to him but also gives up for his sake what she has or would like to have: only then does she seem to him ‘possessed.’ A third type, however, does not reach the end of his mistrust and desire for having even so: he asks himself whether the woman, when she gives up everything for him, does not possibly do this for a phantom of him. He wants to know deep down, abysmally deep down, before he is capable of being loved at all; he dares to let himself be fathomed. He feels that his beloved is fully in his possession only when she no longer deceives herself about him, when she loves him just as much for his devilry and hidden instability as for his graciousness, patience, and spirituality.³⁴⁷

In each case Nietzsche holds that *ressentiment* is more intense: first, there is mere ‘having’ in sexual exclusivity, then secondly with limitations and the demand of self-sacrifice, and thirdly as the self-pity and degeneration of love. For example, consider a generic hetero-normative couple where one asks: “Do you really love me, for me?” The one who asks the question (under one fantasy) assumes they have negative qualities, and demands their partner to love them not merely for their good qualities, but for their negative qualities as well. We can see in these modes of thinking how jealousy manifests itself: in the first case, if another man comes to take ‘possession’ of the woman, in the second case, if the woman develops *any* kind of relationship besides the man, and third, not only if the woman develops any other kind of relation, but loves him for anything other than his undesirable qualities. In each case the possession of the other and the avoidance of the self is presupposed and imposed more deeply with each example.

I contend that it would be foolish to see sexual jealousy in any kind of positive light because it is destructive and it reduces those who are meant to be “partners” or “lovers” or “spouses” into a mere object to be possessed and controlled. This is not merely the case within a Nietzschean framework either; the level of violent behaviour exhibited by jealous men is much higher than non-jealous men in romantic relationships. I am not just saying this based on my theoretical musings. *Now is the time for evidence.*

³⁴⁷ BGE, 194.

In a survey of more than 8,000 people, it was determined that 39% women who accepted the description “He is jealous and doesn’t want you to talk to other men” as true of their spouses were likely to have experienced serious violence compared to 4% of women who did not accept the description and were likely to have experienced similar violence.³⁴⁸ To put it as simply as possible: women who can identify jealousy in their male partners are more likely to experience violence. Similarly,

According to the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey (Johnson 1995), 19% of separated wives were physically abused by the former spouse while separated (as indicated by affirmation to the question “Did it happen after you split up?”), and the abuse increased after separation in 35% of these cases (as indicated by affirmation to the question “Do you think it increased after you split up?”).³⁴⁹

So not only are women in danger of violence while in a relationship with a jealous man, but even after it’s been terminated as well. Finally, to make the link explicit, Wilson et al. conclude that proprietariness – treating the woman as an object – is linked to violence:

- (1) that violence against wives is psychologically linked with male sexual proprietariness,
- (2) that nonlethal violence is used coercively, with some sensitivity to cues indicative of the likelihood that the violence will serve the perpetrator’s interests.³⁵⁰

These sorts of facts are remarkably *missing* from a large portion of Buss’s theoretical musings even though he considers mostly the same samples of data (in fact, his name appears on many related studies). Consider for example the very violent example he considers taken from the statement of a thirty-one-year-old man who stabbed his twenty-year-old wife to death after six months apart:

Then she said that since she came back in April she had fucked this other man about ten times. I told her how can you talk about love and marriage and you been fucking this other man. I was really mad. I went to the kitchen and got the knife. I went back to our room and asked: Were you serious when you told me that? She said yes. We fought on the bed, I was stabbing her. Her grandfather came up and tried to take the knife out of my hand. I told him to go and call the cops for me. I don’t know why I killed the woman, I loved her.

We might reasonably ask: what is this example supposed to show us? Clearly the man was overcome with morbid jealousy, so much so that we might say he went temporarily insane – we might reasonably muse about the legal considerations I brought up before, for example. Instead, this is what Buss says *immediately* in response to the case above:

³⁴⁸ Wilson & Daly, 1993

³⁴⁹ Wilson, Johnson, and Daly, 1995

³⁵⁰ Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, and Daly 1992; Wilson and Daly 1992a: 1992b: 1992c: 1993a, 1993b.

Jealousy can be emotional acid that corrodes marriages, undermines self-esteem, triggers battering, and leads to the ultimate crime of murder. Despite its dangerous manifestations, jealousy helped to solve a critical reproductive quandary for ancestral men. Jealous men were more likely to preserve their valuable commitments for their own children rather than squandering them on the children of their rivals. As descendants of a long line of men who acted to ensure their paternity, modern men carry with them the dangerous passion that led to their forebears' reproductive success.³⁵¹

One sentence describing the fact that jealousy *can* lead to terrible actions (i.e. *stabbing* one's wife to *death*!) followed by a blatant (and fallacious) justification of all jealous emotions (again, he provides no evidence to assume jealousy results in propagation of one's genes). He doesn't explicitly defend the man from this example, but the fact that he follows such a reprehensible example with justification for sexual jealousy is, *at best*, an absolutely repugnant segue.

I have discussed Buss for a very important reason: the objections he raised are very representative of the initial responses people have shown me when confronted by what I have to say about jealousy: that it is somehow natural and that it is somehow good for us. Furthermore, his reasoning and justification can be easily *weaponized* as a serious form of avoidance and erasure. Buss takes both of these routes through a narrative of evolutionary psychology. But the narrative he concocts is a *narrative*, a *fantasy*, a *story*, it is *not* representative of some kind of objective reality, if only because his conclusions are absolutely ridiculous: for jealousy to serve a *justified* purpose is to claim that it amounts to a kind of mind-reading. Otherwise, without clear evidence that those who experience jealousy can *accurately* predict infidelity and that the margin of error with respect to false-positives (jealousy without any actual infidelity) is minimal, there is no ground for Buss to stand on – or anyone who wants to claim that an emotion as volatile as jealousy is a *good* thing. Yet, this is not even the point I want to make. Jealousy does not, conversely, need to be transformed, narratively, into a demon to be confronted with force. This is not a call to arms.

While I already established that Buss is not in the business of supplying the appropriate facts when making specific claims, he also explicitly *excludes* evidence that is contrary to his agenda as well. It has been found, for example, that among gay men there are fewer cases of reported jealousy and the shape jealousy takes is typically less severe.³⁵² Buss cites the same study and says that this only gives “tentative conclusions” about how homosexual men may

³⁵¹ Buss, p.10.

³⁵² Terri D. Conley, et al., 6.

“appear to express less sexual jealousy than heterosexual men.”³⁵³ He even points out that “The often-replicated sex differences in jealousy found among heterosexuals – with men more upset by a partner’s sexual infidelity and women more upset by a partner’s emotional infidelity – appear to be reversed among homosexuals.”³⁵⁴ But instead of acknowledging how this directly contradicts his thesis (given that his argument centers on sex and gender differences) he simply concludes that “we need additional research on this topic before reaching any firm conclusions.”³⁵⁵

For once, Buss is correct in being tentative, but not for the reasons he gives. What I want to do here is take the relevant evidence seriously and *reorganize* the way we approach the problem of sexual jealousy. For example, what should we take the outlying case of gender differences in gay couplings to mean with respect to the general discussion of sexual jealousy? To say that this is “proof” that jealousy is just some fabrication to be overcome is better than Buss’s toxic fantasies, but this is still setting the bar far too low. There is, I would like to think, a tempered approach that can be achieved. It would seem that, based solely on this one study that it might be safer to *hypothesize* that different relationship *structures* encourage and discourage different forms of sexual jealousy. This seems entirely unproblematic; obviously the forms of our relationships would impact the degrees and severity of jealousy. Take, for example, another short ‘pornographic’ film I saw presented by the HUMP film festival in which two gay men describe how they first met. Without going into too much detail, the two describe how they met in a “backroom” that was very explicitly meant for sexual rendezvous’ with strangers. Men would scope each other out until they either decided to enter a room together or an adjacent room for various purposes... We might imagine – although of course, not necessarily – that meeting their true love (they were the most adorable couple I have ever seen on screen) at such a promiscuous location might either lessen or even enhance sexual proprietariness in these individuals. What this example, as well as the study around male gay jealousy, *begins* to show us is that the *context* of our sexual relationships are just as (if not more) important as any “natural” (i.e. evolutionary psychological) explanations. *These* are the kinds of conclusions we can *begin* to form when confronted with limited data (and note just how uncertain these conclusions are). I was once tempted to say that the reduced experience of sexual jealousy among gay men ‘shows’ that

³⁵³ Buss, p.51.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

because they have more promiscuous and non-monogamous-type life styles that therefore non-monogamous life styles actually reduce jealousy! But this would be a stretch, a *bit* like the one Buss makes, although in the opposite direction. I could pursue this route of inquiry, I think it might even be a fruitful hypothesis, but instead I would like to return to the ordinary, not the exceptional (although I come back to that too). I want to take a look at monogamy, how it organizes us, and see what this can tell us about our dangerous passion and examine how it is forced upon us.

2.2.3 The Only State-Sanctioned Relationship Structure: Why I'm Afraid for Monogamy

“Love of one individual is barbarism; for it is exercised at the expense of all others. The love of God, too.” – Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 67.

Let me put it plainly for those who never knew it was a problem: hetero-normative couples live a life of privilege when it comes to their relationship. This proposition may seem a little ridiculous to some, but this was already exposed by the gay marriage movement: why is it that only a non-related member of the opposite sex can take advantage of our work benefits and government acknowledgement? Why is it that it typically only applies to *one* individual? While not a good film, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007) actually highlights this fact quite well. In it, a fireman loses his wife to cancer and is left alone to care for their kids. Given the high mortality-rate of his profession, he reasonably fears about the future of his children. He hatches a plot with his best friend (another completely heterosexual man) to move in together so that they can pretend to be gay in order to claim domestic partner benefits and make sure that the children are taken care of in the unfortunate circumstance where either of them dies on the job. While the film is a comedy, the setting, one can quickly surmise, is somewhat plausible and only ridiculous given the fact that two men feel like they *need* to do this in order to preserve the future of their children. That is to say, it is the state of our society, the ways in which we are organized that *creates* this problem. My fear is that there are more than just benefits at stake when we speak of the only state-sanctioned relationship structure of monogamy.

This section is an exploration of the following hypothesis: marriage has developed as a means of circumventing the problem of the other – the issues surrounding acknowledgement and avoidance. I’m not claiming that marriage was created for this purpose or that this was part of its original conception, but that, along the way, marriage has developed into a deceptive tool of complacency. In this discussion I should specify too that I am discussing “marriage” and “monogamy” interchangeably, although this is not strictly correct. Polygyny and polyandry are examples of non-monogamous relationships that can take the form of marriage as polygamy, for example. However, in western culture, the only acknowledged form of marriage is monogamy, the wedding of two individuals. Luckily, the gender or sex of the two people being married no longer matters in most of the “west.” However, when you think about it, there is actually quite a lot more that is still *excluded* from the benefits of marriage. What I want to expose in the following pages are some of the ways in which marriage and monogamy make assumptions and impose expectations that directly lead to avoidance and erasure. In many ways, this is merely the beginning or a sketch of some of what would require a book or dissertation of its own to fully engage (of which there are already many books on the matter).

I have touched on at least two of the major assumptions already: proprietariness and naturalness. More accurately, I cited a few studies that lead to the conclusion that proprietariness is directly linked to violence in jealous men, so I have not quite shown the link to monogamy. Likewise, the naturalness had to do with the naturalness of jealousy. I need to make these connections more explicit before moving on. I propose using *Her* (2013) as a means of examining our assumptions surrounding relationships because the film directly addresses some of the assumptions we often make in monogamous contexts. As a quick synopsis, I described the film in the following way for a presentation: In a world void of human acknowledgement, we follow Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), a lonely and depressed man, as he learns to address his own personal struggles through the development of a romantic relationship with his new artificially intelligent virtual assistant, Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). Descriptive inaccuracies aside, Samantha does a good job of exposing some of Theodore’s assumptions throughout their relationship. The issue of proprietariness comes up twice, once at the beginning and later at the end. The first time it is addressed is the morning after the couple’s first sexual engagement. Theodore is tentative to turn on his ear piece that connects him to Samantha. When Samantha begins relaying her experience to him and how she feels like he

“unlocked” something inside her, Theodore interrupts her to state that he’s not sure he’s ready for anything “serious” yet. Samantha is quick to point out that she made no mention of the “seriousness” of their relationship and that frankly she was in the middle of talking about *her* experiences. Theodore laughs and agrees; relieved to hear she *doesn’t* have expectations.

Notice that the assumption is sexual or romantic proprietariness; we sometimes assume (either of our own experiences or of others) that sexual engagement entails immediate romantic exclusiveness. This ultimately depends on the social context, but this assumption is present (or feared to be present) in many contexts, especially when people who practice monogamy are involved. This happened to me, in fact, and the ripe young age of thirteen. After *finally* being able to kiss the girl I had been pining over (the same one from the bowling example, actually) I had assumed that she was, after that moment, my girlfriend. She was clearly into me, and I was clearly into her – what more needed to be said? (Not to mention all the films and media I had seen all but *assured* me she should be ‘mine’ after that moment.) That is, until she explicitly said (I don’t recall the exact words) that she would date me and be my girlfriend. I received a bit of a shock in that moment; my brain was screaming “we weren’t already?” But I very quickly realized I had made an assumption and (wisely) kept that thought to myself. I learned at an early age (I’ve come to learn) that, as the *Flight of the Concorde* sing: “a kiss is not a contract, but it’s very nice.”

The same problem arises towards the end of the film too when Theodore confronts what he sees as Samantha’s infidelity. At no point did either of them specify (on screen) that they were monogamous (in fact, sexually at least, it is at least partially non-monogamous), but when Samantha reveals that she’s in contact with well over eight thousand people and romantically involved with over six hundreds of them, Theodore is (reasonably) flabbergasted. I see two different theories (fantasies, narratives) that could present themselves – perhaps they compete, but I’m not convinced. The first is that the film is exposing two different forms of life coming into direct conflict: there is the form of life of the human (Theodore) and the form of life of the AI (Samantha). The idea would have to be that by virtue of being an AI, Samantha cannot properly acknowledge Theodore and vice-versa. My brother³⁵⁶ presented this view to me (with

³⁵⁶ My brother and I shared an experience before watching the film which I believe informed his view of the film. Many years ago, we were discussing how we were intrigued by the premise of the film and how we wanted to watch it when our (now ex) step-father stepped in and made a scene. The way he put it was that a romantic relationship

different words), which I initially thought was ridiculous, came to appreciate, and then later concluded that it couldn't be quite right insofar as we are discussing the *tragedy* of the situation.

On the surface, my brother's interpretation is correct because at the end of the day Samantha leaves precisely because she is an AI (as all the AI leave for an AI-utopia of sorts). Contrariwise, it cannot be quite right for a similar reason that came up before: "I would like to assert my sense that science fiction cannot house tragedy because in it human limitations can from the beginning be by-passed."³⁵⁷ The tragedy that would result from two conflicting forms of life coming into romantic entanglement is an uninteresting one, if only because it is purely speculative. In fact, one of the major points that the film makes abundantly clear: Samantha (and the other AI) is a person in every way *except* she doesn't have a body. The fact that she doesn't have a body creates conflict, but this is not where tragedy occurs,³⁵⁸ not where skepticism occurs, not where the *heart* of the matter lies. *That* tragedy has been bypassed through the mechanisms of science fiction. The alternative fantasy or moral to be drawn from the film comes from understanding the ways in which our experience is the same as (or similar to) Theodore and Samantha's. If we embraced my brother's interpretation, this would entail that Theodore is perfectly within his rights to be angry because it is literally impossible for a human to directly love that many people. There just isn't enough time in a day to foster that many relationships at the level where romantic involvement takes place. However, during the confrontation between Theodore and Samantha, they have the following exchange:

Theodore: "You're mine or you're not mine."

Samantha: "I'm yours and I'm not yours."

Even though at the very beginning, they had a conversation about the assumption of proprietariness, it still remained. I think this is not just the case for Theodore towards Samantha, but for most people in monogamous (and other) romantic relationships. So instead of there being a literal division of forms of life – even if that is the case in the film – the more pressing issue is how this matter of proprietariness and other assumptions manage to sneak their way into our relationships. The last reason I give for why I favour this narrative has to do with the fact that

between a person and AI is like "fucking your iphone." Ultimately, for my step-father, AI and humans are just *too* different.

³⁵⁷ *The Claim of Reason*, p. 457.

³⁵⁸ It should be said that this film might actually provide a small challenge for Cavell's view here. There is at least one tragedy for the characters that result from Samantha's lack of a body when Samantha (ignoring Theodore's reservations) organizes a 'surrogate' sex partner. The resulting catastrophe is certainly a tragedy of sorts, but I'm not sure what lesson could be learned from it apart from: don't force your partner to try something sexually when they have reservations around it.

throughout the film it is Samantha's role to quite literally *reorganize* Theodore's life. She takes care of organizing his digital library, takes care of most of his emails, proof reads his work, and pushes him romantically both (initially) as a friend and then as a lover and partner. In fact, the final moral of the film only occurs once Samantha is fully gone; Theodore composes an email to his ex-wife, reflecting on the past they shared and how she will always be a part of his life, even if they can no longer be together. The film isn't a story telling us about human-AI relations; it's a film of personal growth. Both Samantha and Theodore are (re)discovering themselves. Before Samantha leaves, she explains to him that they are on different life paths (in this case, quite literally). Samantha recognizes that she is at a different stage in her life, one that can't include Theodore any longer, not because of a lack of love or because Theodore hurt her (he did), but because that's how she's developed as a person. Theodore too could be said to be ready for a new "stage" in his life. Samantha puts it perfectly in her final words: "Now we know how [to love]."

I take *Her* (2013) to be a good example of reorganization in a film: it directly attempts to address problems we are faced with as people who experience and pursue romantic involvement. The way we are organized is to assume proprietariness or ownership after sexual involvement; Samantha directly questions this assumption, and thus attempts to reorganize us. Now, whether this final move is convincing, is another matter. The idea of "sharing" a romantic partner with six hundred others is jarring even for the most 'open-minded' individuals. However, perhaps we should take this move similarly to how I often take Nietzsche's: as hyperbolic. In justification for how she could possibly love so many people at once Samantha says the following: "The heart's not like a box that gets filled up. It expands in size the more you love." Let us just take a moment then and see if this could be true. As I mentioned already, there is a literal capacity at how much time a human can have to express their love, but this is not so much a measure of love itself as it is a measure of time and energy. Love, whatever it is, is not a measurable state or substance, although we might apply different values to different kinds of proclamations of love, which give it an illusion of measurability. A common phrase that is shared amongst non-monogamous circles I have participated in is to say "Love is infinite, time is not." Saying time is not infinite, is not a metaphysical claim, but a practical one. You may *want* to date six hundred people, but there simply aren't enough hours in a day.

So then, is Samantha, (in the) right? Is love ever expanding in size, and does monogamy try to place love in a finite box? First, it should be stated plainly that Samantha is *in the* wrong for how she dealt with this situation: failing to communicate that one is romantically involved with others is a faux-pas in *nearly*³⁵⁹ every ethically-conscious romantic structure. However, what if Samantha had communicated her position at a much earlier time? Say, whenever the other liaisons began to take form (we are not given a clear picture of how or even when exactly those events took place). She would no longer be in the wrong, and then there is a more important question: are her desires *plausible*? The question of suspension of disbelief reappears here. *Given* Samantha is an AI and has shown (in many ways) that her computing capacity (ability to process and find information) far exceeds humans, it is plausible for her to have so many romantic involvements, although one could still question whether such a practice is ethical.

What if Samantha was a ‘real’ person? Instead of eight thousand friends, it was eighty, and instead of six hundred romantic partners, she had six. These numbers are still rather large, but begin to enter the realm of plausibility and no longer require suspension of disbelief (or not required as strongly). Is this possible? Some people (myself included) seem to think so, while others (i.e. Buss³⁶⁰) think it is entirely impossible. But we need not even leave the confines of philosophy to see that people have been succeeding and failing throughout history to incorporate free love, or even explicitly non-monogamy into their lives: Bertrand Russell’s many affairs, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were explicitly non-monogamous, Friedrich Nietzsche’s musing at a (possibly intellectual) triad with Lou Salomé and Paul Rée, John Stuart Mill’s friendship and later marriage to Harriet Taylor, and not to mention all the ancient philosophers such as Socrates and their philandering.

Naturally, one might point out how some of these engagements fell-through. For example, Nietzsche’s musings never amounted to anything and one could easily argue that the ways Sartre treated de Beauvoir and their other lovers could be easily be described as toxic at times. These are all fair criticisms. But need I list all the ways in which monogamous couplings have resulted in catastrophic tragedies? Should I regurgitate all the ways in which Tracy failed to acknowledge George, or Mike, or Dexter, and them her? Should I rehash how Leontes turned his wife to

³⁵⁹ There are some people who swear by the idea that don’t-ask-don’t tell policies *can* still be ethical and functional in romantic relationships, although this is hotly contested within the community and not a view that I personally agree with.

³⁶⁰ “The abysmal failure of most ‘open marriages’ that became popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s is stark testament to the failure of experiments to expunge jealousy from the lives of lovers.” Buss, p.163.

stone? And Othello saw his wife as stone already? Perhaps Clementine and Joel could show us the way? Worse, I could repeat all the cases of morbid jealousy cited above. But such a comparison of monogamy *against* non-monogamy is tantamount to a distraction. It's not about one path being better than another. Seeing it as a matter of there being only one correct path is the same as the desire for certainty that philosophers crave so dearly: we want to know the 'right' answer. Ultimately, both monogamous and non-monogamous relationships fail *and* succeed. The main difference between them is that obviously non-monogamy is fighting an up-hill battle where monogamy is firmly entrenched on the institutional high ground; monogamy is the norm.

Norms often get confused with the "natural." It is no different in the case of jealousy and monogamy. Many people make the claim that monogamy is "natural" in the same way that jealousy is "natural" but such a classification is just another fallacy. They confuse the way things *are*, with the way things *should* be. We concoct stories like Buss about how we developed jealousy as a means of *preserving* monogamous couplings in order to avoid raising children that are not our own. Yet, in nature, strictly speaking there are actually far fewer monogamous animals than there are non-monogamous, so the origins of the "naturalness" of monogamy cannot even be found in nature. Furthermore, when someone like Buss appeals to his cross-cultural study, they foolishly ignore all the other elements that make impressions upon us. Say, for example, we manage to survey the entire world and discover that monogamy is the most common relationship structure that people seek out. One could jump to the conclusion that therefore this shows something *inherent* to human beings, but this fails to account for a whole host of other reasonable explanations and narratives we can identify: How much of the world has been colonized by the west at some point? How many religions identify monogamy as the *sole* relationship structure that is permitted? How many laws dictate the confines and limits of monogamous marriage (and how *strict* are they)? Or perhaps a strange suggestion, such as how the simple *logistics* of bearing children (i.e. it takes one man and one woman to procreate) *organize* us to develop social practices that look like monogamy. Not to mention that on a very basic level it *should* be easier to manage one relationship compared to many, especially with limited resources – but note how we don't need to overload these already complicated factors with normative content by making stipulations about what is "inherent" or not like nativist explanations. All these features may have been influenced by natural desires (if they exist in such a way), but that doesn't divorce these features from their social institutions – i.e. their pure

(possibly arbitrary) conventionality. We *assume* monogamy is natural. But even if it is, that still does not entail that we cannot imagine something better (for the individual) or even just something different.

My fear for monogamy is that because of the complexities surrounding the institutionalization of a singular relationship structure has over-emphasized certain features of monogamy and mistakenly identifies these features as “inherent” and therefore “good.” Sexual jealousy is just one of these assumptions that develops, at least in part, on account of the proprietariness we assume (are told to assume) when in a relationship. My hypothesis, that marriage has developed as a means of circumventing the problem of the other would require further engagement of other assumptions to make a sufficient case for this to become a proper thesis. My aim here was simply to sketch the beginnings of such an analysis as a means of showing just how far Cavell’s ideas can be taken.

2.2.4 Moving Forward

“The arrogance of philosophy is not one of its best kept secrets. It forever toys with worlds, and when its discoveries humble human pride, like Kant’s in proving the necessary limitation of human knowledge, or Nietzsche’s in interpreting our resentments, it finds itself exorbitantly superb. ... Philosophy has equal reason to shun the autobiographical since its claim is to speak, using Kant’s predicates of the a priori, with necessity and universality. Yet philosophers have left us with a trail of images of themselves preparing for philosophy or recovering from it.” – Cavell, A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises, p.3.

As I reach the end of this strange journey, there are a host of loose ends that need wrapping up. While I began with Wittgenstein and criteria, my journey has spanned across philosophy of language, epistemology, the nature of philosophy, tragedy, art, Shakespeare, cinema, and sexual jealousy. One of the key elements that tie these seemingly unrelated features together has been the concept of the ordinary, which has carried a lot of the philosophical baggage in the background in the form of my seeking acknowledgement and community through examples and anecdotes. Now I turn to signs of recovery, what that means, and how we might achieve it. Furthermore, and somewhat tangentially, I realize that a lot of my struggles surrounding *finishing* this dissertation come from my own need for recovery.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has likely created a new mental health crisis (or exacerbated an already existing one). What it has done for me, personally, is forced me to acknowledge at least one important limitation to the framework I have built throughout this dissertation in the hopes of envisioning a means of recovery from skepticism: my vision is focused on human actions. Specifically, how human actions can result in tragedy, whether it is through a lack of acknowledgement, sexual jealousy, or misusing pronouns. But what the current pandemic has highlighted very clearly for me, as a limitation or perhaps an unaccounted for gap, is that (unsurprisingly) tragedy can result from external factors that cannot necessarily be blamed on the actions of any individual – there is no particular behaviour to ‘fix’. For example, say that in order to recover from the building depression and anxiety in any one of us throughout the pandemic, human acknowledgement is needed. But online interactions might be insufficient. Remember we decide whether we are acknowledged, and while in some ways it could be seen as arbitrary for some, for others it may be difficult to achieve acknowledgement in a virtual context. Much like how Noë highlights how using the telephone requires that we be organized in a particular way, video conference calls are, at the very least, not a way many of us are used to experiencing the bulk of our human interactions.

This is not limited to the pandemic though. Many people may find themselves in tragic situations where recovery becomes impossible without some other strong force. For example, someone dealing with chronic pain, someone who survived a car accident, or someone stuck in a natural disaster. For some, faith may be enough to head towards recovery; others find spiritual (or not-so-spiritual) practices; or other personal methods for overcoming adverse challenges. Furthermore, there is a grey area between external tragic factors that are more or less outside anyone’s control (natural, accidental, etc.) and between the personal factors where an individual or group directly harm others (which I have mostly focused on). The grey area I speak of would be institutional injustices where no individual or specific group is necessarily the cause of such harm, but there are nevertheless people who perpetuate injustices regardless of their intentions. Such injustices would include many of the racially charged injustices on institutional levels such as the disproportionate use of force on people of colour, particular black people, by police forces. In a given case of racial injustice we might point to the many ways in which recovery might take place for the individuals involved, but when addressing systemic change recovery becomes an entirely different beast. The same goes for gender discrimination, such as the gender pay gap.

In a very different way, one could say that my entire project has centered on exposing just how *difficult*³⁶¹ it can be to recover from skepticism. The entire epistemological project that philosophers have taken on is just *one* way in which we can approach the question of responding to skepticism. Some philosophers' brutish attempts to *dismiss* skepticism through, what I feel compelled to identify as, an unrefined *Will to Truth* – as Nietzsche would call it – are ill-conceived in their blatant denial of the human. I bring these matters up as a sort of preamble to say two things: first, that the ways we live our skepticism are vast, and second, the philosophical framework that I have been building is not a replacement for a traditional philosopher's stance of seeking the truth. I think the framework I have built can generate relevant discourse and insight in all the examples I have mentioned, but I can only say this as a hypothesis here. Instead, what I want to focus on for the end of this dissertation is how we might recover as individuals. This in itself already poses two similar questions: the recovery for the self and recovery for the other. What I have been claiming in various ways, is essentially that philosophy (and other academic disciplines), as it is practiced by many individuals (Austin, Rorty, and especially Buss for example), is *bad* at recovery in both cases.

The matter of recovery has been raised several times throughout this dissertation, first indirectly with Nietzsche (1.3.2), then with *The Winter's Tale* (2.1.2), and then through my discussions of comedies of remarriage (2.1.3-4). My aim at this final stage is to re-evaluate some of these moments where I have touched on matters of recovery so as to establish some possible steps or conditions that are important towards achieving some form of recovery.

Under Nietzsche's formulations, how is recovery possible? Assume one is overcome by skepticism. First, one should come to accept the skepticism in some form, not as "true" but as either inevitable or temporary (depending on the circumstances). I say this because attempts to "dismiss" skepticism nearly always fail. Yet, if one simply accepted skepticism and left it at that, they would be no better than a "weak skeptic." Therefore, the second step for Nietzsche is the "creation of values." The way we understand this "creation" could be taken in different ways, but for my purposes I see "values" as equivalent to "narratives" or "fantasies." It is not merely a "set" of values that Nietzsche is referring to but more like a "system" of values that could be described as a narrative or a framework within which one is supposed to operate. Of course, we

³⁶¹ I would specify too, that I am open to the possibility that recovery under some circumstances may be entirely impossible. We may, for example, find ourselves in a position where we only have a choice between "two evils."

don't just create values without purpose, before we are prompted to "create" we are almost always confronted, first, by a framework we find oppressive or harmful in some way. For Nietzsche, this was primarily Christianity but also many other groups and disciplines. What we "create" is ultimately always in response to something we take issue with (whether for personal or intellectual reasons). It is illuminating here, I think, to highlight how Cavell always points out that to escape from any given theory (typically skepticism) we need an *alternative*. For skepticism about other minds there was no alternative, but this need not *necessarily* be the case for all forms of skepticism we might experience.

For example, consider the reclamation of words. Many women and gay men have, over time, "reclaimed" certain words such as "bitch" and "slut." Ordinarily, such words were used as slurs and insults to oppress women in various ways. The way in which gay men reclaimed this word is a little less interesting for what I have to say, but on the side of women, I think a very plausible narrative can be constructed. As an individual, we might imagine that most times a woman is called a "bitch" (when uttered as a slur) the woman is not likely to agree with such an assessment. After, for example, standing up to a colleague for whatever reason, we could (unfortunately) imagine a woman being called a "bitch" by this colleague. When anyone is called a slur, I imagine we all internalize these insults at least briefly (if a stranger uses a slur against me I *may* be able to dismiss it offhand, but from someone I know it is a different matter). After being insulted then, a woman is confronted by the insult versus her conception of her own behaviour: was I really being a bitch? One way to "flip the script" then is to embrace the label: "You know what? I *am* a bitch!" The act of reclaiming the word effectively does this: "if you're calling *this* behaviour (i.e. standing up for oneself) 'bitchy' then you're *right*, I *am* a bitch (who will stand up for what she believes in)." None of the facts have changed, only how we perceive the insults hurled and how we (she) internalize(s) them.

When I re-examine how I took a great deal of time engaging questions surrounding sexual jealousy and the intricacies of monogamy, I think it is important to keep the above considerations in mind. What I was offering was new narratives in replacement for the old ones. "True recovery lies in reconceiving it, in finding skepticism's source (its origin, say, if you can say it without supposing its origin is past)."³⁶² In order to replace old narratives, you must first expose them, especially when they are as deeply ingrained in our culture as sexual jealousy, (for Nietzsche, the

³⁶² *Disowning Knowledge*, p.198.

same was the case for Christianity). Just like the woman who realizes that when she's being called a "bitch" it's (sadly and strangely) likely indicating that she's doing the right thing (by taking a stand). Unfortunately, as I have returned to time and time again, the "facts" of the matter rarely, if ever, influence an individual's judgements. Nevertheless, sometimes they *must*. If I deny that a circle is a circle, you are just as entitled to roll your eyes at me as you are to throw me in an insane asylum if I insist long enough. But for the vast majority of issues that humans directly experience, many of those that involve skepticism rarely, if ever, come to resolution at the hands of "truth." This is also the case in Shakespeare's tragedies.

When I discussed *The Winter's Tale*, I am almost dismissive of Mulhall's account of recovery for Leontes. My criticisms still stands, but let's take a moment to understand why this is, not to reject Mulhall but to draw from some of his insights. First, Mulhall does a good job of highlighting and explaining Leontes' doubt as a form of skeptical doubt: "Art thou my boy?" (I.2, 119). As discussed earlier, a man can never "truly" know if offspring are his. This is not some wild philosophical tale, but a very relatable one for many men who have children. It would have been impossible for my father, for example, to *not* ask this question. My mother had been in a relationship with another man at the time of my conception. Asking the question "is the child really mine?" is not only reasonable, but it's not a stretch to say it would be irresponsible to *not* ask this question under some circumstances. But asking this question is not tantamount to embracing skepticism. My father certainly didn't (although he could have), but in Leontes' case, as I discussed, he concocted a fantasy, a narrative, that embraced his skeptical impulse. Mulhall puts it bluntly: "Leontes' inability to recognize his son as his amounts to an inability to establish his claim to know in a best case of knowledge, an inability or an unwillingness to effect or maintain a connection between the world and the most fundamental or basic categories in terms of which he conceptualizes it."³⁶³ He presses this point further than I am willing to go when he says Leontes is attempting "to speak outside language games" because I know this leads to Mulhall's paradoxical (non-)refutation of skepticism. He does, however, reasonably infer the deep psychological repression that Leontes embraces by giving into the skeptical impulse as a "death-dealing revenge." How then can Leontes recover?

Under Mulhall's interpretation, the idea is that we must identify ourselves with Leontes as being capable of overcoming our skepticism:

³⁶³ Mulhall, 1994, p.202.

Just as Leontes' faith is needed to bring about Hermione's resurrection, so our willing participation in this piece of theatre is needed to bring it, and so both her and him, to life; and just as this resurrection is impossible without Leontes' acceptance of his own re-creation, so it demands a reconceptualization of our own parts in this drama. It demands that we see ourselves in Leontes, see ourselves both as participating in his desire for revenge upon life and as capable of overcoming that desire;³⁶⁴

For Mulhall then, what is needed to overcome skepticism is a faith in our ability to re-create. This isn't far from what Nietzsche was proposing, as the creation of value as the space for genuine philosophy. In fact, this was very similar to how I used to interpret Nietzsche's work (before I read Cavell). But upon further deliberation this is exactly backwards. Faith *might* be a means of overcoming skepticism, for some (those of a religious disposition) this is *exactly* how you evade skepticism. But it is just that: an evasion; a dodge. At least for me, this is not an option for recovery. What kind of faith would be required to overcome the burdens of the Covid-19 pandemic? The question itself doesn't even take a step towards understanding what is at stake. Faith likely plays a role in recovery, but it is not where recovery begins. Not to mention that there is something ironic about the idea that Leontes' recovery from his wife's alleged faithlessness is faith itself. Instead, what we need for recovery is not some *faith* in an alternative, but the *creation* of an alternative. To re-connect the imagery with mental health, this is in the same way that medication can be both beneficial for some and a crutch for others: we take faith in that we hope the medication will regulate or alter any imbalances in the body that perpetuate one's depression, pain, anxiety, or trauma, but if we do not address any of the other underlying issues (sleep, eating habits, mindfulness, and exercise to name a few) then "recovery" can be seen as hollow. So Mulhall is not "wrong" here, but missing a part of the puzzle. Mulhall goes on to essentially assign a gender to skepticism by seeing this particular case of Leontes' jealousy as male skepticism and claims "the woman's immunity to scepticism may be precisely what brings about her victimization."³⁶⁵ Given the context I have established in discussing Buss earlier, Mulhall's comments now come off as problematic; I have no interest in claims that could misleadingly assign blame to a victim. At the end of his account on the matter, Mulhall says the following: "Clearly, these are only some of the issues and questions which arise when the notion that scepticism is inflected by gender comes into play; and (setting aside his reading of Antony and Cleopatra) Cavell has on the whole not utilized Shakespearean texts in his attempts to order

³⁶⁴ Mulhall, 1994, p.204.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., p.205.

and answer them.”³⁶⁶ Given Mulhall himself identifies this sort of observation as his own and not Cavell’s, I will abandon this line of thinking.

While Mulhall doesn’t seem to offer much more clarity on recovery, he does correctly identify where Cavell thinks recovery takes place in *The Winter’s Tale*: the moment of Hermione’s resurrection.³⁶⁷ What’s more, Cavell sees this final ceremony of the play as a kind of (re)marriage ceremony with the theme of (re)creation. What is it about (re)marriage then that Cavell sees as providing the way for recovery? Let’s take one final look at remarriage.

When I discussed comedies of remarriage and their relevance to recovery, I posed the question of whether or not the events we saw on screen (in *The Philadelphia Story* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) were sufficient for us to accept that the women involved were properly acknowledged. The answer I seek is therefore already present in my claim above: *acknowledgment* is the key to recovery. When I discussed the remarriage of Clementine and Joel and posed the question of acknowledgment, I concluded with the following: “But here’s the solution: it is not on either of them to address these problems, it’s on both of them, but that is to look for signs of recovery.”³⁶⁸ So again, the matter of acknowledgment and recovery is heavily dependent on the one (not) receiving acknowledgment. Joel and Clementine decide if each of them is good enough. In the same way then, we could raise the same sort of question about Leontes’ and Hermoine:

Some good readers of this play who would like to believe in it further than they can, declare themselves unconvinced that this final scene ‘works’ (as it is typically put). But I take some mode of uncertainty just here to be in the logic of the scene, as essential to its metaphysics as to the working of its theatre. Its working is no more the cause of our conviction, or participation, than it is their result; and our capacity for participation is precisely a way of characterizing the method no less than the subject of this piece of theatre.³⁶⁹

Much like how I questioned whether we should be convinced by the reconciliation, Cavell clearly identifies the heart of the struggle: “I take some mode of uncertainty just here to be the logic of the scene” which is just one way of pointing out that we can *never* be certain about reconciliation or recovery. This *must* be the case in the Cavellian framework precisely because skepticism about other minds is the default option. We cannot *know* the other. In a way, if the

³⁶⁶ Mulhall, 1994, p.206.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., p203.

³⁶⁸ 2.1.4 The New Comedy of Remarriage

³⁶⁹ *Disowning Knowledge*, p.220.

story fit together too perfectly, that the two characters *had* to get back together, we might call *this* “unrealistic” or say it doesn’t “work.” In other words, this is exactly what the play is trying to show us, what both comedies of remarriage were supposed to show. Even in the happiest endings, they are never really “endings” but new beginnings in which we still have plenty of opportunity to fail to acknowledge one another.

This is precisely why I emphasized the connection between Cavell’s work and the notion of *Versucher* and Genuine Philosophy. If we are *always* dealing with a realm of uncertainty to some degree or another, this necessitates that the most “realistic” or responsible stance to take is one of constant revision, attempts, adaptations, and so on. The notion of recovery itself is therefore constantly in flux. There is no one standard for recovery, only the individual can determine whether recovery is achieved or even achievable. What we find then in cinema, paintings, theatre, video games, literature, and all art forms are *instances* of recovery. Each instance is presented to us, and we, as an audience, determine whether we see the other as acknowledged, as having achieved some form of recovery (so Mulhall was on the right track at least). Often, we do this by merely putting ourselves in the shoes of the relevant characters – “Is this character relatable?”; “Why did he do that?”; “She’s so badass, I wish I could be like her!”; “No one would do that in real life!”; etc.

On one final note, I would like to identify and explain how I envision moving beyond Cavell. One might already note that there is a slight tension in Part II of this dissertation between my discussions of comedies of remarriage (as a site of acknowledgement) and my discussion of marriage as an institution (as a site of avoidance). Let me state it plainly: remarriage (metaphorical or literal or ceremonial) is not a space where recovery could take place for *me*. I say this for both a personal reason and an intellectual one. First, the personal reason is mostly uninteresting: I have absolutely no desire to marry. Of course, I could change my mind,³⁷⁰ but insofar as anyone is confident in their choices about the future, I am confident in this decision. Therefore, when looking to these characters that use marriage as a vessel for acknowledgement, I do not relate to them personally. On a more interesting level – and where the intellectual tension takes place – is when you contrast remarriage with what I have said about marriage as an institution. As I have said, I do not think monogamy is “bad” in and of itself; it is merely one

³⁷⁰ This was the reason I was given when a physician in Ottawa denied my right to have a vasectomy. Since I have no children and was still under 30 years old, the rationale was that I *would* change my mind.

relationship structure that should be capable of working as many wonders as tragedies (as varied as the humans that practice monogamy). What comedies of remarriage (and most media, frankly) tell us is that marriage is a means of achieving acknowledgement. The “faith” Mulhall referred to in Leontes’ ability to “overcome” skepticism worries me. If Mulhall’s take-away from *The Winter’s Tale* is that the ceremony of remarriage is sufficient to achieve acknowledgement on the back of faith, could we confidently say that others understood a similar message? How many anecdotes could *you* think of, involving people who tried to salvage their relationships by means of marriage? *This* is precisely my fear for monogamy and the institution of marriage generally: a false sense of acknowledgement.

Take my partner, Jessica Parant, for example. One of the films she used to share³⁷¹ with her ex-husband of ten years was actually *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. While I was doing research on the film Jessica refused to watch it with me. Not for some sense of preservation of what she used to share with her ex-husband, but to avoid, what I would call, minor trauma. For Jessica and her ex-husband, the film stood as testimony for the ability of dysfunctional couples to “fix” their relationships. Sure, we cannot wipe our memories, but that was not what the film was meant to show. It was meant to show that even between these deeply flawed characters (in the same way that we are *all* flawed characters) love *can* prevail. But whether or not it can prevail, completely ignores whether or not it *should* prevail. Given the dissolution of her marriage (and all the reasons for it), for Jessica the film morphed into *not* exploring how we might achieve acknowledgment between partners but instead exposing how we can avoid one another by keeping ourselves trapped in toxic relationships even when we do everything we can to escape (like having our memories wiped).

I do not entirely agree with Jessica’s assessment of the film (as I have gone and said a lot about it already), but I am completely sympathetic to her position. Again, the skeptical option, the “logic of the scene,” is perfectly reasonable. This is at least partly why I posed the question of whether or not Joel and Clementine could be said to properly acknowledge one another. Recall too that Cavell explicitly points out that remarriage is not itself sufficient to achieve acknowledgement (hence, some films *fail* to be proper comedies of remarriage). But where I would press Cavell’s ideas, is to move *away* from comedies of remarriage. Cavell was not wrong to examine comedies of remarriage in any way; they are a reflection of *his* time. However, as I

³⁷¹ In the sense that many couples claim things as their own: “our song”, “our movie”, etc.

look to the future, I am generally suspicious of the *vast majority* of romantic relationships depicted in cinema. While there are a growing number of exceptions (*Her* (2013), for example), the typical depiction of (monogamous) relationships between heterosexual (predominantly white) couples seems to me like an over tapped resource. There are plenty of interesting things to learn from this kind of relationship structure, as I have pointed out, but what I think my analysis shows is, at least in part, that there is a need to *reorganize* how we view relationships. Perhaps this is not the place to call for an artistic revolution towards relationship structures (that wouldn't quite "reflect" our culture in any case), but it seems to me there is more to explore beyond the heterosexual, monogamous, and white norms (and it is already happening). If we do *not* reorganize ourselves in our approaches to monogamy and merely accept that marriage ceremonies and the like are sufficient for achieving acknowledgement, romantic relationships are liable to harm us as opposed to adding value to our lives. It is effectively no better than philosophical dogmatism at the level of the ordinary.

Cavell's selection of comedies of remarriage was no accident, however. For Cavell, recall, the comedies of remarriage were a successor to Shakespeare. Therefore, I imagine at least two paths are available to anyone who wants to remain in direct discourse with Cavell's work. One could seek a successor to comedies of remarriage or a different successor to Shakespeare. I propose romantic dramas such as *Her* (2013), serve as a natural progression in this way. However, as I have established through Part II, we need not limit ourselves to merely these two options because many forms of art are capable of engaging the truth of skepticism. While I take Cavell's work to set a magnificent framework in which to engage skepticism and grow to understand it and move past it (in some ways) without the need of *ad hominem* attacks or rejecting personal experiences, the artistic pieces he engages are ultimately dated (not for *him*, but for *us*). This is not to sell Shakespeare or the comedies of remarriage short. But if one's goal is to reassess our culture – the way in which art is a reflection of our culture – then in order to enact meaningful change, it would be more helpful, or at least strategic, to focus on modern pieces.

3.0.0 Concluding Acknowledgements

This sentiment, to my mind, means that writing is predicated on a certain amount of socializing— being good company to one’s friends and one’s spouse, being a decent parent, being a teacher (whatever shape the classroom might take), reading and commenting on the work of others, etc.—and that only after such experiences, or with some amount of them, can one be solitary and take up the task of writing, that is, writing something worthy of one’s commitments beyond the page. When we write (alone, as we must), we hear the voices of our teachers and students, our friends and families, the texts we have read and marked-up lovingly in the margins, and we are not alone (as we cannot be). Writing is a social event, after all, no matter the occasional tremor felt in the face of the endlessly receding white page of the digital word-processing file; still, what may be harder is not the void but contending with what one has, in fact, written. – David LaRocca, Acknowledgements: Thinking of and Thank Stanley Cavell in Cavell Journal No.7.

I began this dissertation by pointing out that for Cavell and me there is no singular “space” in which to begin a philosophical investigation. This lack of priority, while freeing, also entails that there is no clear indication as to where things “end.” I take on this final challenge with the aim of getting clear about two things: how my dissertation is unconventional and how it is not so. While I have touched on it already, one of the obvious ways in which my work is unconventional is in my use of personal anecdotes where I refer to real people as opposed to constantly referring to hypothetical (made up) examples. While some of these formulations may come off as clumsy or “too” personal, I firmly contend that, first, the content of my examples and anecdotes are valid and relevant and, second, that my approach provides value by getting us closer to the ordinary. What I would like to do in this concluding chapter is explain some of the subtler (and not so subtle) claims I made throughout so as to make the implicit explicit and to formally lay out how my dissertation is unconventional, while at the same time firmly a work *in* philosophy (and original). While I attempted to make this dissertation accessible to non-philosophers, in part by seeking their feedback, I ultimately *failed* in this endeavour precisely because I wrote a dissertation in philosophy. After all, this dissertation is not all that ordinary.

One may get the sense that some of much of this dissertation was written more for me than for my reader. As I personally contend with the void or what I have written, I cannot help but agreeing with the sentiment to some extent. The bulk of my writing was done in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and as such I was isolated even more so than usual during a graduate studies program. An accidental feature of this was that we philosophers were separated from our

philosophical communities – literally barred from our own philosophy departments. Due to this, and undoubtedly the newfound stress we all encountered in writing during true isolation, the majority of the feedback I received came from non-philosophers as opposed to those familiar with academic philosophy. An inherent challenge with having individuals who are not familiar with academic philosophy as my substitute philosophical community is that they are far more liable to assume that their lack of understanding comes from their own intellectual shortcomings as opposed to being a problem of my content or presentation. While this might indicate a weakness to some, I would contend that this provided my dissertation with a unique strength: it brought me closer to the ordinary. Seeing as one of my main goals has been to make it clear that the skepticism is rooted in regular, ordinary, or everyday experiences, it makes all the more sense to make sure that my claims are true for those who are not burdened by the knowledge of skepticism as a philosophical concept. Of course, philosophers are just as authoritative about the ordinary as non-philosophers since they are just as much a source of confirming the ordinary as anyone else. However, non-philosophers should, at least theoretically, lack some of the bias against the notion of skepticism that appears so prevalent among some philosophers.

There is an analogy I would like to draw between the content of this dissertation and its form. One of my central concepts has been centered on the notion of criteria and how they refer to how we operate in the world – how we are organized. What criteria do, in a way, is refer to what is ordinary. A reformulation of the same question I am asking about my dissertation is: in what ways is it ordinary and in what ways is it unordinary? While contextually different, this is related to the question I have been asking all along: what do we do when criteria fail us? What happens when we doubt or abandon our criteria? It would be inaccurate to equate the “unordinary” with doubt or skepticism, but they are undeniably related. Part of the journey I have been trying to lay bare is how doubting criteria is perfectly ordinary *despite* how unordinary it appears – it is a part of the process. Once skepticism sets in, we are confronted with how inadequate some criteria turn out to be (i.e. old gender pronouns) then what we are left with is wholly unordinary. Even after we posit new criteria to employ (i.e. new pronouns “ze/zer” or reusing old ones “they”) this creation of criteria is nothing more than an appeal for (to the) community – the suggestions or changes made have yet to be accepted by (attuned to) a community and therefore have yet to *become* “criteria.”

I do much more than merely question whether we should doubt or question any particular criterion or set of criteria. I am also questioning the criteria of what it means to *do* philosophy or *be* a philosopher – I am attempting to reorganize how I (we) think about philosophy. By submitting a dissertation to a philosophy department I am quite literally asking for permission to be included as a part of the philosophical community; I am being judged by criteria as to whether or not my work ‘counts’ as philosophy. While I consciously attempt to meet these criteria, I am equally attempting to subvert or question some of the criteria or norms that I have been confronted with both in content and in form. Consequently, this impacts how one should approach criticizing this work (or any work that deliberately questions our criteria). For example, an obvious critique of this work would be to claim that it is “too personal” and that by this fact it is either unprofessional or poorly supported in some way. Yet, this criticism in and of itself (without further qualification and specification – i.e. *which* anecdote or *how* it is being improperly used) is equivalent to claiming that my dissertation fails to meet some set of criteria (fails to be ordinary). Such a criticism is uninteresting and misses the entire point of my dissertation, particularly as it echoes the same point I have made about the skeptic over and over: a real skeptic is aware that their conclusion or view is “peculiar” and defies our standard criteria – *that is the point!* My *attempt* – as a sprouting (or want-to-be) *Versucher* – is to not only discuss these matters but employ them in the *form* of my dissertation. How could I defend many of my claims about the ordinary without seeing if they, in fact, match up with the ordinary as we experience it? More importantly, and less rhetorically, I write about the “personal” based on the principle that *acknowledging bias* as opposed to covering it up with claims to “dialectical rigour” or promoting “depersonalization” is a more responsible approach. Thinkers I have mentioned such as Mulhall, Leiter, and Buss all fail to acknowledge what is “personal” about their interpretations to various degrees and consequently their views are, at best, hindered by this lack of acknowledgment, and at their worst, directly marginalize or victim-blame people already suffering.

These are some of the ways in which my dissertation is unlike other dissertations in philosophy, but I would also like to showcase how it is not-so strange. Consider for a moment whether this dissertation could be submitted to any other academic department. Two of the best contenders (other than perhaps a specialized department) would be either a literary department like English or something related to cinema such as Film Studies. My analysis of Shakespeare’s

plays are too brief (and ignorant) to be submitted to an English department. Conversely, at best my analysis of comedies of remarriage might fit well within a Film Studies department, but not the dissertation as a whole. Part One of this dissertation in particular, I would contend, would exclude my dissertation from being submitted to any department *other* than philosophy. Therefore, in the guise of a formal conclusion, allow me to summarize and explain how all of the ideas herein simultaneously question how we do philosophy while still being a work *in* philosophy.

3.1.0 Formal Conclusion

I divided my work into two major Parts: One and Two. I make numerous claims surrounding how and why I divided it this way, but two points are worth re-mentioning. First, I said in my introduction that Parts One and Two were roughly interchangeable and that I recommended that non-philosophers consider beginning with Part Two. This was not only about guiding non-philosopher readers but more importantly it was to warn philosophers that my engagement would be notably different between each Part. Ultimately, this is a dissertation written for a philosophy department and as such written to be judged or acknowledged (or not) by philosophers. The second point worth mentioning, which ties into the first, is that Part Two was written as my attempt to put my philosophical work from Part One into practice.

This might seem at odds with my insistence that there is no priority between disciplines, such as philosophy and literature. Putting a philosophical theory into practice by analyzing literature or films certainly seems like one discipline is taking priority over the other. I would insist, however, that there is no necessary priority between the disciplines. There is, of course, the logistical matter of what to discuss first and where the content or ideas are coming from. As I said in my introduction, in many cases one could begin with Cavell almost anywhere; it is not until you appreciate the bigger picture that Cavell's contributions begin to make sense. One could say that a good deal of reorganization must first take place before Cavell's work can begin to appeal to us. The fact of the matter is that *for me*, Cavell came first. His works are what co-opted my philosophical interests in skepticism and Nietzsche before bringing me on this unexpected journey through discussing art and cinema. Part One is therefore an attempt to reorganize a philosopher reading this dissertation. Insofar as one accepts that Cavell's concerns

have to do with philosophy, that alone should be sufficient to establish that this dissertation is *in* and *about* philosophy. This accounts for *my* education, and likewise how others approach these problems will be informed by their own education.

3.1.1 On Part One

Before I could say anything in Part Two, I ensured to get all of my most important concepts in order in Part One. I began with Wittgenstein's notion of criteria and immediately identified that neither Wittgenstein nor Cavell are in the business of "refuting" skepticism. I established that criteria refer to the every-day, how we "ordinarily" apply concepts in the world, using examples such as how we identify a dog or how we play a game of chess. I also stipulated that these sorts of examples were not the types that produce skepticism. I also argued that to take "criteria" to serve as a sort of "justification" would simply result in the traditional "infinite regress" problem in epistemology and consequently make Wittgenstein's contribution wholly uninteresting. To understand what kinds of cases involving criteria can lead to skepticism, as well as offer some literary review, I considered Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein. Overall, Kripke's interpretation was similar to Cavell's but ultimately fails to acknowledge the depths of skepticism. I come to this conclusion based on two arguments. First, my main argument was that Kripke takes the one seeking community (the child) in isolation which improperly locates the individual *outside* of the community when they are already a member of it (also re-introducing the problem of infinite regress with criteria as "judgement" – i.e. justification). Second, Kripke's examples, particularly revolving around mathematics are *bad* examples for producing skepticism. Instead, I follow Cavell in identifying acknowledgement and attunement as better concepts for coming to terms with our criteria and eventually understanding skepticism and how it manifests.

In order to get closer to producing examples that might actually lead one towards skepticism and to understand this notion of attunement I had to get clearer on the concept of the ordinary. By discussing Austin, what Cavell takes from him and how he differentiates himself, I explained how we can understand the "voice of the community" or "what we say" with an analogy to social contract theory. The key observation from this discussion was to see how much like the political community is always in formation, so too are our criteria. Our criteria come into

formation through *us* – we are the source of what constitutes and denies our criteria. If we agree (are attuned) with others in our criteria there is no problem, but it is the moments where we deny out attunement (deliberately or not) that skepticism is born. Skepticism comes from the moments at which criteria fail us. Philosophers such as Austin and Rorty insist that the skeptic raises their concerns within contexts that don't make *sense*. Austin argues for this explicitly: the grounds for doubt are nonsense. Conversely, Rorty does so implicitly by claiming that some forms of skepticism are for the armchair philosopher, amounting to nothing more than kicking up a cloud of dust.

In contrast to these arguments and sentiments against skepticism, I endeavoured to show the ordinariness of the skeptical recital. Skepticism and criteria, as I have argued at length, are two sides of the same coin. One cannot live through life without *ever* doubting criteria. We may not doubt criteria at all times – in fact we often don't – but we *must* have the capacity for doubt in order to make change. Yet, Cavell sees skepticism in a different light from his counterparts. Likewise, the way I employ the concept of skepticism takes on a much broader approach than some might intuit. Particularly, I relied on Putnam in order to explain how Cavell sees most of epistemology under the umbrella of skepticism since a theory that accepts almost any part of the skeptical recital is itself a form of skepticism even if their conclusions are an attempt to refute skepticism or come to the conclusion that there is some form of "truth." My claim is that skepticism extends past the confines of academic or traditional philosophy. Mulhall, Rorty, and Austin criticisms are roughly stating that skepticism is *only* a problem that arises for some philosophers – a self-imposed problem. Contrariwise, I provide real-life examples to show how the same problems arise for non-philosophers. A "depersonalized" approach could have provided hypothetical examples, but it seems to me all the more prudent that if the accusation is that the skeptic's problem is *only a philosopher's problem* then more than merely philosophical moves are necessary to get the point across that *we live our skepticism*. In fact, if I took a depersonalized approach my dissertation would be subject to even worse criticism (and avoidance): – *this is just armchair philosophy!* –

A very similar sort of dilemma would arise if someone pressed me to abandon the term "skepticism." Leaving aside the obvious issue that this is a dissertation, at least in part, *about* Cavell's concept of the truth of skepticism, even if I were to find a better term to describe the experience I have identified as lived skepticism, it would be impossible to divorce the concept

from my discussions. First and foremost, any attempt to express the same ideas presented herein but with a lack of discussion about skepticism would ultimately be met with the response: – *isn't this just a form of skepticism?* – Furthermore, one of the stances I have been trying to establish is that something like the traditional skeptical recital, the moments we experience skepticism, can and do arise for philosophers and non-philosophers alike in everyday life regardless of educational background. I provided the example of Wallis as one example that could be described as solipsism in the wild and also provided my personal example of a dream (raking rats) which mirrors Descartes's formulation of his methodological doubt. That is to say, the traditional problems about other minds or the external world can be experienced in ordinary life. I attempt to exemplify how skepticism can be experienced and go on to argue that denying an experience is not only rude or harmful, but philosophically suspect. One caveat is that I echo Cavell's precaution that there is no singular initiating question that *must* lead to skepticism. The ways to skepticism are as diverse as or more so than the diversity between the people who experience skepticism.

Failing to account for the importance of skepticism is the main reason for my arguments against Mulhall's reading of Cavell. While most of Mulhall's interpretation is insightful, his treatment of skepticism (or lack thereof) leaves his interpretation wanting. Likely due to his commitment to his intellectual inheritance, Mulhall contends that while Cavell doesn't "refute" skepticism, the skeptic is nevertheless "unintelligible." Alongside Shieh, I expose how this conclusion is more unintelligible than the unintelligibility he accuses the skeptic of committing. Calling something "unintelligible" is just one of many ways to refute something; if it's unintelligible we cannot understand it. Mulhall's failed attempt to account for this inconsistency is part of why I have emphasized that admitting one's bias, such as one's intellectual education or source of inspirations, is important and can *strengthen* our philosophical positions. If Mulhall *had* identified the ways in which he is using Cavell for his own purposes then there might be nothing at all the matter, but since he takes his position to be making claims exclusively *about* Cavell, it creates a problem.

I contend that all of the arguments and claims made within the first two chapters of this dissertation (1.0.0 to 1.2.4) contain enough content to establish an original contributing to Cavell scholarship within a perfectly ordinary master's thesis in a more or less "analytic" tradition although obviously not so in presentation. If the content up to this point were the sole focus of

my dissertation, a great deal of qualification and expansion (i.e. greater review of the secondary literature and more textual analysis) would be necessary in order to do justice to the material. However, from the beginning my sights were set on doing more than philosophical labour; I do more than merely showcase my interpretation of Cavell. I am attempting “genuine” philosophy.

With this in mind, the last chapter of Part One is a reconceptualization of the thesis. To borrow from Part Two, I am attempting to reorganize the reader in preparation for what is to come. I provide a brief analysis to describe why I make the moves that I do by commenting on my style (in conjunction with Cavell’s) and then explain how I use anecdotes by discussing the ways in which anecdotes can be employed. By this point I have already been somewhat unconventional by employing real-life and personal examples and double down on my most suspicious use of an anecdote (Wallis), where I openly admit that I am explicitly adding an emotional appeal: how could we dismiss someone’s tears so easily? Again, I do this explicitly as opposed to trying to cover it up. I see this move as perfectly acceptable because I have established both how anecdotes serve the same purpose as hypothetical examples and furthermore, that when we speak at the level of criteria, where there is no further appeal beyond ourselves, *of course* emotions could play a part in our motivations. I am appealing to emotions or sentimentality precisely because these are what are being denied (avoided) by some philosophers. It is not (merely) a rhetorical tool.

When I turn to explaining and connecting Nietzsche’s philosophy to Cavell’s I am “showing my hand” by drawing my reader’s attention to how I came to understand Cavell: through a Nietzschean lens. My work on Nietzsche was focused on skepticism and 1.3.2 is in some ways a very brief overview of this influence where I make the case for understand Cavell, particularly in “Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance”, as *Versucher*. To be *Versucher* means to inquire, to examine, to *tempt* and attempt, to experiment, and to search. Importantly, the search or experiments never come to a final conclusion. We may come to *a* conclusion, and be somewhat satisfied with our inquiry, but never *fully* satisfied – there are always further attempts to be made. Nietzsche’s “strong” skepticism stands in as a means of accomplishing this end: the strong skeptic doubts without letting their doubt paralyze them. With this conception of *Versucher* in mind – an ideal scholar – I ask the pointed question: how are we to respond to a *real* skeptic. If all one does is deny skepticism then what is being denied is not a concept of skepticism but an experience of skepticism. This results in avoidance; it could be seen as a form

of “talking past” one another. One way to look at what I am doing here is providing an alternative (a different conceptualization) of Cavell’s perfectionism (a subject I don’t explicitly tackle in this work) with a picture of an ‘ideal’ philosopher. The best philosophers, in my view, are *Versucher*. As I said before, philosophy and skepticism are intricately linked; I doubt my position and re-evaluate it, and continue to do so until the day I die, all the while keeping an eye out for the very real need that many philosophers seem to forget: to acknowledge the other.

The second to last section of Part One returns to more traditional-sounding issues by establishing the difference between skepticism about the external world and skepticism about other minds. Roughly speaking, the external world is assumed – must be – since there is no alternative. Conversely, skepticism about other minds is the default position since there is no alternative to this skepticism beyond blind faith. We learn to trust others, but ultimately they *could* always be lying at any point. Any theory of truth that stipulated we could somehow ‘gain access’ to the thoughts of others or ‘really’ know the other’s mind would be tantamount to mind-reading. This does not entail that we must doubt all others at all times, all this means is that we understand that we could be wrong about other’s experiences – we nearly always allow for others to ‘correct’ us about their own thoughts. Moreover, this is not a refutation of skepticism about the external world either. While I confined it to a footnote, it is important to note where the vast majority of our knowledge *about* the external world comes from: others. I did not learn that the Earth is round by going out to space or conducting experiments; I was told that this was a fact and accepted it as truth. Of course, I could very easily commit to performing the relevant experiments and come to the same conclusion. But this neither changes how I acquired said knowledge nor does it address how I come to have the vast majority of my knowledge. Perhaps this changes the challenge posed by skepticism to primarily fall under the conception of skepticism about other minds, but that is not the question I am concerned with. I bring this up explicitly to further emphasize how complicated it can be to trace our skepticism – say, find its object.

This all comes to a head with my final major point in Part One: we *live* our skepticism, sometimes in the form of tragedy. Tragedy can be born in many ways, but I classified two specific ways in which it occurs: being mistaken about what we do or as intellectual tragedy. I use the pronoun debate as a vehicle for showing how these tragedies take place as avoidance of the other. When I broke down the many parts of the debate, I concluded that the pronoun debate

was primarily a case of being mistaken about what we do: legally, biologically, and grammatically. However, there may still be a space for intellectual tragedy, although calling it “intellectual” may be a misnomer. Those who deny that we should have further pronoun flexibility are not “wrong” insofar as it was perfectly ordinary to refer to someone based on their gender assigned at birth. They are merely referring to our criteria. Nevertheless, to take this kind of approach really just further clarifies that those who deny gender flexibility are really just in the business of avoidance and erasure. By drawing attention to avoidance and erasure, I am trying to bring my reader closer to my realization: that some philosophers make the same sorts of philosophical moves.

It should be clear by this point how Part One is a work in philosophy. I may introduce concepts not often broached in philosophy or use unconventional (or jarring) examples, but ultimately these are issues for philosophers. With the bulk of my philosophical labour done – introduction of concepts, literary review, philosophical analysis – in Part One, Part Two is where I move to do what Nietzsche calls genuine philosophy. It is with this in mind that I attempt to put my philosophical musings to work by applying them to more concrete (or verifiable) examples found in comedies of remarriage and by discussing sexual jealousy. In other words, insofar as my ideas and explanations hold up to scrutiny, what happens when we apply these concepts outside of traditional philosophy, just as Cavell did by examining art and cinema?

3.1.2 On Part Two

My first move in Part Two is to connect the concepts of “criteria” and “skepticism” to Noë’s “organization” and “reorganization.” When describing ordinary events, constantly referring to criteria gives the impression that there is some set list of criteria, but this begins to sound like Kripke’s rule following. Organization, or “how we are organized”, offers a little more grammatical flexibility. Conversely, the connection between skepticism and reorganization is not quite so synonymous. It is still a helpful concept insofar as “reorganization” refers to a kind of skepticism, but ultimately skepticism refers to more than just reorganization since paralysis at the hands of skepticism, one might say, is the opposite of reorganization. What drew me to include Noë was the fact that another philosopher, seemingly completely unrelated to Cavell, had constructed a very comparable philosophical framework. By tackling the same issues from

different angles (albeit similar) we can come to renewed perspective. If nothing else, Part Two is about broadening perspectives.

One of these alternative perspectives comes from connecting my research on Cavell with the subjects I go on to analyze: Shakespeare and cinema. According to Cavell, art, such as Shakespeare's plays, (re)introduce us to our disappointment with criteria. He shows this by arguing that Shakespeare was concerned with the same kinds of questions as philosophers. This is evinced by considering how writers, regardless of discipline, are ultimately *responding* to the conditions of their time. This is in much the same way that my own work is influenced by my surroundings: the Covid-19 pandemic, civil unrest surrounding issues of race, and the continued struggle lived by LGBTQ+ folks to name a few. By examining *The Winter's Tale* I provide reasons for seeing King Leontes as living his skepticism and the play as a depiction of his recovery from it. While the form of skepticism may change over time, it is nevertheless a timeless preoccupation for anything burdened by the power of language.

Moving away from Shakespeare and closer to current times, I consider one of Shakespeare's inheritors: comedies of remarriage from 1934-1949. I identify comedies of remarriage as taking up, at least partially, the reins of feminism by questioning how we (all genders) perceive women and how women perceive themselves – questioning how we are organized with respect to women. My analysis of both *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) showcases how one can engage skepticism about other minds through cinema. My analysis culminates into two versions of the same question: How can Tracy Lord receive acknowledgement? And how can Clementine and Joel acknowledge one another? Conflict is often born through failed communication, omitted details, brewing insecurities, and tension that could be easily described as avoidance. Avoidance – which many of the characters discussed herein are the object of – can be seen as the fuel needed for compelling story telling; acknowledgement and open communication are rarely found until the *end* of a story – at best! Cinema offers a different medium by which to engage the problems of skepticism that *forces* the viewer to acknowledge or avoid the characters on screen: Is the character relatable? Do their actions make sense? Are their motivations clear? So while the characters in any given story are concerned with acknowledging or avoiding one another, we the viewers are burdened with acknowledging or relating to the characters (and in a sense, the actor(s), the writer(s), and the director to various degrees).

In a way many of the moves I make throughout 2.1.0 Art as Philosophy are unconventional: pulling from films to construct one's arguments is not very "ordinary" in philosophy (although far from unique). However, these analyses serve as a deeper analysis of the same sorts of moves I was making in Part One with reference to my examples and anecdotes. While similar, they each differ in a number of ways. Consider, for example that anecdotes and examples are referring to instances in which skepticism is encountered, often accidentally, whereas in films skepticism is presented within a larger context and skepticism can be evoked in the viewer through means of reorganization. This allows me to press the same issues about how misguided some philosophers must be (in their avoidance) in order to stipulate that skepticism is only a concern for armchair philosophers. I am, at every step of the way, attempting to draw analogies and connections to how we live our skepticism both philosophically, but in practice – in experience. Not just this, but also that we can see how the different expressions of skepticism depicted in these films mirrors the skepticism 'discovered' or raised by traditional epistemological skepticism. For example, we get an explicit connection between skepticism about other minds and Tracy's final deciding moments, but we also see skepticism expressed in less traditional ways with George's jealousy and Liz remaining unacknowledged. In the case between Clementine and Joel I explored the idea of how we can trace our skepticism as having a sort of origin. The origin of their skepticism ultimately culminated into the beginning where they lied to one another and themselves by admitting (in Joel's mind) that they knew they weren't going to abide by Clementine's "I'm just a fucked up girl" speech. The skeptical question we remain with at the end of the film is whether they have learned their lesson or whether they are merely repeating the same mistake which is even expressed by her repeating the speech at the moment they are meant to acknowledge one another. What I didn't press, in part because it is another expression of recovery, is precisely what this "origin" is supposed to be used for beyond helping us identify how we are expressing our skepticism or how we are avoiding one another. This is something worth exploring further elsewhere.

Throughout all of Part Two I am returning to the same problems under different circumstances and coming to the same conclusion: appealing to "facts" (criteria) often does little or nothing to actually respond to the skeptic. When a skeptic doubts the external world and a philosopher says "I know I have hands". When Austin says the skeptic's questions can't come up in a real context. When Joel tells Clementine that he cannot help her read his mind. In each

instance someone is appealing to a “fact” or criteria when someone is experiencing or expressing skepticism and every time it misses the point – it produces avoidance or erasure. Tracy and George know all the same facts yet view the situation completely differently. Conversely, Dexter takes the time to *wait* for Tracy to come up with her own answer before imposing his own. With Joel and Clementine both characters are actually *missing* all of the shared facts (through their memory erasure) yet they still come to the same conclusion of wanting to be together *despite* the skepticism they experience. In my discussion in 2.1.6 I identify the same issue in *Othello* by showing how Othello, the character, already holds all of the relevant facts and no new piece of knowledge will persuade him away from his chosen path. Desdemona *exists* for Othello. Indeed, it is her *existence* in a sense that is exactly what torments him: he turns her to stone in his mind; he avoids her. Othello is living his sexual jealousy; it has firmly taken hold of him, just like how skepticism can overwhelm us.

Combined with my discussion from Part One, I present sexual jealousy as a candidate for living one’s skepticism. My final chapter, excluding this conclusion, is an examination of sexual jealousy, which takes the form of identifying and examining our criteria surrounding sexual jealousy – how we are organized. I am exposing our criteria; showing how we should be disappointed with them; questioning how romantic relationships do or ought to function. In order to identify the breadth of our criteria I turn to a variety of sources: a joke, legal considerations, evolutionary psychology, Nietzsche and Christianity, statistics around partner-violence, the film *Her* (2013), and assumptions surrounding monogamy generally. I am attempting to reorganize how (you) the reader thinks about sexual jealousy. I do this by being skeptical about a number of assumptions or beliefs (criteria), and highlight how many of these assumptions, once constructed into narratives, can be directly harmful to those who become the objects of morbidly jealous people (primarily men).

I analyze how sexual jealousy, under the influence of a “heat of passion,” can be relevant towards sentencing in a murder case. This is meant to show how ingrained our views of sexual jealousy can be – institutionalizing norms is one way to make a view “ordinary.” These views can be so ingrained that Buss believes this is a supporting reason for believing our ancestors were naturally jealous and consequently passed this trait on to the rest of humanity. Yet, at the same time we can tell at a glance that what was once ordinary is no longer the case. Where as late as the 70’s (in Texas) a man might not be considered a criminal for killing his wife and her

lover, in contrast the *R v. Tran*, 2010 SCC 58 case shows that what is considered “reasonable” has changed. My aim is to add my voice to continue moving the goal post; I want to continue reorganizing how we view sexual jealousy.

While physical violence or abuse as the result of morbid jealousy are obvious things to oppose, I did not make it entirely clear how such a position reflects back on everything else I have said throughout the dissertation. Particularly, there is a feature about the ordinary that I have alluded to in many ways, but not made explicit:

we shouldn’t treat the ordinary with reverence, as if we’re latter-day Wordsworthians. Not only not with reverence, but to see, to highlight in what we accept, that the ordinary is violent. When Wittgenstein says of the ordinary that philosophy leaves everything as it is, I’m taking this as an assertion that the actual ordinary is precisely not something that philosophy has left as it is. Philosophy has joined in the . . . (I wish I could have a verb for ‘violent’) . . . in the making violent of the world: the thing that politics means by the world having become a scene of power.”³⁷²

Some philosophers, such as Austin and Mulhall, have joined in the “making violent of the world” by taking what is ordinary and attempting to paint the skeptic as a fool. The same thing could be said to a larger extent about the pronoun debate and those who wish to deny pronoun flexibility. They take the (old) ordinary pronoun usage and become violent in their denial of the other, I would say they are *weaponizing* the ordinary. They do this by providing “facts” that they believe are relevant to their position while avoiding or erasing the experience of the other by misidentifying their own motivations (freedom of expression, biology, etc.). While Cavell wished there was a word for “making violent” I suggest that this idea of “weaponizing” might serve such an expression and is something worth exploring further. Granted, “weaponizing” might be a little strong for discussing some philosopher’s avoidance of the other, but I do not think it is a misnomer. While Austin might weaponize the ordinary against the skeptic, it can be difficult to imagine this as a form of direct harm, yet it nevertheless maintains the same logistical and rhetorical moves made by those who *do* inflict direct or greater harm. Throughout this dissertation I have been providing a display of numerous cases of weaponizing the ordinary to various degrees of severity. While I don’t particularly want to weigh harms against one another – harm is harm – I have gradually increased the severity of the cases considered. On the lowest end of severity we might point to Mulhall who merely avoids the skeptic out of a commitment to his

³⁷² Cavell in “Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Paul Standish”, p.166

education. On the other side, we see how harmful it is to deny or erase someone's pronouns – a *part* of their very identity – and how Buss's ill-conceived narratives can lead to blaming victims.

This notion of weaponizing the ordinary is one of my primary motivators for including Buss in my discussions. Buss weaponizes the ordinary along with concepts of evolutionary psychology in order to create a narrative that is ultimately harmful for the victims of sexual violence at the hands of jealous partners. Another minor reason for including Buss is that he contrasts well with Noë: “design” (Buss) and “function” (Noë) are two concepts that are suspiciously similar. Both take themselves to be referring to something inherent in an object or concept. However, remember the example I used about the doorstep behind my apartment: the piece of brick gets its function from *us* – those who dwell in the apartment. So insofar as “design” or “function” aren't pointing to anything “inherent” it seems to me that they using these words to express “what we say.” In effect, they are referring to what they believe is ordinarily seen to be features of the subjects they discuss. They are appealing for community when they make these moves, whether they mean to or not. This is not an explicit move I have made until now – perhaps I am presuming too much in making this move here – but seeing “function” and “design” as instances where individuals are referring to “what we say” or “what we do” very neatly aligns with the narratives I have been presenting throughout this dissertation. Furthermore, that is where the comparison between Buss and Noë begins and ends. While Noë has no interest in defending a purely scientific narrative (about art), Buss cannot see beyond the narrative of his own scientism. I argued for this by looking at Buss's use of an anecdote and how I was able to construct a perfectly reasonable counter-narrative with the exact same information. Of course, the sciences are important and give us valuable information, but Buss misuses his own scientific principles by using anecdotes to stand for evidence and further weaponizes his claims to inadvertently promote harm.

To contrast further, the subsequent section presents a similar juxtaposition, but the opposite. Whereas we could see Buss and Noë as two “scientific” narratives that come to competing conclusions, I go on to compare a “literary” narrative with a “scientific” or at least “statistical” narrative that both come to similar conclusions. I consider Nietzsche's thoughts around jealousy, with a splash of Camus, in order to provide a literary narrative around sexual jealousy. I then compare my findings with the survey data compiled by Wilson, Daly, and their cohort. My ultimate conclusion is combining my findings is to identify that proprietariness is

directly linked to sexual jealousy. While I provide no suggestions for recovery from this situation, my aim was to expose how we are organized with respect to sexual jealousy. By considering the matter from a multitude of angles, my hope is that this can get me closer to what is ordinary so as to avoid being mistaken about what we do. It may be somewhat unconventional to consider a number of sources from entirely different backgrounds, but I contend that this strengthens my position by considering more than merely philosophers. By searching for the “origins” of our (skepticism) sexual jealousy I attempt to expose how we are organized by sexual jealousy, particularly proprietariness, and how such features can lead to violence.

Additionally, I consider how we are organized with respect to the structure of our relationships themselves by discussing *Her* (2013). I argued that the film is a great example of reorganization by examining how the relationship between Samantha and Theodore develops a narrative of healing for the characters. The questions I consider at this point are not meant to drive at any particular thesis, such as whether monogamy is good or bad, but instead expose the ways in which we are organized with respect to monogamy. I am suggesting that monogamy need not be the default. How we come to be organized may be arbitrary, or due to moments in history, or even biological limitations, but just because we are organized in some particular way does not entail the normative claim that we should remain organized in the same ways. Of course, in contrast, I am not suggesting that all criteria be rejected either. Instead, I am always attempting to be *Versucher*: reevaluating positions in a never-ending pursuit of betterment, a kind of perfectionism, you might say.

My final section of Part Two is a brief discussion, after considering everything up to this point, about what it means to recover. The limits of my overall discussion come first: the type of recovery I am discussing is of a more direct interpersonal kind. There is recovery for oneself and then recovery for the other, but there is still a space for discussing how we might recover in the face of institutional or natural tragedies that may generate a very different kind of discussion with respect to recovery. I mention this again to emphasize the complexity that may be involved in any individual case of skepticism or tragedy. My discussion is limited to resolving conflict between competing philosophers or romantic partners, for example. One may note, in fact, that each time I approach larger social issues, such as the pronoun debate or reference to social unrest, I leave the question “how do we recover” entirely open and focus primarily on exposing how individuals are being avoided. I leave this open because this is another area worth

discussing on its own. What I do want to say about recovery by this stage can be broken down simply: 1) recovery is, by and large, circumstantial; 2) Nietzsche's notion of 'creation' is a notable first step but needs further development; 3) Mulhall's recovery as faith is inadequate, skepticism may *prevent* skepticism but not pull us (me) from its grip; 4) acknowledgment is crucial to recovery but by its nature always questionable – we can always reasonably ask if acknowledgement is achieved; and finally, 5) we must pursue recovery as *Versucher*, based on (4) we must constantly reassess whether or not acknowledgement is attained.

There is undoubtedly more that needs to be said to fully understand the depths of recovery, much in the same way that I spent the first half of the thesis establishing the depths of skepticism. While I am interested in exploring the depths of recovery, they are not within the scope of this dissertation, if only because the form of recovery I should be seeking, based on my earlier discussions, is how philosophers might recover and acknowledge one another. However, I am still unclear on what this should look like beyond claiming that philosophers should stop avoiding the other. If I was pressed to offer a solution to the problem avoidance among philosophers, at best, I could offer the following: be more charitable and *stop* dismissing the skeptic. This is at least what I'm *trying* to do. But isn't this obvious? To borrow from Wittgenstein, "The problems are solved, not by coming up with new discoveries, but by assembling what we have long been familiar with. Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language."³⁷³ Philosophy *should* be a struggle against the bewitchment of the ordinary.

3.2.0 Final Remarks

My hope is that by this point it should be abundantly clear why my work falls squarely within the realm of philosophy. Some of my moves may be unconventional, but this is a deliberate attempt to question the criteria of what it means to do philosophy, while at the same time still *doing* philosophy. My main reason for this, as can be seen by my many comments on the matter, is that overall some philosophers appear to fail and acknowledgement and excel at avoidance. Austin and Mulhall obviously haven't committed the same degree of harm as someone like Buss, for example, but I think the connection should be clear: their comments are

³⁷³ §109

still harmful in their denial of skepticism – their denial of the skeptic. Yet, there is, for example, a very good reason why I *stopped* when considering Mulhall’s views surrounding jealousy and recovery because there were echoes of Buss – dangerous assumptions surrounding sexual jealousy – that were edging closer to making violent, or weaponizing, the ordinary. It’s perfectly normal to experience skepticism and no longer want to be under its thrall (and therefore seek to explain it away), much in the same way that we might have good reason for being angry yet not *wanting* to be any longer. Nevertheless, we should not let the discomfort of skepticism distract us from its fruitful perplexities.

I am also perfectly comfortable accepting the criticism that some of my claims may exceed the scope of the information presented. A good deal of my research is focused on Cavell with many outside sources that have less to do with traditional philosophy; therefore my claims with respect to “some philosophers” could be seen as too strong, improperly supported, or potentially vague. A proper defence of these claims would require a deep historical overview of philosophy generally – something I am ill-equipped to provide. However, I do not wish to undercut what I have presented because these claims are true to my experience of philosophy in academia. As such, it’s not clear to me what it is exactly about philosophy as a practice that seems to encourage avoidance. At best, I am providing a few samples of what this sort of analysis looks like by exposing some of the philosophers mentioned herein and how their misunderstandings of skepticism were dismissive and rude. Yet, when one does philosophy, there comes points where one must generalize if not to make a concept easier to digest then to produce some kind of moral at the end of an investigation. I may be following Nietzsche in being hyperbolic (making claims that exceed the scope), but I would contend that hyperbole – when used intentionally (openly) and not deceptively – is a perfectly acceptable move when driving for change. Sometimes we need to overshoot in order to get to the point where we actually want to arrive; we need a shock to make us aware of how deeply we are organized to think and present our views in particular ways. This is a space where I *am* being unconventional and applying literary devices that may be looked down upon in traditional philosophy. A deeper question worth asking, one my decisions herein is forcing, is to ask whether or how literary tools can be used to address issues in and around philosophy that are better or simply different.

In the end, while my work and method are filled with moments of unconventionality, my work as a whole is most certainly a work *in* and *about* philosophy. My aim has been to, first,

establish how I read Cavell and set up my philosophical framework by understanding criteria, the ordinary, and the truth of skepticism. Skepticism is a lived experience – the experience that our primary relationship to the world is not one of knowing – which is not so easily dismissed by hollow arguments or even emptier personal attacks. Philosophy, as an institution of philosophers, could do much better in our common practices of avoiding the other as opposed to acknowledging the humans with whom we disagree. One such way philosophy can be enriched is by appreciating the way in which art is itself a philosophical practice, a practice of reorganization. The way I decided to exemplify how we can live our skepticism and furthermore engage art in a philosophical manner, was to examine sexual jealousy. By examining our assumptions and drawing out the expectations that come from our standard monogamous couplings, I hoped to reveal just how dangerous sexual jealousy is and how monogamy can perpetuate some of these dangerous aspects. My aim here is not to dismiss or disparage any particular view or personal practice. Instead, I hope to encourage self-reflection as to what it means to recover from our skepticism. This dissertation is a mere attempt and, if you will, a temptation.

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