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SKEPTICISM AND THE SKEPTICAL SPIRIT

Stanley Cavell: The Philosophical Challenge of Literature

by

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates different interpretations of modern skepticism in philosophy and literature. In philosophy, skepticism is most generally understood as the achievement (or consequence) of a certain kind of epistemological enquiry. Whether skepticism is directed toward knowledge of the existence of a separate and independent, "external" world, or toward our knowledge of the existence of others like ourselves in it (in the Anglo-American tradition, what is called "the problem of other minds"), this comprehensive philosophical perspective is most often neither consistently defended nor absolutely refuted and yet it remains a constant theme of contemporary philosophy. But in Shakespearean Tragedy, Romanticism, and American Transcendentalism, skepticism is presented as a moral or practical issue rather than, or at least prior to, any epistemological one that may arise. If the latter view is a defensible one, and this thesis attempts to show that it is, then its consequences for, and beyond, philosophy are as disturbing as they are fascinating.

An interpretation of certain key literary texts as studies of skepticism is part of the overall argument of this thesis to the effect that literature challenges philosophy's understanding of the skeptical problem, hence also philosophy's self-understanding. Furthermore, the investigation of certain interactions between philosophy and literature with respect to skepticism undertaken in the present work challenges our ordinary understanding of what it is to think about and to describe ourselves and the world,

philosophically or otherwise, and what it is to act, one among others, as a knower and agent in the world.

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PREFACE

While I provide a full introduction to my thesis, these prefatory remarks comprise an introductory summation intended to explain what the reader can expect from the work and the various steps in the argument which lead to its final conclusion.

A study of skepticism is at the very least one filled with intellectual challenge and fraught with practical danger. In an attempt to meet that challenge and negotiate that danger, I first propose certain parameters for the present study. These parameters effectively limit my exploration to modern skepticism with the stated purpose of determining what skepticism is or is not about.

In the first instance, it is crucial to present a clear and straight-forward account of the Cartesian legacy since modern skepticism acquires its seminal philosophical articulation in Descartes's writings. The manner in which Descartes interprets skepticism and to what end is never at issue in the present work. Rather, how modern philosophy has traditionally understood and responded to the skeptical position Descartes outlines and with what consequences are the subjects I first take up in Part I. There I discuss what Jonathan Dancy once characterized as the "skeptical tendency" of Cartesianism, that is, the dangerous tendency in the whole of modern philosophy for ordinary knowledge-claims to require or take on, explicitly or otherwise, certain idealist qualifications.

My examination of G. E. Moore's treatment of skepticism serves to confirm and illustrate Dancy's claim. Moore's theory of

perception is shown to guide and inform his anti-skeptical arguments in defense of common sense. That theory is itself shown to take as its starting-point the traditional Cartesian mind/body distinction and to claim epistemological priority for our own "ideas" or "inner" experience. Therefore, it must come as no surprise to discover that, for Moore, the propositions of ordinary common sense about the existence of the world and others in it must be supported by or arrived at through inference and analogy. This necessity is clearly contrary to our everyday understanding of the relation between the world and our knowledge-claims about it. Yet it is a common enough failing of modern philosophy that acknowledges the tendency of Cartesianism to perpetuate what Descartes sets out to combat, namely skepticism. While I find Moore's argument against skepticism fatally flawed in this way, a review of his writings nonetheless proves helpful in understanding why this is so. At the same time, such a review inevitably moves our study in the direction of Austin, Wittgenstein, and Cavell, each of whom takes up, in their own peculiar way, Moore's insistence on the ordinary or everyday as the vantage point from which skepticism is best understood.

My examination of contemporary views of skepticism continues with a consideration of J. L. Austin's ordinary language philosophy. Austin's analysis of our ordinary concept of knowledge and the everyday use of epistemological terms proves illuminating. But we see that and how the application of ordinary language procedures to the post-Cartesian skeptical problematic is misguided

and inappropriate. Indeed, the skeptical philosopher readily concedes the validity of the arguments Austin so skilfully puts forward about knowledge-claims entered in the context of the everyday. But the skeptical philosopher insists these arguments fail to meet the skeptical problem at the point where it actually becomes a philosophical issue. This is the point where the question which arises is not about what anything is but about whether and how I can know that anything at all exists beyond me, or my senses. And so Austin does not fall into skepticism in the same way that Moore does. Rather, Austin deliberately avoids the problem and hence dogmatically denies it significance. And this brings us to the fundamental question of this thesis, namely, what, if any, is the significance of skepticism. That is, whether and how skepticism is a position that can be achieved and sustained intellectually or otherwise, and what drives anyone to strive for it? It is just such a question as this that guides and informs Stanley Cavell's philosophical/literary elucidations.

In Part II, a review of Cavell's Wittgensteinian-inspired practice of ordinary language philosophy carries us some distance toward articulating an intellectually satisfying and practically helpful understanding of skepticism. Cavell's interpretation of Wittgensteinian, as opposed to Austinian, *criteria* is particularly useful as an interpretative tool to distinguish between philosophical and ordinary contexts of knowledge and doubt. This distinction helps provide a clear picture of what skepticism is not: whatever else skepticism is about, it is not simply, or in the

first instance, about knowledge.

In recent debate on the issue, the claim that "scepticism, properly understood, is not just about knowledge," is a controversial one.¹ From the perspective of the practical consequences for philosophy should such a claim go through, on the one hand, certain philosophers worry that if an interpretation of skepticism as, in the first instance, a non-epistemological issue is sufficiently compelling, then skepticism and hence, also, philosophy, will no longer be interesting.² This worry implies a rather narrow view of philosophy which the present work rejects. However, more worrisome still are the consequences envisioned in recent and inflationary arguments in defense of skepticism as just a problem of knowledge.³

On the other hand, for some philosophers, whatever their view

¹see M. Burnyeat and M. Frede, eds. *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), Preface, p. x.

²see Peter Unger, *Ignorance: A case for Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) pp. 10-13.

³*Ibid.* Unger strenuously defends both the view that skepticism is strictly about knowledge and the skeptical conclusion that "nobody knows anything about the external world (p. 11)." Unger acknowledges the difficulties associated with any attempt to articulate his position in a way that is consistent with ordinary beliefs and the language in which these are embodied (p. 6). In order to align the skeptical position with ordinary beliefs, Unger argues that we can and ought to dramatically alter the allegedly erroneous everyday beliefs about the world that we now hold and which conflict with skepticism or what he calls "universal ignorance." (pp. 92ff.) Unger insists that philosophy's task is to change the world and our view of it, (which for Unger is one and the same thing), by finding a different natural language, creating a new language or radically changing our current language so as to avoid the use of terms like "knowledge," "justification," "reason," "truth," "belief," "certainty," and the epistemic and theoretical commitments now related to them. (p. 314ff.)

of the arguments presented here, skepticism as primarily a non-epistemological issue may seem so deflationary that nothing more need be said on the subject and epistemologists can now safely, and justifiably, simply refuse to talk to the skeptic.⁴ But for Cavell, and for this thesis, the sheer tenacity of the epistemological interpretation of skepticism provides sufficient testimony of the seriousness of the issue and the necessary motivation to pursue it still further.

With Cavell's heuristic distinction between "generic" and "specific" objects, or between Wittgensteinian and Austinian objects, we are able to determine part of the truth or moral of skepticism, namely, skepticism is a threat impervious to philosophical attack of the sort traditionally launched against it and, hence, skepticism remains a standing threat that should not be ignored in the hope that it will simply go away. This is because, as Cavell says in a recent article, "skepticism is not the discovery of an incapacity in human knowing"; rather, skepticism shamelessly, that is, intellectually, confesses "an insufficiency in acknowledging what in my world I think of as beyond me, or my senses."⁵ To appreciate this as the truth of skepticism is to take the first step toward recovery, beyond epistemology and into the realm of the self. But the human aspiration to self-knowledge is

⁴See, for example, Michael Williams, "Coherence, Justification, and Truth," in *Review of Metaphysics*, 34 (December 1980), pp. 243-72.

⁵Stanley Cavell, "Something Out of the Ordinary," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 71:2 (November 1997), p. 26.

traditionally more the subject of literature than philosophy. Thus, if we would gain a better understanding of what skepticism is, its motivations and consequences, then we must look elsewhere than philosophy.

In Part III, Cavell's elucidations of Shakespearean Tragedy and Romanticism provide the framework needed to mount a philosophical challenge from literature, namely, a new and compelling interpretation of some of the merits and consequences of skepticism. I already find in Part II that one of the difficulties for philosophy in its treatment of skepticism is that traditional philosophical procedures are simply unable to get at the problem, to take it seriously, to make it a real, live issue for us. But the poet or dramatist has other tools, relatively-speaking less precise ones but, for all that, further reaching in their own peculiar way.

Cavell claims that Shakespeare's Tragedies are experiments in skepticism which predate Descartes's own and that they present us with clear and telling pictures of the life of the skeptic. More importantly for this thesis I find Cavell's notion of a "best case for knowledge" in his analogy between philosophical skepticism and tragedy particularly useful. His analogical tool helps us uncover a number of perfectly credible candidates for the role of skeptical motivation, namely, neediness and dependence, fear, jealousy, pride, desire, and even self-loathing. The skeptic is thus driven to deny or repudiate what he or she cannot simply fail to know and then to further compound the thing by turning this moral or

practical act, wherein all that is missing is simple human honesty and fortitude, into a case of absence or lack of knowledge. In full flight from the freedom, responsibility and interdependence that are the peculiar marks of the human, the skeptic would shed his or her very skin, which has become burdensome in its unique form and distinction, and be instead a thing alone, unknowing and unknown, *inhuman*.

Cavell's most important contribution to the literature of skepticism is to have recognized and so forcefully shown us that the human spirit has a skeptical tendency and that skepticism - the drive toward the *inhuman* - is thus one of the possibilities of the *human*. Avoiding or coping with that truth about ourselves, about skepticism, is shown to be an exercise in self-knowledge involving both feeling and will as well as reason. It is an exercise in which Kant stopped short, serving only to heighten its urgency for those who would follow him.

In section two of Part III, I review Kant's theory of transcendental idealism informed as it is by his doctrine of the complete diversity of the ideal, or *noumenal*, and the real, or *phenomenal*. I argue there that the cost of Kant's bargain with skepticism to secure knowledge of the phenomenal world is, in effect, a repudiation or denial of knowledge of the *in itself*. I claim that the immediate effect of such a denial is to shift the skeptical problematic to the level of ethics and aesthetics, thus revealing skepticism's true depth and its natural haunt. But I also claim that a further effect is that, despite Kant's best

efforts, he is unable to put back together the world, the form of life, he has so deftly dissected, namely, the human. The moral and the aesthetic already lay dead by his hand and we see how his valiant attempt to animate their remains is, at least for the Romanticist, a poor thing indeed.

Cavell must be credited for finding in the notion of animism, the subject of the third section of Part III, Romanticism's critical and analogical weapon in its battle against both Kant's settlement with skepticism and against skepticism itself. In Cavell's elucidation of Coleridge's poem, *The Mariner*, Cavell finds an identification between a dead bird, a world navigator and the poet. The poet does not, as it were, step back from the world he creates and the forms of life depicted there; he inserts himself into his creation and shares in its forms of life taking on all the advantages, and the risks, attendant upon such literary license and intimacy. For navigator and poet alike, no sea is so big, no port so far, no boundary so demarcated, no sign so adamant that they are barred from going where they will.

Ultimately for the Mariner, his ship is becalmed; he sees no ports, no lines, nothing to indicate life and its multiplicity of forms. On Cavell's reading, Coleridge presents an image of the skeptic haunting a realm beyond Kant's critical line, a picture, which philosophy was unable to provide, of life lived under the consequences of skepticism. But more importantly, Cavell insists that Coleridge's poem presents a commonly-shared or universal skeptical tendency or spirit as a form of animism. The Mariner's

shipmates demonstrate complicity with the Mariner with respect to the bird and their relation to it. Thus, while there is only one true skeptic aboard the ship, all its crew display some insufficiency in acknowledging what is otherwise separate and distinct from them, or their senses.

For Cavell, the moral of the poem is not fully comprehended or expressed by the Mariner on his return. Coleridge's poem implies that the lesson to be learned is less that we should love all things than that we should let things be as they are for us, to acknowledge them as such, that is, in their integrity, separateness and distinction. Otherwise, we distort our relation to the world and others in it; we commit pathetic fallacy, killing our knowledge, hence the world, in an animistic and fanatical display of love, in a tragic desire for absolute and exclusive possession. In his act of creation, Coleridge is redeemed; he maintains a poetic distance in relation to the Mariner and his world and at the same time shares with the reader an intimate knowledge of life lived under the consequences of skepticism.

In Coleridge's poem, the Kantian compartments of knowledge, morality and art are conjoined; the poet gladly pays the price of animism to achieve this result. It is perhaps a small enough price to pay for a better understanding of skepticism and its motivations. But more importantly to those of us for whom the question of skepticism arises, the notion of animism suggests ways to acknowledge (recognize) the threat of skepticism, to overcome it or to cope with some of its consequences.

In his elucidation of Coleridge's use of animism, Cavell claims that words, which are the poet's arrows, kill to connect the bifurcated, skeptical life that is the chosen lot of the great majority of us. In Cavell's interpretation of the philosopher's context, wherein the epistemologist would subject the whole edifice of human knowledge to examination, the traditional epistemologist also uses a form of animism. But unlike the poet, the epistemologist steps back or sets himself apart from that context, leaves himself outside, as it were, from the start. Cavell claims that the epistemologist thereby carries to or begins an investigation that is already contaminated by a form of animism that supports, or provides a cover for, skepticism rather than studies it. Given the contemplative position or stance the epistemologist assumes from the outset, the epistemologist's words are cut off from him as they "murder to dissect" a world he has already deprived of life.

Still, if skepticism is to be understood as a *livable*, and lived, possibility, an all too human ill, the philosopher being no less but no more susceptible than any other of us, more needs to be said both about its practical manifestations and its remedies if any exist. These are the matters I take up in turning to American Transcendentalism in Part IV.

Section one of Part IV argues that American Transcendentalism continues and deepens the Romanticist critique of the tradition of modern philosophy and Kant's settlement with skepticism. In sections two and three of Part IV, I find Cavell's claim that

Emerson and Thoreau are not only founders of the New England Movement but founding thinkers of philosophy in America to have considerable merit. That Cavell sees this claim as something he needs to argue against the evaluation of the tradition to which he belongs tells us something significant about the state of American philosophy and about the singular nature of Cavell's own thought. What is in such thinking as Emerson's, Thoreau's, and now Cavell's that the established tradition is wont to avoid, deny, mock, ignore, and why?

In Emerson's and Thoreau's writings skepticism is animated, that is, skepticism is brought down from the abstractions of traditional philosophical writings, dragged from the philosopher's chamber, and given a full-bodied account as the extraordinary disguise we daily don to flee life as it really is for us. And so, to borrow from Shakespeare, we turn the world into a stage and ourselves not even into actors but instead into disembodied ghouls haunting the wings of a world without eyes, mouthing words with no sound from points with no reference. Cavell's elucidations of Emerson and Thoreau challenge us to recognize conformity, cowardice, and apathy as the commonly-shared props of life theatricalized. In a review of Cavell's readings, I present the images Cavell finds of the manner in which we delude ourselves into thinking that, because life is thereby lived as spectacle, we are somehow fated to so live it and that life is somehow had on condition that we do so. I explore with Cavell how Emerson and Thoreau understand the meanings of such terms as "condition,"

"fate," and "necessity" to be ours, only ours, and we can turn from them. That is, given certain natural facts about ourselves and the world, we live as we will and the world we inhabit is one largely of our own making. I argue that we cannot but know this to be the case, however we may deny or repudiate that knowledge together with how we come by it. And such denial or repudiation must result in distortion of the self and its relation to the world and others in it. I further argue that such a distortion exists in the American mind. There is a one-sidedness in America's analytic philosophy which denies its own more robust and literary origins. And this one-sidedness has its issue in moral relativism and cynicism. What I attempt here is a stripping away of the putrefied, ill-fitting rags of science to uncover the self-inflicted wounds of such a denial and the results of the further refusal to acknowledge that denial and what motivates it.

Following Cavell's guidance, this exploration of the writings of Emerson and Thoreau lays the ground for an assessment in Part V of certain practical applications of this novel interpretation of skepticism with respect to the possibility of certain kinds of community. I explore there Cavell's arguments against skepticism as a way of life, and against relativism and empty abstraction in the fields of aesthetics, ethics, and politics. I argue, in effect, that if "we live as we dream, alone," we live nonetheless in a *community* of at least one and we choose to do so in the face of reasonable, knowable, and morally justifiable alternatives. To acknowledge this to be the case is to affirm the principle of

subjectivity as the basis of both private and social life.

Two fundamental features of subjectivity are freedom of the will and universality, apparently antagonistic notions. How this apparent antagonism is overcome in aesthetics and ethics through self-knowledge and acknowledgement is the subject of the first and second sections of Part V, respectively. How it is overcome in political life through a notion of consent guided by principles but not constrained by them is the subject of section three. There I find that if, on reflection, we determine that we do not share community with others in mutual respect and regard, then we must at least acknowledge our own presence and role in such a state of affairs. We must acknowledge that while the society that exists is not altogether one of our own choosing, nonetheless, it is to some extent one of our own making. We have a hand in its present state and progress. We may withdraw our consent and repudiate such as society is but we thereby engage in an act of self-repudiation whose recourse is as much a matter of self-transformation as it is the transformation of society. Or alternatively, we can choose to live out our lives in "quiet desperation and skeptical despair." I further argue that to make the latter choice is to theatricalize our lives, to enchain each other, and hence also society, to its present or attained state. That we do so by choice and therefore could also do otherwise is the point Cavell drives home in his argument that Emersonian Representativeness and Moral Perfectionism are essential to the life of justice in a constitutional democracy, to keeping democratic hope alive in the face of its failures and

disappointments.

I hope to make clear in the following pages that the problem of skepticism is neither intractable nor to be solved once and for all. In the present work, I argue that the truth of skepticism is not simply, as the skeptic usually puts it, that "nobody knows anything about the external world, including and especially whether it exists or not." Rather, the truth of skepticism is that our relation to existence is not primarily one of knowledge. At the same time, I argue that our relation to existence is first and foremost one of acknowledgment. Skepticism is therefore an insufficiency in acknowledging that shows itself, in philosophy as elsewhere, in the adoption of an epistemological attitude toward the very existence of the world and its inhabitants besides oneself. This epistemological attitude turns the existence of the world as the ground of all our beliefs into one belief, opinion, or conjecture among others and, hence, as Cavell correctly says, this attitude challenges our power or capacity to believe anything at all, shaking the very ground on which we stand or fall.⁶ Thus is skepticism a temptation to knowledge that it is at the same time a *standing* threat of profound concern to us all. That the problem is not traditionally so understood or presented by the dominant philosophical tradition should not be taken as an indictment of that tradition. Rather, it should be seen as a testament to the power and tenacity of skepticism to motivate the masquerading of a

⁶Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 240-241; hereafter cited as *MWM*.

refusal of knowledge as an intellectual lack -- a power and tenacity fully appreciated and confronted in what are traditionally viewed as literary, rather than philosophical, works. And this necessarily so, given the traditional aims, methods, and procedures of the latter.

INTRODUCTION

In this introduction I want to provide a delimiting and informative guide to the argument of my thesis on skepticism as something more, or other than, what modern philosophy identifies as skepticism. In my thesis, I argue that skepticism is not only an epistemological problem; skepticism is not simply the discovery or consequence of a certain kind of philosophical enquiry. Rather, skepticism is a moral or practical issue and epistemological skepticism is rather one manifestation of a universally-shared skeptical tendency or spirit. Skepticism is therefore a *standing* threat of profound concern to us all. And if philosophy itself suffers or harbours skepticism, then philosophy must look outside itself for a reliable guide as to what skepticism is or is not about and how we might best respond to it.

Since skepticism is a topic that spans a wide historical and intellectual area, I will first discuss the parameters of my work and the philosophical background to it. Having thus established in general terms the kind of skepticism we are dealing with, I will introduce several contemporary responses to this skepticism. Two of these responses, those of G. E. Moore and J. L. Austin, are no doubt quite familiar. At the risk of boring the reader, I review these two powerful responses to skepticism in order that we might benefit from whatever insight they each bring to the issue. But more importantly, I mean to show that and how these responses ultimately fail to provide a full understanding of the skeptical

challenge or adequate ways to meet it.

In taking up a third response to skepticism, that of Stanley Cavell, I will argue that the failure of the previous two responses lies in their respective interpretations of skepticism and in their understanding of the applicability of their own methods and procedures. I will then sketch what I take to be the philosophical challenge of literature given Cavell's literary and philosophical elucidations of certain works and movements. Given the topic of skepticism, this thesis explores certain of Cavell's writings in epistemology and literature, while it excludes other less pertinent but no less interesting writings of his, for example, those on film, psychoanalysis, and feminism. Finally, after providing an outline of the structure of my thesis, I will anticipate in these introductory remarks the upshot of my study in skepticism and the kind of contribution I hope it makes to our understanding of skepticism and some of the ways we can and do cope with it. But to begin with, we need to know the kind of skepticism we are talking about.

General Parameters

Skepticism is a vast subject-area. Depending on the target of skepticism, we can find different kinds of skepticism at issue in various moments of the history of Western Thought. This thesis does not attempt to cover this whole area. For our purposes, a skeptical issue is relevant if it involves a threat to our hold on the shared existence of the world, and of ourselves and others in

it. The skeptical issues this thesis deals with are therefore those associated with intellectual or epistemological skepticism in the modern era. As an aid to understanding this kind of skepticism, so also in establishing the parameters of this study in it, we do well to distinguish between ancient and modern skepticism.

Ancient or Greek skepticism begins with Pyrrho of Elis (360-270 B.C.E.) and continues for at least five centuries up to the time of Sextus Empiricus.¹ The "Academic" skeptical view, formulated in the Platonic Academy in the third century, B.C.E., is founded on the premise that "no knowledge is possible." The less dogmatic and more consistent "Pyrrhonic" view holds even that proposition to be more than can be said with certainty. In either case, ancient skepticism presents itself as an instance of the way philosophy might be practiced, traditionally offering itself as a way of life designed to bring peace and tranquillity to the practitioner.²

Again, for our purposes, an important distinguishing feature of ancient skepticism is that, whatever its sources and targets, it is never directed toward the very existence of an objective world or of oneself and others in it, but only toward what we can truly

¹C. B. Schmitt, "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times," Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 225-226.

²See Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 300-326, for an extensive bibliography of further literature on the subject.

be said to know of whatever there is. Ancient skepticism is the view that the "appearances" to oneself of the world, of others, and implicitly at least, even of oneself are all anyone can truly be said to know, that is, to have or to possess. Thus, ancient skepticism insists upon and is directed toward the multiplicity of opinions and knowledge claims based upon different appearances of whatever there is.³

Things appear differently to different people, and even to the same person at different times. Since the individual's account of his or her own appearances at a given time is irrefutable, one result of conflict may be the belief that there is no way to choose with certainty between appearances, hence relativism. Another consequence of conflicting appearances may be the view, however inconsistently held, that nothing exists or can be said to be known to do so, that is, radical or direct skepticism. Still worse, conflict may lead to a dogmatic insistence on the objective truth of one's own appearances. So the whole point of ancient skepticism is to avoid the kind of confusion and anxiety thus engendered by the pursuit of absolute knowledge about what is, and to be guided contentedly by custom and by what appears to be the case. It is against this background of ancient skepticism that modern skepticism is generally understood.

With the rediscovery and use of ancient skeptical writings in modern times, skepticism becomes an intellectual and polemical tool

³See Christopher Hookway, *Scepticism* (London and New York, 1990), pp. 4-40.

rather than a goal in the pursuit of the good life. In the sixteenth century, Descartes transforms skepticism into a method for investigating, analyzing, and certifying knowledge.⁴ Pushing the skeptical argument to what he sees as its logical conclusion, Descartes argues that the philosopher can achieve a complete *epochē*, that is, the philosopher can bracket all knowledge of anything whatever. With the Cartesian skeptical method, all appearances are subject to doubt, just as they were with the ancients. But here it is even doubtful whether there is anything at all to which one's appearances refer beyond the appearances themselves, or whether a stream of appearances might be said to belong to a single, enduring and unified consciousness.⁵ Nonetheless, with the skeptical hypothesis radicalized and pushed to its logical limit in this way, Descartes insists that the skeptic is finally unable to deny the thinking existence of the self without contradiction the moment the skeptic doubts that he or she doubts. Descartes insists that consistency and completeness require that the skeptic acknowledge this final upshot of the skeptical argument: the indubitability of the *cogito*.⁶ This combination then, the skeptical procedure inspired by the ancients, and the principle of subjectivity as both the starting-point and

⁴Bernard Williams, "Descartes's Use of Skepticism," in Burnyeat (ed.) 1983, pp. 337-52.

⁵*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Vol. 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Meditation Two, pp. 16ff.

⁶*Ibid.*, Meditation Two, p. 17.

final end of the skeptical argument, constitutes the Cartesian legacy, and presents the basic framework for much of modern, or Cartesian, epistemology.

Intellectual Background

Given these general parameters within which to understand the skepticism which is the subject of this thesis, there are different interpretations of, and responses, to skepticism, some philosophical, others anti-philosophical. What is at issue for this thesis are the merits of the claim that skepticism is properly understood as the discovery of an absence, lack or incapacity in human knowing with respect to *existence*. At issue as well are the merits of the claim that skepticism so understood is the discovery or consequence of, and, hence is confined to, a certain kind of philosophical investigation. In either case, epistemological skepticism is a comprehensive philosophical perspective which may be directed toward knowledge of the existence of a separate and independent "external" world, or its target may be our knowledge of the existence of others like ourselves.⁷ While epistemological skepticism is most often neither consistently defended nor absolutely refuted, it continues to be a constant theme of contemporary philosophy.

G. E. Moore, for example, interprets skepticism as claiming to have discovered a problem in human knowledge, but Moore thinks

⁷Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 66-84. Hereafter cited as *Contemporary Epistemology*.

skepticism presents no real or serious threat to our hold on existence.⁸ Knowledge for Moore is any proposition in accord with what he describes as our "common sense view" of the world. Moore's allegedly anti-philosophical attack on skepticism presents an apparently powerful account of the impotence and instability of the skeptical argument, namely, skepticism flies in the face of common-sense or reason; skepticism is unlivable, even for the skeptic; skepticism is therefore unreasonable. Moore also argues that the skeptic cannot articulate his position without self-contradiction. This does not tell us that the "common sense view" is true but, having shown that skepticism is untenable, Moore thinks he has undermined the only opposition to common sense.

The problem with Moore's response to skepticism in defense of common sense is two-fold. (1) Moore accepts in the first place that skepticism really is about the discovery of some supposed lack or absence of knowledge, and hence Moore structures his response to skepticism in epistemological terms. Moore claims that the individual has immediate or intuitive self-knowledge but only demonstrative or inferential knowledge of the world or of others. Moore's defense of common sense is thus grounded in an elaborate philosophical argument as unstable as the alleged non-position of the skeptic. (2) Moore's discussion everywhere assumes that skepticism is unlivable and yet it offers no explanation for the power and tenacity of the skeptical argument.

⁸G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World," in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959), pp. 127ff.

Together with most skeptical and non-skeptical philosophers, Moore understands skepticism as philosophy's own discovery of a problem in (or consequence of) epistemological investigation. In investigating the nature and content of human knowledge, the established Anglo-American tradition generally assumes that all knowledge is based on "experience" and that any conscious experience is an idea. This tradition then goes on to conceive or describe experience in a purely subjective way.⁹ That is, feelings, sensations, perceptions all present data for a conscious subject. But as mental events, all such data are modifications of an individual mind and therefore subjective.

Since on such a conception of experience mental events exist because an individual mind has them, we can correctly say of mental events, *esse est percipi*. This view, as indeed most ordinary views, maintains that mental events differ from physical behaviour and the two are only contingently, not causally or logically, related. For example, an individual can have a headache and successfully pretend not to have one, or a person can not have a headache and successfully pretend to have one.

Traditionally, the epistemologist assumes that every act of knowing begins with subjective data so described. Supposing for the moment that this assumption is a correct one, then if I am to know either that the world exists or other persons (minds) exist, I must infer by some reliable method that they do so. It is

⁹Thomas O. Buford, ed., *Essays on Other Minds* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. x-xi. Hereafter cited as *EOM*.

impossible directly to apprehend another's experience and, as I will argue, there is no perfectly reliable method that such a position would require by which I can make correct knowledge claims about the existence of the external world or other minds.

Thus, if the epistemologist's conception of experience is accepted, then we are unable to provide the required foundation to or justification for our ordinary knowledge-claims. On such a conception, the skeptic is indeed unanswerable. On the other hand, skepticism here does fly in the face of our ordinary common sense beliefs and this in turn implies that skepticism is unlivable. The skeptic and non-skeptic alike are generally seen to behave in ordinary life just as if our ordinary knowledge claims about the world were true.

Addressing itself to the above-outlined conception of experience and knowledge, philosophy has traditionally failed consistently to refute or defend skepticism as an epistemological issue. Even so astute and careful a thinker as Moore is finally reduced to saying in effect, *I don't know how I know; I only know that I do.*¹⁰ Nor need the skeptic concede anything in the face of the linguistic and criteria-based arguments of J. L. Austin.¹¹ A response such as Austin's "what we would say when" also assumes that skepticism is the consequence of a misguided intellectual or

¹⁰For a comprehensive and thorough-going analysis of why this is so, see Thomas Baldwin, *G. E. Moore* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 288-300.

¹¹J. L. Austin, "Other Minds," in J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 1st edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 44ff.

philosophical enquiry.

In his own epistemological enquiries, Austin attempts to avoid skeptical issues by circumventing the role of subjectivity in human knowledge and thus cutting off the possibility of skeptical issues even arising. But in avoiding the question of subjectivity, most notably his own, Austin's linguistic analyses serve to underscore rather than undermine the power of the skeptical argument. His analyses affirm rather than deny the fundamental claim implicit in the skeptic's argument. As Stanley Cavell so concisely states that claim in his own critique of the merits of Austin's procedures: "there are no criteria of a thing's *being* so, over and above the criteria for a thing's *being* so."¹² That is, there can be no appeal to our criteria for making and assessing knowledge claims with respect to identity and recognition when it is existence itself which is at issue for the skeptic. Yet these are the only criteria we have, and they are *only* ours. This is the truth or moral of skepticism however the skeptic and non-skeptic might understand that truth. Skepticism is not about knowledge of what our criteria are, but about a refusal to acknowledge both the source of our criteria as authoritative and what it is our criteria are of. Skepticism is thus more a practical or moral issue than a problem of knowledge. Therefore there can be no criteria-based refutation or rebuttal of skepticism.

¹²Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 45. Hereafter cited as CR. Cavell relies here on the notion of criteria he finds in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968). Hereafter cited as *Investigations*.

Contrary to most interpretations of skepticism, certain key literary texts treat skepticism as a practical or moral issue and, therefore, as a genuine problem of greater import than traditional epistemology wants, or is even able, to appreciate. For the Shakespearean dramatist, the Romanticist, and the American Transcendentalist mostly shunned by the established philosophical tradition in America, skepticism is first and foremost an all too human expression of despair; a desperate desire to escape or deny the human altogether. Skepticism in such writings as theirs is not about knowledge at all, or anyway not about what we ordinarily call knowledge.

Of his readings in Shakespearean tragedy, Stanley Cavell says that he is continuing what he sees as the work of the later Wittgenstein. That is, Cavell's elucidations are an attempt to develop a philosophically satisfactory "response to skepticism but not as a refutation of it; rather on the contrary, as a task to discover the causes of philosophy's disparagement of, or its disappointment with, the ordinary, something I have called the truth of skepticism."¹³ Cavell offers his interpretations of Shakespearean tragedy as presenting independent support for his claim that skepticism is not about any lack or absence of knowledge or about any ignorance as to what our criteria are. And there is more. On Cavell's reading, epistemological skepticism is to be understood as an intellectual subterfuge for a prior avoidance, denial, repudiation of such knowledge as we do already have. The

¹³Cavell (1997), p. 26.

consequences, of course, are practical and real. Tragedy usually ends in not one but many untimely deaths by murder or suicide. In tragedy, epistemological skepticism is claimed in response to knowledge and as a cover for an already-felt sense of disappointment in our criteria, a fear of inexpressiveness or a fear of expressing too much. Skepticism here is an intellectually devised guise for jealousy, shame, arrogance, pride, fear or refusal to accept human finitude, limitation and dependency. Rather than acknowledge any of these ordinary human conditions, skepticism is used to hide a temptation to knowledge, an aspiration to, or desire for, inhuman omniscience or impossible privacies.

An interpretation of skepticism similar to that presented in tragedy is to be found in the Romanticist response to the Kantian compartmental response to, or settlement with, skepticism and in American Transcendentalist writings as these continue and extend the Romanticist critique of Kant's philosophy. Indeed, Cavell sees Emerson and Thoreau in their literary/philosophical reflections as engaged in the finding or founding of the self, of an American cultural state, of philosophy no less than literature in America, and of what Cavell calls Emersonian Perfectionism as the cornerstone of an American political state that could rightly call itself just.

As a student of English Romanticism as well as German and early-American philosophy, I have long wondered what became of the moral and intellectual quest pictured in these literary and philosophical movements. If one were to accept Cavell's

interpretation of skepticism, then failure of the American philosophical tradition to acknowledge Emerson and Thoreau as America's, hence its own, founding thinkers can be read as a study in, and emblematic of, self-delusion, ill will, intellectual subterfuge, in other words, the skeptical spirit, present not only in the dominant American philosophical tradition, but more importantly, perhaps, in what has become of American culture generally.

Cavell's response to literature's treatment of skepticism is to interpret skepticism as a constant and standing threat in ordinary, practical, not just philosophical life. This is because through his readings in literature Cavell sees that the ordinary is both more simple and more complex than modern epistemologists like Moore or Austin would have us think. As such, there is no way to overcome skepticism once and for all. One way Cavell proposes we cope with the threat and temptation of skepticism in modern life is to understand better what extraordinarily skeptical lives we ordinarily choose to live.

Divisions and Anticipated Conclusion

The body of this thesis is divided into Five Parts, each one devoted to achieving an increasingly clearer understanding of what the skeptical problem is and is not about, and of how one might go about finding some solution to it. Each Part of the work has three sections and these are further divided into three sub-sections. Part I explores skepticism as it is traditionally understood

together with two key contemporary responses to it. It is here that we begin to see skepticism as something other, or more than, an epistemological issue whose merits and consequences, as I will argue, are not well understood or best illustrated in what we ordinarily call philosophy.

Part II is largely devoted to developing the argument that skepticism is primarily a moral or practical issue. Stanley Cavell's Wittgensteinian-inspired ordinary language procedures are outlined and applied to the skeptical problem. I conclude here that criteria-based arguments are powerless against skepticism because our criteria are and must be such as to be open to repudiation and that skepticism is therefore a standing threat. While the argument of Part II attempts to bring some clarity to our concept of knowledge, its conclusion directs us elsewhere than philosophy if we are to more fully understand the nature of the skeptical threat. In Part III, I examine what I take to be the skeptic as represented in literature, Kant's settlement with skepticism, and the relation between skepticism and romanticism. I explore interpretations of the way certain literary forms present the possibilities of existence under the consequences of skepticism. I conclude here that in its rival interpretations of, and responses to, skepticism, literature presents a philosophical challenge to the seeker of knowledge, a challenge only fully recognized and taken up in American Transcendentalist Philosophy.

Part IV is an examination and assessment of the American Transcendentalist's confrontation with skepticism with separate

sections devoted to certain writings of Emerson and Thoreau, respectively. I conclude here that the world we inhabit is essentially one of our own making; through our every word and act, the world is as we would have it. Our words do not call the world into being as if from nothing. Rather our words, in whatever form, gesture or text we deploy them, can only describe how the world is, for us. We can refuse any such description. But while such refusal has its own consequences, it cannot make the world, or the question of its existence should it arise, disappear. It is through such writings as Emerson's and Thoreau's that we discover something of the merits, and the burdens, of a being for whom the notion of exclusive and absolute knowledge is a constant desire or temptation and, hence, skepticism a standing threat.

The topic of Part V is skepticism and community and here I examine the relation between the self and the other in the spheres of aesthetics, ethics and politics. The first section focuses on the question of rationality vs. matters of personal taste in aesthetical debate; the second on the question of universality vs. partiality in ethical debate; the third on the governance of rules vs. the principles of individual freedom and universal or democratic consent in political debate. The stated sides in these critical debates clearly suggest the kind of stakes involved in any resolution of them. In each case, as Part V concludes, the ubiquity of the self is a given, hence the tendency and tenacity of skepticism. But as is also argued, it is the constrained disposition of subjectivity that is necessary in, and adequate to,

meeting any skeptical challenge to the possibility of aesthetical, ethical and political community.

The position I hope to articulate and defend in the following thesis is that skepticism is a possible response to knowledge rather than any absence or lack in human knowing as though the skeptic does not know something which others do know. As such, skepticism is a moral or practical issue that presents a real and constant threat to our hold on the objective existence of the world, and of oneself and others in it. This is the challenge that literature presents to philosophy's understanding of skepticism and to philosophy's own self-understanding. A crucial point for the present work is to discover some explanation or motivation in philosophy for its traditional failure to appreciate that challenge. Another no less important point is to consider the consequences for philosophy should it now acknowledge this philosophical challenge of literature, or instead continue in its refusal to do so.

That skepticism is not just an epistemological issue is only part of the truth of skepticism. Recognizing that skepticism is not about knowledge, or anyway not just that, does not mean that we need not take skepticism seriously. Rather, as primarily a moral or practical issue, skepticism is a standing threat to all our socio-political institutions and strikes at the very heart of what it is to be a human being, a knower and agent in the world. That skepticism can and does accomplish this is also part of the truth of skepticism. My thesis examines some of the ways we live our

skepticism and why; it asks if indeed we must do so, and suggests ways we can avoid or best cope with some of its consequences. In forwarding this study in skepticism I take up also certain related issues in aesthetics, ethics and politics. The challenge for this thesis is to find and present a philosophically satisfactory account of modern skepticism that helps us understand both its power to threaten our hold on existence and at the same time to account for its impotence in the face of the ordinary knowledge claims we make everyday about ourselves and the world.

In this introduction, I have established the parameters of my thesis and briefly touched upon several contemporary responses to skepticism that serve to help us understand what skepticism is, or is not, about. I have also sketched what I characterize as the philosophical challenge of literature (Tragedy, Romanticism, American Transcendentalism) to traditional interpretations of, and responses to, skepticism. I have anticipated the conclusions of my thesis with respect to the seriousness of this challenge and some of the consequences I take to follow from it in the philosophical domains of aesthetics, ethics and politics.

My philosophical studies have helped me view skepticism as raising something more, or other than, epistemological concerns. While that insight alone does not provide an adequate understanding of the skeptic, it does direct us to look beyond or outside philosophy for such an understanding. The philosophically more fundamental question that wants answering is what, if any, are the merits of skepticism or what motivates the skeptic to it? The

question is inherently one of self-knowledge. Historically, at least, this question is more the subject-matter of certain works traditionally deemed literary, rather than philosophical. But before we turn our attention to these works, we need to understand this historical fact from a philosophical perspective. We need to gain some insight into what constitutes the skeptical problem and into how philosophy has thus far understood and attempted to respond to it. These matters we will now take up in Part I.

PART I SKEPTICISM AND SOME CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES

The purpose of Part I is to gain an adequate understanding of the problem of modern or post-Cartesian skepticism. To this end, the first section is devoted to an outline of the intellectual background to most contemporary interpretations of, and responses to, skepticism. In section two, I will take up one such response, namely, G. E. Moore's influential defense of common sense. Next I will look at J. L. Austin's linguistic analyses of ordinary knowledge claims as appearing on Austin's view impervious to challenges of the sort the skeptic traditionally poses. I hope to discover through these discussions of Moore and Austin on skepticism just how it is that neither common sense alone, nor the procedural linguistic analyses of Austin's ordinary language philosophy, are able to provide a full understanding of, or sufficient defence against, the skeptical challenge. We will then be in a position to evaluate the merits of the entirely different interpretation of, and response to, skepticism taken up in Part II. But first, we need to be clear on what we mean by modern or post-Cartesian skepticism.

THE SKEPTICAL TENDENCY OF CARTESIANISM

We live as we dream, alone. Conrad

Cartesianism

From the perspective of most contemporary philosophy,

"external-world" skepticism characterizes the peculiar centrality of skeptical worries in modern or post-Cartesian philosophy about the relation between knowledge and the existence of a separate and independent world. In his *Meditations*, Descartes finds that the senses alone do not provide a reliable guide as to the nature of reality and no traditional authority (whether his own past experience or the collected wisdom of others) escapes the philosopher's net of the dubitable. But Descartes claims we have an immediate awareness of certain characteristics that accompany subjective appearances of external objects and fulfil the criteria for certain or objective knowledge. These characteristics are a clarity and distinctness like those that accompany the *cogito* and the idea of God, only less so. On Descartes's view, these criteria of objectivity with respect to appearances or ideas provide the basis for our ordinary beliefs about ourselves and about the world around us.¹ How this step from subjective experience to objective knowledge is actually to be effected is the fundamental epistemological problem for Descartes, as it is to a great extent for the whole of modern philosophy.

Some of the worries arising from the difficulty of resolving the Cartesian epistemological problem find various skeptical formulations employing, for example, variations of the "evil genius" hypothesis or the "dream-possibility." But the upshot of these varied formulations is that all one's psychological states or

¹*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Meditation Six, p. 54.

"inner" experiences, with respect to the existence of an objective world, of a unified and embodied self, and of others like oneself, could be just as they are although there are none of these latter, that is, although there exists no separate and independent reality to which one's inner experience is related. External-world skepticism thus may lead to solipsistic concerns about the possibility of getting beyond one's own ideas and impressions of external objects. Or external-world skepticism may give rise to the doctrine that all that exists are ideas and modifications of mind, that is, to some form of subjective idealism.

The Anglo-American Tradition

In investigating the nature and content of human knowledge, the established Anglo-American tradition generally assumes that all knowledge is based on "experience" but conceives or describes experience in a purely subjective way.² That is, feelings, sensations, perceptions present data for a conscious subject. But as mental events, all such data are modifications of an individual mind and therefore subjective. Since on such a conception mental events exist because an individual mind has them, we can correctly say of mental events, *esse est percipi*. This view, as indeed most ordinary views, maintains that mental events differ from physical behaviour and the two are only contingently, not causally or logically, related. For example, an individual can have a

²see Thomas O. Buford, ed., *Essays on Other Minds* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. x-xi. Hereafter cited as *EOM*.

toothache and successfully pretend not to have one, or a person can not have a toothache and successfully pretend to have one. On this view, it holds as well that physical objects differ from the data which are the objects of direct perception. That is, for example, one individual's datum "blue" differs numerically from that of another individual seeing the same blue ball and both data differ numerically as well as qualitatively from the blue of the ball.

Traditionally, the epistemologist assumes that every act of knowing begins with subjective data so described. Supposing for the moment that this assumption is correct, then if I am to know either that the world exists or other persons (minds) exist, I must infer by some reliable method that they do. It is impossible directly to apprehend another's experience and, as I will now argue, there is no perfectly reliable method that such a position would require by which I can make correct knowledge claims about the existence of the external world or other minds. Indeed, given the subjective or idealist foundation of such a position, the attempt to work out and maintain distinctions between subjective data and the physical world leads logically to skepticism with respect to the existence of an external and shareable world.

Foundationalism

The "other-minds" skepticism of the Anglo-American tradition is simply an aspect or further characterization of "external-world" skepticism. As such, the former position also is based on Cartesian presuppositions. That is, underlying or accompanying

external-world skepticism as that is traditionally understood is the Cartesian presupposition that all we know immediately and with certainty is the nature of our own psychological or sensory states. The problem for classical epistemology is then how we build on that "foundation" to acquire knowledge of an existing and shared world, of a unified and continuously existing self as subject of otherwise discrete past, present, and future sensory states, as well as of the existence of others like ourselves.³

Some philosophers, like Jonathan Dancy, identify concern with the individual ego as the irreducible foundation of Cartesian epistemology.⁴ Yet, interestingly enough, Dancy rejects the foundationalism of the Cartesian epistemological approach on the grounds that it leads directly to skepticism. Less polemically, Dancy says that this foundationalism has a skeptical tendency, "just because it leads us to see as problematic everything other than our knowledge of our own sensory states; it acknowledges the danger that we might be unable to construct the superstructure which the foundations are intended to carry."⁵ It is precisely in order to mitigate this skeptical tendency of Cartesianism that Moore turns to perceptual analysis of ordinary knowledge claims in his celebrated attempt to defend our common sense view of the world

³*Contemporary Epistemology*, pp. 53-84.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 67. This "skeptical tendency" of Cartesianism, and the nature and consequences of its acknowledgment, is what represents for Cavell the pivot of human desire, fear and temptation around which modern skepticism turns.

against skeptical attack. In the following section, we will examine the contribution Moore's analyses make to our understanding of skepticism.

SKEPTICISM AND COMMON SENSE

*I never know immediately such a thing...
and yet I think I do know such things for certain.*
Moore

G. E. Moore on Skepticism

Moore devotes much of his work to combatting skepticism understood as an epistemological challenge to our ordinary or "robust" conception of the real and abiding existence of the world and our experience of it. Together with most skeptical and non-skeptical philosophers alike, Moore understands skepticism as a problem in human knowledge which philosophy claims to have discovered in the course of a certain kind of philosophical investigation. But Moore argues that skeptical claims that we do not know that the world exists, together with others like ourselves in it, are false because self-contradictory; hence, such claims are unanswerable, incapable of either proof or disproof.⁶ Still, Moore takes the assumed unlivability of skepticism as the starting-point for an argument that skepticism is unreasonable, while the "common-sense" view is entirely, indeed for Moore, obviously, livable, that is, reasonable. Moore argues that we all do live and act on the

⁶G. E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense" in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 32-60. Hereafter cited as *PP*.

assumption that the world exists much as science and ordinary common sense would describe it.

In order to present and defend a philosophical perspective he considers to be in harmony with both reason and common sense, Moore offers an empirically-based critique of skepticism. Moore describes his account of the relation between ordinary knowledge claims and objective existence as a *perfectly rigorous* proof of the existence of an external world. In his celebrated paper, "Proof of an External World," Moore understands the skeptical challenge as a philosophical problem about the nature of the relation of human knowledge to an "external" or objective and independent reality.⁷ Here, Moore sets out to defend our ordinary or unqualified knowledge claims about the world. For Moore, the skeptical argument arises from a mistaken idealist or subjectivist view of the world and he attacks this view from an "objectivist" standpoint.

Taking his cue from Kant, Moore distinguishes between "things outside us" or "external" or to be "met with in space," such as soap-bubbles, hands, shoes, socks and so on, and "inner" things, such as pains, after-images, double-images and the like. He argues that by definition the existence of external things does not depend on their being perceived or experienced, while from the existence of inner things it follows that someone is having or has had some experience or other. Moore claims that if any particular two of

⁷G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World" in *PP*, pp. 127-50.

the first kind of things could be proved to exist, the existence of things outside us generally would at the same time be proved. And, he says, "I can prove now, for instance, that my two hands exist."⁸ On Moore's view, to prove this is to "have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things."⁹

The proof Moore presents is brief and to the point: he simply holds up his two hands, makes a certain gesture with his right hand and says, "Here is one hand" and a certain gesture with the left and says "here is another."¹⁰ Moore claims that this is a "perfectly rigorous" proof of the existence of external things and that there is probably none better to be had.¹¹ He claims that his proof meets three necessary conditions of a successful proof: (1) the premise is different from the conclusion; (2) the premises are known to be true; and (3) the conclusion follows necessarily from the premises. Most criticism of Moore's proof has tended to focus on the second condition. That is, Moore's assumption of knowledge as to the existence of two things (his left and right hands) is generally viewed as a claim to *know* just what the skeptic denies. On this interpretation, Moore's proof is viewed either at worst as mere question-begging or at best as making some linguistic or normative point about language usage.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 145-46

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 146.

Moore's Analysis of Common Sense

It is possible to defend Moore against the charge of mere question-begging and at the same time reject the notion that Moore is instead making a point or a recommendation as to correct language.¹² One such defense begins, as Moore himself does, with a conception of objectivity wherein things are a certain way independently of their being known or believed or said to be that way by anyone.¹³ From this standpoint, one can proceed to construct a conception of the relation between the philosophical investigation of knowledge and our everyday standards and procedures for assessing knowledge such that there is a crucial distinction between philosophical theories of knowledge and the everyday claims to knowledge which are presumably their subject-matter. That is, there is a distinction between a philosophical or "external" response to a question and an "internal" response made from "within" one's current knowledge.¹⁴ Given this distinction, when Moore asserts two particular claims as premises and derives his general conclusion, he fails to appreciate the "external" or detached, philosophical way in which all knowledge whatever of the external world, both particular and general, becomes problematic.

If it is in this "external" way that the skeptical challenge is to be understood, then Moore's response might be read as one

¹²Baldwin (1990), pp. 298-302.

¹³See Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 81-81.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 117.

presented from "inside" rather than "outside." Moore's proof is thus entirely valid with respect to our ordinary standards and procedures for assessing knowledge. But Moore nonetheless fails to meet the skeptical challenge as it arises for a particular philosophical, that is, "external," conception of knowledge.¹⁵

On the interpretation of both traditional epistemology and of Moore thus presented, Moore fails to provide a refutation of philosophical skepticism. But if Moore fails to respond in kind to the skeptic, that is, from the "outside", then it would seem that the two are simply talking past one another, so to speak. If that is the case, as on this view of Moore and the skeptic it must be, then the claims of common sense and those of the skeptic are "insulated" from each other. In this sense, they could not possibly be contradictory claims. On this interpretation of the traditional conception of knowledge and objectivity at least, it appears that skepticism and common sense are in some way compatible after all. But are they really?

Most of us would agree that Moore's proof alone cannot silence the skeptic, however many of us would also argue that the skeptic's conclusion is in outright conflict with common sense and hence also

¹⁵cf. Baldwin (1990), pp. 285ff. While Baldwin is critical of Stroud and others as to just what Moore is attempting to do in his "Proof," Baldwin nonetheless agrees that Moore's confrontations with skepticism are characterized by an "internalist" conception of knowledge which leads directly to foundationalism. Baldwin goes on to say that although the foundationalist approach offers the possibility of non-question begging, there is no way in which skeptical hypotheses can be eliminated in the way required by the internalist and so a skeptical conclusion is inevitable. (p. 303)

with what Moore says in defence of common sense.¹⁶ Traditionally, the skeptical conclusion is best characterized or pictured in the "dream possibility," that is, the whole of one's experience of the world could be just as it is and there be no physical world that corresponds to that experience. Such a possibility poses a serious threat to all of human knowledge. Any suggestion that there is some sort of compatibility between the truth of skepticism (the "dream-possibility) and that of our ordinary knowledge claims is problematic.

A theory of "insulation" that would allow the compatibility of these two claims necessarily involves some sort of idealist qualification of the content of our ordinary knowledge claims. It is precisely to avoid such idealist qualifications that Moore begins his "proof" with an allegedly "robust" conception of the relation between the knowledge claims we ordinarily make and the objective existence of the world. But one of the problems with Moore's proof arises just here: he utterly fails to offer any philosophically satisfactory account of our ordinary or "robust" conception of objectivity or why it is not dogmatic or presumptuous to assume or maintain it in the face of skeptical attack.

In the final pages of his "Proof," Moore acknowledges that at least one of his opponents is the "dream possibility" hence, the Cartesian skeptic, and that he is unable to defend his proof

¹⁶See Marie McGinn, "The Conflict between Scepticism and Common Sense" and "Moore's Defence of Common Sense" in her *Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Scepticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 14-39; 40-53. Hereafter cited as *Sense and Certainty*.

against this opponent.¹⁷ Moore says, in effect, that he has not proved what he asserted in his premises, that he cannot prove it, and that he does not need to prove it. In his recent book on Moore, Thomas Baldwin goes to considerable lengths to defend Moore's "Proof" against what he takes as Moore's own confused appraisal of it. It is unnecessary to review the intricacies of Baldwin's defense but the upshot of Baldwin's argument is that Moore's "Proof" is not a refutation of skepticism, nor was it intended to be. Instead, according to Baldwin, it was intended to be a refutation of idealism and that as such "it is a total failure."¹⁸ Baldwin claims that Moore fails here for much the same reason as Moore's arguments in the "Defense of Common Sense" against idealism and skepticism fail, namely, Moore's dogmatic assertion of common-sense realism accompanied as it is by a dualist philosophy of mind.¹⁹

A Fatal Flaw

There is an aspect in Moore's "Defence of Common Sense" that is more problematic than anything I have touched upon thus far. That is, Moore's discussion there of "sense-data".²⁰ With regard to an analysis of propositions such as "This is a hand," "That is the sun," "This is a dog," etc., Moore writes the following:

¹⁷Baldwin(1990) p. 292.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁰*PP*, pp. 54ff.

Two things only seem to me to be quite certain about the analysis of such propositions, ...namely that whenever I know, or judge, such a proposition to be true, (1) there is always some *sense-datum* about which the proposition in question is a proposition--some sense-datum which is a subject (and, in a certain sense, the principal or ultimate subject) of the proposition in question, and (2) that, nevertheless, what I am knowing or judging to be true about this sense-datum is not (in general) that it is *itself* a hand, or a dog, or the sun, etc. (PP, pp. 54)

In elaborating on his view in terms of a "theory of representative perception," Moore says that if he asked someone to look at his own hand, that person would be able see something which it is natural to assume is identical, if not with the whole of his hand, then at least with that part of its surface he is actually seeing. According to Moore, the person would, on further reflection, be able to see that it is doubtful whether what he sees can *itself* be identical even with the part of the surface of his hand in question. Moore claims that the sort of thing one allegedly sees in looking at one's hand, and about which there is doubt as to whether it is identical with the part of the surface of one's hand which one is seeing, is itself a datum of experience which he designates a "sense-datum."

Elsewhere, Moore reiterates that neither the physical object, nor that part of its surface, the upper side of, say, a hand or a coin which one is said to see, is simply identical with the visual sensible (sense-datum) which one *directly apprehends* in seeing it.²¹ Furthermore, Moore holds that in asserting "I see A" where

²¹G. E. Moore, "The Status of Sense-Data" in his *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1922, reprinted 1948), p. 187; hereafter cited as PS.

A is a name or description of a physical object, I am asserting that I am directly apprehending some sensible, but also something else about this sensible--perhaps some proposition of the form "and I know this sensible to have certain other properties."²² Moore insists that one's knowledge of all such propositions related to physical objects *is based* on one's experiences consisting in the direct apprehension of sensibles and in the perception of relations between apprehended sensibles.

As to the relation of sensibles to physical objects, Moore says that sensibles do not exist anywhere in physical space. But Moore also claims that neither do sensibles exist in the mind, except in the sense that some minds directly apprehend them. Finally, Moore adds, that "some [sensibles] and only some, *resemble* the physical objects which are their source, in respect of their shape."²³

I present this somewhat lengthy account of Moore's theory of perception in order to show what is clearly an elaborate philosophical framework underlying Moore's allegedly anti-philosophical defense of common sense. If I am right about this, then it is difficult to see how any assessment of Moore's response to skepticism as failing because it is "internal to" or comes "from within" our ordinary or common sense outlook can be entirely correct. This means at the very least that some further or other account of Moore's failure than those considered above is required

²²PS, p. 188.

²³PS, pp. 195-96.

and that the possibility of an adequate response to skepticism which looks to the practices and procedures of everyday life cannot be so hastily ruled out.

Dancy's criticism with respect to the skeptical tendency of Cartesianism discussed above surely impinges negatively on Moore's reliance on "sense-data" in defence of common sense. Moore argues that we know "external" things exist because we perceive (see) them. But as noted above, Moore claims that sense-data or sensibles also exist. Some combination of argument from analogy and induction is implicit in Moore's defence of ordinary knowledge-claims concerning the existence both of external objects and other minds.²⁴

According to Moore's theory of perception, we should distinguish between sense-contents (eg. patches of colour, movement) and any feeling, perception, or thought one might have in

²⁴See G. E. Moore, "Four Forms of Scepticism" in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1959), pp. 196ff. Here Moore criticizes four kinds of skepticism he finds in Russell's writings. Moore says "I cannot help agreeing with Russell that I never know immediately such a thing as 'That person is conscious' or This is a pencil', and that also the truth of such propositions never follows logically from anything which I do know immediately, and yet I think that I do know such things for certain" (p. 225). And Moore also says with respect to both kinds of propositions that he agrees that "my belief or knowledge that this is a pencil is, if I do not know it immediately, and if also the proposition does not follow logically from anything that I know immediately, in some sense 'based on' an analogical or inductive argument" (p. 225). But he rejects Russell's argument that knowledge so based is "never certain knowledge but is more or less probable belief" (p. 226). Moore insists that his final rejection is rational since Russell's argument, with which he himself agrees, is nonetheless based on assumptions which are less certain to Moore (perhaps to anyone) than it is certain to him that he does know that "this is a pencil" and that "you are conscious." (p. 226)

relation to these contents.²⁵ If this is right, we can all know (perceive) the same "external" things through the senses (sense-contents) and induction. But we cannot all have the same feelings, perceptions, thoughts. However, Moore claims that each of us can observe, in reflecting on our own perceptions, certain spatial relations and movements both between different sense-contents on the one hand, and between these and our own perceptions of these, on the other. Given the existence of that separate class of data which he calls sense-contents, Moore says, "there is no reason why I should not be justified in inferring that another person's feelings stand *in the same relation* to the real movements of his body, in which my own feelings do stand to similar real movements of mine."²⁶ That is, according to Moore, we can *infer* that entities that look and behave as we do must have "inner" experiences similar to our own and so we can know that other human beings exist.

From the skeptical perspective, Moore's argument from inference is as unstable as the alleged contradictory position of the skeptic. In a remark that acknowledges this point, Baldwin nonetheless insists that "despite the Cartesian tradition within which Moore approached epistemological issues, some of Moore's characteristic affirmations of common-sense knowledge point away from the internalist conception of knowledge."²⁷

²⁵See G. E. Moore, "The Nature and Reality of Objects of Perception" in *PS*, pp. 69ff.

²⁶*PS*, p. 83.

²⁷Baldwin (1990), p. 303. Baldwin's work ends with a brief discussion of Wittgenstein and the latter's indebtedness to Moore.

I hope this discussion of Moore's treatment of skepticism explains how any theory that begins with the traditional Cartesian mind/body distinction and claims epistemological priority for our own "ideas" or "inner" experience can prove to be problematic or drift toward skepticism. But the more fundamental point is one Dancy raises but does not explore, namely, the danger that the skeptical tendency of Cartesianism acknowledges. This point suggests that the motivation to skepticism, and hence any adequate response to skepticism, lies elsewhere than, or prior to, epistemology. Acknowledgment, after all, implies a response, whether granted or withheld, to something one always already knows. But before leaving our discussion of skepticism as strictly an epistemological issue, I would like to consider the response of ordinary language philosophy to the skeptical challenge. Here we move from conceptual analysis and the phenomenology of perception to linguistic elucidation. That is, we step back from the attempt to understand *how* the world is as it is for us, to an attempt to understand what we *mean* when we say that the world *is*.

SKEPTICISM AND ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

The Mystical is not how the world is, but that it is.
Wittgenstein

J. L. Austin on Skepticism

Later, in Part II, we will focus our attention on Stanley Cavell's interpretation of epistemological skepticism, one quite different from the one we have just considered. But we want to

avoid overly relying on Cavell in our discussion of skepticism. While Cavell himself belongs to the Anglo-American tradition, his writings provide less a counter-foil against which to measure historical philosophers than a stopping place from which to gauge the distance that tradition has travelled, and may still have to go, if it is to provide a philosophically satisfactory understanding of skepticism. To prepare the way then for a critical and appreciative understanding of Cavell's thought on skepticism, we first need to independently review another and already well-known treatment of the skeptical problem. Throughout the course of his career, Cavell is deeply influenced by ordinary language philosophy, especially as practised by J. L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein,²⁸ in their respective attempts to find ways to understand and to cope with epistemological issues.²⁹ So before turning to Cavell, let us explore ordinary language philosophy's response to skepticism.

The Concept of Knowledge

In his famous paper, "A Plea for Excuses," J. L. Austin says that "ordinary language is not the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only

²⁸Cavell is particularly indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968). Hereafter cited as *Investigations*.

²⁹The influence of Austin and the later Wittgenstein on the development of Cavell's thought is already present in Cavell's first published work, *MWM*.

remember, it *is* the first word."³⁰ Taking what we would ordinarily say when as his methodological guide, Austin's response to the skeptic is founded upon the belief that philosophy becomes absurd whenever it places itself at odds with ordinary common sense.³¹ In his "Other Minds" essay Austin attempts to show how the traditional skeptical recital deviates from our normal practices.

Austin thinks that the philosophical madness into which the skeptic is led, with the absurd conclusion that we lack justification for our ordinary, everyday beliefs, is to be seen as the result of a misuse or abuse of language. Austin attempts to describe and analyze how it is we actually do use such phrases as "I know" and to derive a different account of what is required for knowledge than what the skeptic claims.³²

In analyzing the uses of the phrase "I know," Austin describes how the skeptical philosopher comes to the conclusion that we can never know any external fact, either because our experience may be the result of a dream or the work of an evil genius. Austin attempts to demonstrate that and how the philosopher's skeptical worries arise through a fundamental misunderstanding about the rules of practice that govern the meaning of the words "I know." Once we see how we actually use (mean) our words and phrases,

³⁰J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses" in J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1961), pp. 133ff.

³¹*Sense and Certainty*, p. 54.

³²J. L. Austin, "Other Minds", in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 44ff. This essay hereafter cited as OM.

Austin claims, then it becomes evident that the skeptic's objection to our ordinary knowledge-claims as groundless is itself without ground.

Austin's investigation of carefully constructed knowledge-claims and contexts with respect to specific objects or events includes the case of someone who sees a bird in the garden and says "There is a goldfinch in the garden."³³ Austin wants to determine the conditions that make this statement a reasonable knowledge-claim, to uncover the kinds of objections that might be lodged against its going through, and hence to determine what it is to know that something in the garden is a goldfinch. He tries to meet the skeptical challenge by preventing the possibility of its issuance in the first place. That is, Austin attempts to demonstrate that the justification the skeptic demands for knowledge claims we ordinarily make about the world out-runs our ordinary requirements for correctness, adequacy, or even truth.

Austin suggests, for example, that if I were asked how I know there is a goldfinch in the garden, I might respond by giving my "credentials," that is, an account of how I acquired experience or knowledge enabling me to recognize goldfinches generally. Or I might point to certain "facts," that is, explain how I came to be in a position to recognize, hence to say, that there is a goldfinch in the garden right now. It is the second sort of response that might raise some question about one's ability to recognize, and hence to properly classify, objects of a certain kind--the

³³*Ibid.*, p. 45.

indicators (markings) I use to determine what it is I am looking at may in fact indicate something else. Or the indicators might be held to be insufficient to support my knowledge-claim--"But that's not enough: plenty of other birds have red heads. What you say doesn't prove it. For all you know, it may be a woodpecker."³⁴ This last raises the possibility that, in spite of everything I have said, I do not know that there is a goldfinch in the garden.

Austin explains what we ordinarily require in order to make this possibility a genuine or *live* one, that is, an objection to be taken seriously as counting against some knowledge-claim we might make in our everyday lives.

(a) If you say 'That's not enough', then you must have in mind some more or less definite lack. ...If there is no definite lack, which you are at least prepared to specify on being pressed, then it's silly (outrageous) just to go on saying 'That's not enough'.

(b) Enough is enough: it doesn't mean everything. Enough means enough to show that (within reason, and for present intents and purposes) it 'can't' be anything else, there is no room for an alternative, competing, description of it. It does not mean, for example, enough to show it isn't a *stuffed* goldfinch. (OM, pp. 52.

Austin's remarks above bring us into the region of the sort of objection the skeptic raises against our ordinary knowledge-claims about the world and about others like ourselves in it. Austin thinks that in their assessments of ordinary knowledge-claims, philosophers deliberately focus attention on "reality" and "certainty" and then go on to deviate from ordinary practices in their own procedures. When the philosophers raise questions of

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 51.

reality, (eg., "But do you know it's a real goldfinch? How do you know you're not dreaming? Or after all, mightn't it be a stuffed one?"), according to Austin, they intend to call into question the reliability of the "credentials" or the "facts" put forward in support of the original claim. We do this in everyday life, but Austin claims that when the philosopher raises such questions of reliability, he or she fails to meet the accepted requirements as outlined above. Austin argues that there are recognized procedures both for raising and for allaying doubts about "reality" and "certainty". He insists that such doubts must always have some special basis or ground for being raised.

The doubt of the question 'But is it a real one? has always (*must* have) a special basis, there must be some 'reason for suggesting' that it isn't real, in the sense of some specific way, or limited number of specific ways, in which it is suggested that this experience or item may be phoney. Sometimes (usually) the context makes it clear what the [basis] is: ...If the context doesn't make it clear, then I am entitled to ask 'How do you mean? Do you mean it may be stuffed or what? *What are you suggesting?* (OM, pp. 55)

Austin claims that the metaphysician's attempt to raise doubts about our ordinary knowledge-claims fail to meet the above requirement. That is, the metaphysician asks, for example, "Is it a real table?" but does not specify or limit what might be wrong with the item in question or our experience of it. This may leave us at a loss as to how to respond to the alleged challenge, that is, how to prove the table is a real one. But on Austin's view, the metaphysician fails to issue a genuine challenge to the knowledge-claim in the first place. Thus, we should accept and take comfort from the fact that the skeptical challenge cannot be

stated legitimately, that is, within the common rules of the sayable with respect to the knowable and the dubitable.

But Austin's procedures for assessing our knowledge-claims already assume that only those claims which are defensible from within the common sense perspective are legitimate. For the skeptic, it is precisely the legitimacy of this assumption and the adequacy of this perspective that are open to challenge. And so, the linguistic philosopher is simply speaking at cross-purposes with the skeptic whose "discoveries" are made only with the adoption of a contemplative, detached attitude Austin's method of linguistic phenomenology rejects out of hand.³⁵

As we have seen in our earlier discussion of Moore, (pp. 28-29 above), any argument supportive of some kind of compatibility between the skeptic and Austin, (i.e., between skepticism and common-sense), must be based on a misunderstanding of both. The skeptic, on the one hand, claims to have uncovered a legitimate objection to the whole edifice of human knowledge: it rests on judgments which are not well-grounded but rather depend on the unproved assumption that experience is a reliable guide to and indicator of the truth of existence. Austin, on the other hand, claims that careful assessment of knowledge-claims reveals that the kind of objection the skeptic raises in the absence of a legitimate basis is outrageous. In the interest of understanding skepticism, how are we to best understand these two apparently quite contradictory claims?

³⁵see *Sense and Certainty*, p. 64.

Philosophy's Achievement and Its Limitation

In applying the procedures of ordinary language philosophy as he understands them, Austin *begins* with the assumption that the procedures we adopt from within the common-sense outlook are correct. Thus, Austin's investigation implicitly assumes from the outset the very thing it sets out to demonstrate, namely the absurdity of the detached, contemplative outlook and the skeptical conclusions it allegedly yields. On this account, Austin appears no less dogmatic than Moore. Like Moore, he fails to provide a philosophical understanding of our conviction in the well-groundedness of, for example, the judgment that there is a goldfinch in the garden or that the skeptic's objection is indeed outrageous.³⁶

It is generally accepted that the starting-point of Austin's ordinary language procedure, with its interest in practicality and its required specificity, cannot meet the post-Cartesian skeptical problematic at the level of the very *possibility* of knowledge concerning the existence of any and all objects whatever.³⁷ From the contemplative and detached stance of the skeptical philosopher, Austinian concern with practicality is not the principle concern; rather the concern here is with the motivation, objective value, and truth of our convictions and practices. What is it that

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁷See *Philosophical Scepticism*, pp. 39ff. and *Sense and Certainty*, pp. 54ff. Stroud and McGinn each offer a somewhat different account of why this is so and what might be done about it.

determines our doing and saying certain things and not others? What makes things the way they are for us and not otherwise? Does the fact that for all practical purposes our knowledge is restricted, temporally and spatially situated, socially, linguistically, politically-determined, necessarily mean that nothing is thereby mediated in human language, culture and history? These queries suggest that whatever the ground or legitimacy of either the common-sensical or the philosophical perspective, the philosophically more fundamental question is whether or not the skeptical position has any merit whatever, and what drives a person to strive for it.

Conclusion to Part I. Skepticism Remains Standing

Neither Austin nor Moore are able to dissolve the skeptical problem as they would wish. In their own peculiar way, they both fail to approach the problem at the point at which it really does become an issue. This is the point where the justification the skeptic finds lacking is with respect to the relation between our knowledge claims and any representative, rather than particular, object, that is, existence *in general*. Austin's attempt to derive an understanding of the nature and content of knowledge from "what we say when" raises more questions than it settles. Austin's investigations do, albeit inadvertently, illuminate the degree to which our judgments appear already to be in agreement prior to the entering, challenging, or defending, of any specific knowledge-claim. In this sense Austin's ordinary language philosophy represents an advance on Moore's empiricism. However, it is precisely the motivation underlying our agreement in judgments, and underlying our conviction in their having an objective basis, for which the skeptic would have an account. The skeptic might fairly charge that Austin's ordinary language procedures fail, perhaps necessarily, even to raise this issue, and hence fail to adequately meet (understand) the skeptical challenge.³⁸ Thus, skepticism remains standing.

In Part II below, Stanley Cavell's Wittgensteinian-inspired critique of the Austinian practice of ordinary language philosophy, and Cavell's assessment of the merits of any criteria-based

³⁸see *Sense and Certainty*, pp. 72-3.

refutation of epistemological skepticism, are explored. This discussion provides the background for an understanding and evaluation of Cavell's conclusions with respect to the nature of the skeptical argument and any possibility of a satisfactory intellectual or philosophical response to skepticism. This in turn lays the groundwork for taking up Cavell's interpretation of skepticism in the final section of this Part before turning to the philosophical challenge of literature put forward in Part III. First, then, a look at Cavell's reading of skepticism and ordinary language philosophy's ability to deal with it as we begin to move beyond traditional views of epistemology and skepticism.

PART II THE TRUTH OF SKEPTICISM

Thus far, I have argued that skepticism cannot be refuted simply through a dogmatic assumption of our ordinary beliefs about the world and others in it. Rather, what is required is an understanding both of the invulnerability of our ordinary knowledge-claims to skeptical attack and of the power and tenacity of skepticism nonetheless. A fuller understanding of the procedures of ordinary language philosophy in dealing with epistemological issues will carry us some distance toward meeting these requirements. In the first place, such an understanding depends on a clear sense of how we are to understand the notion of *criterion*. In this second Part, I look to the writings of Stanley Cavell to help us acquire the kind of clarity we need.

ANOTHER VIEW OF ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

*What has to be accepted, the given,
is... forms of life. Wittgenstein*

Cavell on Criteria

In his book, *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell defends the Wittgensteinian method of self-knowledge, and its notion of *criterion*, as providing a way to understand and respond to the threat of skepticism.¹ Following Wittgenstein, Cavell views the nature and role of criteria with respect to epistemology as a way

¹Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 3ff. Hereafter cited as CR.

of doing philosophy, a way of understanding and perhaps of dissolving (rather than resolving) some philosophical (epistemological) issues. For Wittgenstein, one way of doing philosophy that avoids some of the dangers and confusions of traditional methods "is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use"² by carrying out *grammatical investigations*. The need for philosophy arises when we find ourselves wanting to know something about a phenomenon and we are so lost or entangled in our words that we sometimes fail or refuse to see its most obvious, ordinary, or everyday aspects. In carrying out a grammatical investigation, we do not attempt to utterly detach ourselves from ordinary practices and procedures for assessing knowledge claims. Rather we step back from such practices and procedures and remind ourselves about the kinds of statement we make about the phenomenon under investigation. We ask ourselves what criteria we have for saying *anything* about it.³

Criterion is an everyday notion. However, Cavell claims that while Wittgenstein's account of criterion is dependent on the everyday notion, it is not exactly the same notion. Criterion, as a philosophical term, carries also a technical meaning. We therefore require an analysis of the term if we are to understand both the reach, and the limits, of what our criteria can do for us. Only thus can we adequately attempt to explore the possibility of a criteria-based refutation of skepticism.

²*Investigations*, sec. 116.

³CR, pp. 28-29.

As in ordinary usage, Wittgensteinian criteria are possessed by certain groups or persons; they are adopted or accepted; they form a "kind of definition"; there are various criteria for something or other "under certain circumstances"; they are associated with "what we call something"; they show what something "consists in" or what "counts as" something.⁴ Cavell presents seven elements as functioning in our ordinary idea of criteria:

1. source of authority
2. authority mode of acceptance
3. epistemic goal
4. candidate object or phenomenon
5. status concept
6. epistemic means (specification of criteria)
7. degree of satisfaction (standards or tests for applying 6)

In ordinary usage, *both* criteria and standards are means or terms according to which a given group judges or selects or assesses value or membership in some special status. But *criteria* determine whether an object is of the right *kind*, whether it is a relevant candidate at all, whereas *standards* discriminate the degree to which a candidate satisfies those criteria.

This is where the first disanalogy appears between Wittgensteinian criteria and those of official or everyday practice, say those of show judges, umpires, court judges, and the like. As Cavell correctly insists, there is no stage at which Wittgenstein appeals to the application of criteria where one might also appeal to the application of standards. If in a given case there is some doubt about the application of criteria, then the

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 9.

case is in some way "non-standard." There simply are no decisive criteria for it.⁵

A second point of disanalogy has to do with the above-element (4), namely, with the nature of item which is a candidate for judgment together with element (5), that is, the concepts which assign the item a certain "status." Cavell explains that in official cases, the item in question in some obvious way requires assessment or evaluation; its status or ranking needs to be determined. Here, criteria are set up to allow evaluation and decision to be as rational (consistent, coherent, impersonal, non-arbitrary) as possible.

But Wittgensteinian *candidates* are not of this kind. They neither raise nor allow an obvious question of evaluative or competitive status (e.g., whether someone has a toothache, is sitting on a chair, is of an opinion, is expecting someone, was able to go on but no longer, whether he means to be doing something or is doing it as a matter of course, reading, thinking, following a rule). These are just the ordinary objects and concepts of the world. But then, on Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, any concept we use in speaking about anything at all will call for criteria.⁶

It is the case that both statements of fact and judgments of value rest upon human capacities to judge of value and to state a fact. Everything we assert (or doubt) is governed by both evidence or truth conditions and criteria. Criteria are object-specific and

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 14.

Cavell is clear that Wittgenstein depends on this feature of object-specificity. But Cavell insists that where Wittgensteinian criteria are sought, we do not first know the object to which, by means of criteria, we assign a value; on the contrary, Wittgensteinian criteria are the means by which we learn what our concepts are and hence what sort of object anything is. Wittgensteinian criteria are appealed to in the course of grammatical investigation and grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. Ordinarily we start out with a known object, whereas with Wittgensteinian criteria we end up knowing a kind of object. Thus on Cavell's reading, Wittgensteinian criteria are criteria of any and all judgment, including, but by no means restricted to, official judgments.⁷

A third disanalogy Cavell finds between the Wittgensteinian notion of criteria and the everyday one is that the criteria Wittgenstein appeals to as the data of philosophy are always ours. Referring to our first element (1) above, the group that forms the authoritative body with respect to Wittgensteinian criteria is not one person or group of persons rather than another, as in especially qualified judges or chosen officials, but human beings generally. The source of authority for the applicability of Wittgensteinian criteria is oneself, a representative *human* being as opposed to any other kind of living being, a member of a certain form of *life* for which language is its *forms* of life.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

Criteria, Language and Knowledge

In his essay, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," Cavell alludes to the biological and psychological, no less than the social, aspect of criteria.⁸

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place, (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation--all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. (*MWM*, pp. 52)

Following Wittgenstein, Cavell implies in the above passage that, given certain natural facts about the way the world is and the way we are, whatever harmony there is between our language and the world is all on the side of human forms of life, the peculiarities of language, and any given person's mastery of their language.⁹

According to Cavell, a person's authoritativeness as a master speaker of their language contains two elements: (a) generalization from what the person says; and (b) a sense in which that person is party to the establishment of criteria. But with respect to (a) Cavell insists that disagreement is possible; one person can be and

⁸Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in Stanley Cavell, *MWM*, pp. 44ff.

⁹see *Investigations*, sec. 93-97.

always remain a complete enigma to another. With respect to (b), Cavell holds that a search for our criteria is a search for community.¹⁰ Both points are crucial in any attempt to understand Cavell's method of self-knowledge in response to skepticism as having consequences for philosophy (and ourselves) that go far beyond the initial epistemological issues.

In appealing to Wittgensteinian criteria we want to know the basis on which we grant any concept to anything, why we call things as we do. On Cavell's reading of criteria, however, the reach of criteria, what they can and cannot do for us, is at issue: "Criteria are 'criteria for something's being so', not in the sense that they tell us of a thing's existence, but of something like its identity, not of its *being* so, but of it being so."¹¹

Cavell finds, as does Wittgenstein, that language is shared. But Cavell opposes the view that Wittgenstein presupposes, begins with, or asserts *thesis-like* the publicness of language. Rather, Cavell argues, "publicness is his [Wittgenstein's] goal. It would be like having sanity as one's goal. Then what state would one take oneself to be in?"¹² Cavell clearly implies in his remark here that it is a state wherein one experiences a threat to the existence or integrity of both private and public alike.

¹⁰CR, p. 18.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 44. Also, see Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 81. If I understand Mulhall correctly on this point, his view is that the Wittgensteinian notions of criteria and grammar do presuppose that language is shared and pervasively systematic.

Madness also appears as a constant threat in traditional epistemology. But Cavell argues that while traditional epistemology interprets skepticism as a near maddening problem of knowledge with respect to others, it simultaneously exhibits complacency about knowledge of the self. On this interpretation, the epistemologist "infers" the existence of others but "intuits" his or her own existence. In describing such a combination of skepticism and complacency, Cavell says that the traditional epistemologist is "convinced ...[he or she is] speaking from the most hidden knowledge of others."¹³ But Cavell argues that such hiddenness is not a fact about our relation to others and to ourselves. It is rather an instance of self-delusion and of a refusal to acknowledge the applicability of our psychological concepts to the other.

Thus, in withholding or hedging the applicability of our psychological concepts to the other as a body expressive of an inner life, one denies the other's privacy all the while insisting on a privacy of one's very own. Following Wittgenstein along such lines as these, Cavell opposes those who take Wittgenstein as presenting an argument that denies the possibility of a private language. "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."¹⁴

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 109.

The forms one relies on in making sense are human forms. As such these forms impose human limits when it comes to voicing necessities which others recognize (obey). Cavell claims that it is in this sense that Wittgenstein's claim that our uses of language are pervasively *systematic* is to be understood.¹⁵ In the course of *grammatical* investigations we discover our criteria, that is, the conventions, rules, and so on, which are in play but mostly go unnoticed in the context of everyday life and ordinary practices and procedures for making and assessing statements and knowledge-claims. Wittgenstein calls our shared commitment to the criteria we act upon *agreements in judgment*.¹⁶ Cavell says that for Wittgenstein our ability to use language, to say anything whatever, depends upon our agreement in "forms of life".¹⁷

Following Wittgenstein's teaching and his own insight, Cavell says there are criteria that no one could have established and that whoever is party to them does know what they are. He goes on to say that his claim is not that one can tell *a priori* who is implicated by oneself--this is rather one point of grammatical investigation. What Cavell insists upon here is the democratic principle of consent (equality) implicit in the Wittgensteinian notion of criteria; that we each recognize these criteria as our own.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶Wittgensteinian criteria would thus play a grammatical role in language similar to that played by Moore-type propositions in Moore's analysis of ordinary knowledge claims.

¹⁷CR, p. 30.

Skepticism and Criteria

On Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein, forms of life are what comprise the "given" and what has to be accepted. That is, our ability to establish criteria depends upon a prior agreement in judgments. But as Cavell points out, (perhaps anticipating the skeptic's reply), the suggestion is not that we can have agreed (in any conventional sense) beforehand to all that would be necessary. Nor, as Cavell also says, is it clear in Wittgenstein's *Investigations* what it would mean to alter our criteria.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Cavell rejects appealing to criteria as a description of the fact of our attunement in words (in forms of life). Contrary to the view of many orthodox Wittgensteinians, Cavell thinks there can be no appeal to criteria as a way to fend off the skeptical impulse in ourselves, to establish the existence of something with certainty, to rebut the skeptic.¹⁹

On Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, our criteria, even those we find in the course of grammatical investigation to be applicable to concepts such as certainty, necessity, and so on, are always (must be) open to repudiation. Cavell's conclusion with respect to any criteria-based rebuttal of skepticism is as follows:

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

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁹For Cavell's critique of the orthodox interpretation of Wittgenstein by Norman Malcolm and Rogers Albritton, see *CR*, pp. 7; 66-71; 233-36.

human, nothing more than natural to us. (CR, p. 47)

Cavell would agree that describing the world in language presupposes the existence of techniques of description and that repudiation of these techniques is sufficient to bring about the condition of muteness. But for the skeptic, it is the existence of the world, existence as such, which is in doubt. As to who, or what, repudiation strikes mute, and why, these are still further questions in Cavell's investigations. We turn to these questions in the following section.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S CONTEXT REVISITED

*An island of earth is faced by
an island of consciousness. Cavell*

The Object of Investigation

In the following section, we take a close look at the philosopher's context, the context within which skepticism is traditionally seen to arise. Cavell employs ordinary language procedures, as he understands them, to explore and describe how it is that modern philosophy discovers for itself the problem it calls skepticism. On Cavell's view, the situation the epistemologist creates is not one in which an empirical claim is in question. Hence there can be no appeal here to our agreements in judgment, to our ordinary or Austinian criteria. It is only on this basis that the ordinary problem of knowledge as one of correct identification is transformed into the philosophical problem of knowledge of existence.

In his own critique of Austin's "Other Minds," Cavell discusses the relation between knowing what a thing is (by means of criteria) and knowing that it is.²⁰ Austin, we may recall, considers types of replies that might be given to the question "How do you know?...there's a goldfinch at the bottom of the garden." If one produces one's credentials and opportunities with respect to the specific claim, and they are not relevantly countered or questioned, then the claim goes through. According to Austin, one has said enough. But on Cavell's view, the skeptical philosopher would concede all this. As pointed out earlier, the skeptical philosopher focuses on questions of *reality and existence* ("But is it *real*") rather than on questions of identity and recognition. According to Cavell there are (can be) no criteria for something's being a real X over and above the criteria for its being an X - there are no criteria for its *being* so over and above its being so.

Cavell thinks that the criteria (credentials and facts) are the same for something's being a goldfinch whether it is real, imagined, hallucinated, stuffed, painted or in any way phoney (existence is not a predicate).²¹ Cavell agrees with Austin's claim that, were the skeptic to enter his objection in the context of correct identification or recognition, the philosopher would be "silly" or "outrageous." But Cavell insists that in the context of the philosopher's skeptical recital, there is a difference between real and imaginary and between existence and absence. But this

²⁰CR, pp. 49-64.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 51.

difference is not as Austin would have it, a criterial difference or one of recognition, and so the philosopher is not being either silly or outrageous.²²

In an attempt to explore and articulate something of this difference, Cavell views Austin's cases as differing in important ways from those presented in traditional epistemology. In the first place, Austin selects an object or example in which you can have provided enough to show that there is "no room for an alternative, competing description of it." The problem of knowledge that arises here is initially one of identification, recognition, correct description. Cavell claims that this is never the kind of object under investigation in the traditional epistemological investigation, (bits of wax, tables, chairs, houses, men, envelopes, bells, sheets of paper, tomatoes, blackboards, pencils, etc.). What is common to all the objects of traditional epistemology is that they are ones about which there just is no problem of recognition or identification or description. They are cases "about which the only 'problem' should it arise would be not to say what they are but to say whether they are, whether they exist, are real, are actually there."²³

Cavell uses the technical term "generic object" as a heuristic device to be contrasted with Austinian "specific object." Cavell is not suggesting here that there are two kinds of objects in the world. Rather, he employs his heuristic device in an attempt to

²²*Ibid.*, p. 52.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 52.

characterize the spirit in which an object is under discussion in traditional epistemology, the kind of problem that has arisen about it, the problem in which it presents itself as the focus of investigation. Cavell says that the philosopher analyzing knowledge in relation to a generic object would rather have an unrecognizable *something* there if he could, an *anything*, a *thatness*, "an island," or "a tiny earth," materiality or externality as such.²⁴

The point Cavell insists upon is that the traditional philosopher's examples are not ones about which there is something more for someone to learn in order to recognize them. No one's position with respect to *identifying* them is *better than anyone else's* in any respect.²⁵ Cavell sums up the matter in the following way: "An island of earth is faced by an island of consciousness, of sense experience. And this proves not to be enough for knowing."²⁶ The philosopher's apparently ordinary question, "How can we know?" directed towards what appears at first sight to be a specific object, and hence entered against a concrete claim in an ordinary or empirical context *turns out* to investigate the question, "How do we know (can we be certain) that *anything* exists?" concerning a generic object. Hence the question, traditionally mistaken as one pertaining to epistemology, arises in what Cavell calls a *non-claim*, that is, a non-epistemological,

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 56.

context.²⁷ According to Cavell, the ordinary language philosopher sees no meaningful question arising here while the traditional philosopher says it is obvious that a serious question does arise just here, and this shows the inadequacy of Austin's ordinary language philosophy in confronting the skeptical problem.

...[T]he traditional philosopher is, as the ordinary language philosopher is, involved with investigating our conceptualization, or projective imagination, of problems and situations. But the traditional philosopher is led to this investigation by a problem which suggests to him that our description must be wrong, that we are misconceiving the real situation. Whereas the ordinary language philosopher is led to his investigations by a problem which means to him that we are misunderstanding our own conceptualization of a plain situation. It is as though the traditional philosopher is saying: I know what it is to see something and so I realize we *don't* see objects. Whereas the ordinary language philosopher is saying: Since we *do* (sometimes) see objects, you have misunderstood the concept of seeing something. (CR, p. 157)

Cavell thinks that the context the traditional epistemologist establishes serves to protect any conclusion drawn within it from simple refutation or a charge of absurdity. According to Cavell, the choice of candidate for investigation which is therein forced upon the epistemologist, the fact that in this context neither the claim to know nor the bases for doubt are fully natural (since then we would be dealing with a specific object) and yet they make some sense and so are not fully unnatural either, all serve to immunize the skeptical conclusion from Austinian direct criticism. Given the formulations of the traditional epistemologist in what Cavell characterizes as a "non-claim" context, that is, a "best case for

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 56; 217-221.

knowledge" of a "generic object," all knowledge, hence existence itself, is dubitable, that is, the skeptic's challenge is unanswerable. Cavell goes to great lengths, pace Austin, to show that this result is not the consequence of a misuse of, or extraordinary use of language, in this context. More importantly for Cavell, the silence (unanswerability) should not be interpreted in the traditional manner as indicative of a lack of certainty in our knowledge of existence. On Cavell's reading, the silence which meets skepticism is to be understood as pointing to the truth or moral of skepticism: the nature of our relation to existence is not one we would *ordinarily* call knowledge at all.

Cavell pushes the Austinian method of ordinary language philosophy, guided and informed by the Wittgensteinian notion of criteria, to its logical conclusion much as Descartes does with the ancient method of doubt. What emerges from Cavell's work is that epistemological skepticism is a logical or intellectual response to the *standing* threat of skepticism, to the temptation to knowledge itself. For Cavell, the skeptical conclusion marks the limit of the role that Austinian or official-type criteria play in human knowledge and the beginning of the search for community and ourselves in relation to it, that is, the beginning of the search for our common or Wittgensteinian criteria. And this search is as much about the self as it is about the world. Cavell says that *ordinarily* we know this to be the case. There is nothing really new here that we might add to our store of knowledge of the world. But it is knowledge we sometimes seek to disown or deny. Cavell

reflects on some of our motivations and methods for doing so in the following passage:

In philosophizing we come to be dissatisfied with answers which depend upon our meaning something by an expression, as though what we meant were more or less arbitrary. ...It is as though we try to get the world to provide answers in a way which is independent of our responsibility for *claiming* something to be so; ...and we fix the world so it can do this. We construct "parts" of objects which have no parts; senses which have no guiding function; become obsessed with how we can know "the pain itself." (CR, pp. 216-17)

On Cavell's view, our excitement in the face of the skeptical hypothesis expresses rejection, repudiation, refusal of, or disappointment in, our criteria, our human forms of life, our separateness and finitude, our conditionedness. Cavell interprets this truth as the end (result or legacy) of the modern enlightenment project in its many formulations of, and responses to, the threat of skepticism. His critique goes through the tradition itself, in an attempt to inherit (acknowledge), rather than repudiate (avoid), its achievement.

According to Cavell, the *standing* threat of skepticism is not taken seriously by any philosopher after Kant, until Wittgenstein. In his critique of the Anglo-American tradition, Cavell interprets "other-minds" skepticism as a problem somewhat different from, though intimately connected with, "external-world" skepticism. Cavell looks at the concept of pain, a psychological concept traditionally favoured for analysis in "other-minds" skepticism.²⁸ As with the "external-world" skeptic, Cavell credits the skeptic in

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 37-48.

this domain of knowledge for the recognition that the criteria we ordinarily employ in relation to pain determine the kind or identity of pain as expressive of an inner life. A failure of knowledge in any particular case, the possibility that pain may be feigned or suppressed in any given situation, leaves our ordinary criteria intact.

Existence and Certainty

Cavell accepts the skeptic's claim that there can be no appeal to criteria where skepticism is directed toward the very presence or reality of pain, the very existence of an inner life, the existence of a certain kind of entity as one that lives and feels.²⁹ Cavell's interpretation of criteria here opposes orthodox Wittgensteinian philosophers like Norman Malcolm and Rogers Albritton who understand Wittgensteinian criteria as meant to establish the existence of something with certainty.³⁰ For Cavell, such orthodox views fail to fully appreciate the limits of what our criteria can be called upon to do for us and the range of our possible responses (including failure to respond) to them in so far as they are ours, "nothing more than natural to us."³¹

The orthodox view of criteria holds the generally-accepted view that someone may behave as if they were in pain and yet not really be in pain at all. In order to establish criteria as a

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 37-48.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 47.

guarantee of certainty as to the existence of pain, the orthodox Wittgensteinian philosopher interprets such a situation as one in which the criteria only seem to be satisfied but in fact they are not. But once a distinction between the apparent and the real satisfaction of criteria is drawn, the original doubts about the reality of another's pain are not allayed but instead resurface as doubts about whether what appears to be a case of the satisfaction of criteria really is such a case at all. And what is one to say (do) then? Wittgenstein once expressed the difficulty in his own inimitable way as follows: "Normally, if you say 'He is an automaton' you draw consequences, if you stab him. On the other hand, you may not wish to draw any such consequences, and this is all there is to it--except further muddles."³²

According to Cavell, there simply are no criteria that go essentially beyond the criteria for the behaviour's being pain-behaviour. But while Cavell's interpretation of Wittgensteinian criteria is unorthodox, neither he, nor Wittgenstein, are behaviourists. On Cavell's view, criteria and their satisfaction guarantee the applicability of the concept of *pain*, but pain may very well be absent. Cavell describes the situation as follows:

Criteria of pain are satisfied ...by the presence of (what we take as, fix accept, adopt, etc., as) pain behaviour (certain behaviour in certain circumstances)... If ...[for example] the groaning was not (turns out not to have been) in those circumstances a criterion of pain (pain-behaviour), then there is no reason to suppose the person to be in pain; pain is not, so far, at issue. But

³²Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), p. 72.

if the groan was in those circumstances a criterion of pain, then pain is, and remains, at issue. And that means that only certain eventualities will normally count as his not being in pain after all. ...Circumstances, namely ...in which we will say (he will be) feigning, rehearsing, hoaxing, etc. ...What differentiates such circumstances from those in which he is (said to be) clearing his throat, responding to a joke, etc? Just that for "He's rehearsing" or "feigning", or "It's a hoax", etc. to satisfy us as explanations for his not being in pain (for it to "turn out: that he is not in pain) what he is feigning must be precisely pain, what he is rehearsing must be the part of a man in pain, the hoax depends on his simulating pain, etc. These circumstances are ones in appealing to which, in describing which, we retain the concept (here, of pain) whose application these criteria determine. And this means to me: In all such circumstances he has satisfied the criteria we use for applying the concept of pain to others. It is because of that satisfaction that we know that he is feigning pain (i.e., that it is pain he is feigning), and that he knows what to do to feign pain. Criteria are "criteria for something's being so", not in the sense that they tell us of a thing's existence, but of something like its identity, not of its being so, but of it being so. Criteria do not determine the certainty of statements, but the application of the concepts employed in statements. (CR, pp. 44-45).

Cavell thinks that excitement in the face of other-minds skepticism, as opposed to external-world skepticism, is not an expression of disappointment in or refusal of our criteria, but a refusal to accept, acknowledge, or respond to what they are criteria of. Cavell drives home this point with a passage from Wittgenstein's *Investigations*: "Only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living being can one say: It has sensations; it sees, is blind, hears, is deaf, is conscious or unconscious (sec. 281)".³³ Cavell is sympathetic to the skeptical view that criteria, say of pain, are disappointing. They do not

³³CR, p. 63.

assure that one's words reach all the way to the pain of others. They simply do not do the very thing they were meant to do.³⁴ But then, Cavell says, in such a context one has left out one's own responses to the criteria (of the other's pain) as they emerge.

Acknowledgment

On Cavell's interpretation of skepticism, the skeptic's problem is not a failure of knowledge but a failure to acknowledge a failure of acknowledgment. That is, there is no knowledge that the skeptic lacks but there is knowledge the skeptic refuses to acknowledge. Rather than acknowledge this refusal, the skeptic turns it into an intellectual lack. What the skeptic leaves out in his skeptical recital is self-knowledge, the source of the very idea, together with all its implications, of anything as having a body at all. On Cavell's view, the skeptic's claim of uncertainty as to the existence of other-minds *in this context* is empty.³⁵

Cavell says that in reaching the "inner" life, one's position is not exactly that one has to put the other's life there or leave it there. One has to respond to it, or refuse to respond. "It calls upon me; it calls me out. I am as fated to that as I am to my body; it is as natural to me."³⁶ In the favoured "argument from analogy" or in the defensive phenomenological notion of "empathic projection" which makes knowing others a special kind of knowing,

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 79-81.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 84.

(too special, Cavell says),³⁷ the "truth" the skeptic refuses to acknowledge begins to show itself: what is important in this domain of knowledge is the *response* of the knower. That is, we are each a separate embodiment of human life. As such, we are each vulnerable to the motivations and consequences of human passions and actions, we are each subject to the life of the body. But the individual, not the body, is *responsible* for whatever separates or unites us in life.

BEYOND EPISTEMOLOGY

The cost of knowing... . Cavell

Skepticism and Self-Knowledge

Any attempt to formulate a philosophical response to Cavell's views of epistemology and skepticism will do well to consider the central theme of self-knowledge in Cavell's skeptical writings, and to ask: In his constant and continuing concern with, and treatment of, skepticism over the course of his career, does Cavell shift his focus, thereby expanding the subject, or does he, as some have charged, (simply) change the subject? Is Cavell able to articulate an undogmatic defense of common sense which accounts for skepticism's power to render philosophically unjustified our ordinary view of the external world and others living in it, while skepticism itself remains impotent in the face of our continued conviction of the truth of those common-sense beliefs and

³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 46-47; 440-41.

practices? Or, to put the question another way: How deep, how far down, does Cavellian skepticism go?

The Reach of Our Criteria

On Cavell's view, the reply to the question of the depth of our criteria is that there is nothing further down. And thus, the notion of criteria, the fact that they are and must be open to repudiation, reveals that skepticism goes all the way down, deeper than our agreements in judgment, and so beyond or below appeal to criteria. According to Cavell, then, through grammatical investigation of our criteria we discover the truth of skepticism. How great the threat of skepticism is, what motivates it and what is at stake in it, these are all questions that Cavell continues to explore.

Contemporary interpretations of and responses to modern skepticism are many and varied. These interpretations generally attempt either to achieve complete avoidance of, or else a justified disregard for, the skeptical problem. Stanley Cavell's approach to skepticism differs markedly from each of these: Cavell takes the skeptical hypothesis far more seriously than most contemporary philosophers; he does not think that skepticism is open either to a Moore-type dismissal or to a criteria-based refutation. For Cavell, skepticism is not primarily a question of human knowledge but of the human as knower and agent in the world.

A Rest as Good as a Cure

Given that skepticism raises the question of the *human*, one begins to leave the region of epistemology and enter that of self-knowledge and morality. One of the questions that must now arise is "what is the nature of the self?" It is precisely in an attempt to respond to this question, and so to skepticism at its most profound, that Cavell looks to interpretations of skepticism which he finds articulated in Shakespeare as well as in the post-Kantian Romanticism of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Emerson and Thoreau. Cavell claims that so far as the Romanticist is concerned, what we, and the world, are in need of is "redeeming from at once skepticism and the answer to skepticism provided in the *Critique of Pure Reason*."³⁸

Cavell interprets Wittgenstein (and Heidegger) as continuing the Kantian project of providing an account of ordinary beliefs and practices that is both unskeptical and nondogmatic which at the same time helps us understand the tenacity of skepticism and the tendency to oppose it in epistemological terms.

Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger continue, by reinterpreting, Kant's insight that limitations of knowledge are not failures of it. *Being and Time* goes further than *Philosophical Investigations* in laying out how to think about what the human creature's relation to the world as such is (locating, among others, that particular relation called knowing); but Wittgenstein goes further than Heidegger in laying out how to investigate the cost of our continuous temptation to knowledge, as I would like to put it. In *Being and Time* the cost is an absorption in the public world, the world

³⁸Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 44. Hereafter cited as *Quest*.

of the mass or average man. In the *Investigations* the cost is arrived at in terms (e.g., of not knowing what we are saying, of emptiness in our assertions, or the illusion of meaning something, of claims to impossible privacies. And in both the cost is the loss, or forgoing, of identity or of selfhood. To be interested in such accounts as accounts of the cost of knowing to the knowing creature, I suppose one will have to take an interest in certain preoccupations of romanticism. (CR., pp. 241-42)

An adequate understanding of Cavell's view of skepticism is really possible only if one sees each of his writings as part of a larger "work-in-progress" and hence as presenting neither Cavell's first nor his last word on skepticism. And of course, in considering the wider range of Cavell's writings, one comes to appreciate not merely the profound depth of Wittgenstein's influence on Cavell, but also the limit of that influence as it is measured against other equally profound influences, and against the increasingly decided, and original, direction of Cavell's own developing thought.

Conclusion to Part II: The Nature of Criteria

Given the existence of criteria, whether the everyday Austinian notion, the official notion, or the Wittgensteinian one, the possession and application of criteria entail responsibility and obedience. With Wittgensteinian criteria, responsibility and obedience is to the language community as a whole, that is, to oneself as a representative member of that community so that the capacity for language is at once the capacity for human community and the capacity for individual autonomy. But these criteria are ours, only ours and as such they are always open, indeed must be open, to repudiation. On this basis Cavell claims, for example, that the possibility of (whatever the need for) political community and political freedom arises precisely from our capacity for, and the necessities in, language. Cavell views the polis both as the field within which one develops and makes manifest one's personal identity (or voice) and as the creation of (political) freedom.³⁹

I will come back to further discussion of the moral and socio-political dimensions of language as criterial, of the relation between self and community, in Parts IV and V below. But while skepticism denies the very possibility of community, the traditional philosophical rendering of skepticism fails to present skepticism itself as a serious threat, that is, as a real, live possibility.

In an attempt to understand and respond to such failure, Part III takes up Cavell's interpretations of Shakespearean tragedy, and

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 18-28.

later his readings in Romanticism. Here it becomes clear that an important difference between Cavell and Wittgenstein (but something Cavell shares with Heidegger) is that Cavell looks outside philosophy for ways to understand and to cope with skepticism. Cavell sees skepticism as in some sense *natural*, rooted in ordinary, practical life and so also part of the subject-matter of certain central literary works of art. In taking up certain of Cavell's literary elucidations, we prepare to explore and assess the philosophical challenge of literature to philosophy's understanding of skepticism and to philosophy's own self-understanding.

PART III THE SKEPTIC IN LITERATURE

In Part III, we move to a consideration of certain key literary texts whose subject is the human as agent and knower with the capacity and desire both to own, and disown, knowledge. It is here that I hope we can further our understanding, not only of skepticism and its consequences, but also of some of the ways and places skepticism manifests itself and of certain of its motivations.

Thus far, we have considered several contemporary responses to skepticism. In doing so, we found that a strictly epistemological interpretation of skepticism misses the mark or moral of the skeptical challenge and thus is unable to provide a basis for a fully adequate response to it. We also found that criteria-based responses to skepticism take as their starting-point the erroneous view that skepticism is only, or just, an epistemological issue. Given their false start, we concluded that such criteria-based attempts to silence the skeptic are inappropriate as well as inadequate.

But even if we were to accept that skepticism is not simply about a lack of knowledge or misuse of language in the way philosophy has generally understood, this cannot be the end of the matter, philosophically or otherwise. Stanley Cavell's fundamental contribution to our understanding of the skeptical challenge is his insight that while skepticism is something other or more than simply an epistemological issue, it is nonetheless a moral or practical issue and one about which we should all be deeply

concerned. That, in either case, philosophy has generally thought otherwise provides the necessary and sufficient reason for my now turning elsewhere for an understanding of the nature and scope of the skeptical problem. Such a move holds out the promise (or threat) not only of contributing to our understanding of skepticism but also of dramatically altering our understanding of the nature and task of philosophy itself.

The skeptical conclusion can be read as the intellectual betrayal, loss, even non-existence (or death) of the world. Shakespearean Tragedy provides the quintessential equivalent to such an end in human and practical terms. In section one below, I examine the tragic hero's progress from knowledge to doubt to death (murder and/or suicide) in an attempt to discern in the hero's journey (or flight) some clue which will help us unravel the riddle of epistemological skepticism. Section two explores the Kantian settlement with skepticism, in particular with a view to understanding the Romanticist critique of both skepticism and Kant. Certain key texts of the Romanticist movement are then taken up in section three as providing not only a deepening understanding of the skeptical philosopher but of the skeptic in all of us. The hope is that we thereby begin to see the kind of relevance which both literature and philosophy might have in any attempt to understand and to cope with skepticism. But first, I want to explore Stanley Cavell's claim of parallel structures and outcomes in epistemological skepticism and Shakespearean Tragedy. Cavell characterizes these parallels as the skeptical structure of tragedy

and the tragical structure of skepticism.

THE SKEPTIC IN TRAGEDY

Othello: Nay, had she been true/If heaven would
make me such another world/Of one entire and
perfect chrysolite/I'd not have sold her. 141.

The Life of the Skeptic

In *Disowning Knowledge In Six Plays of Shakespeare*, Cavell persuasively lays claim to Shakespeare's plays as modernity's earliest and most consistent attempt to describe and respond to its peculiar skeptical problematic.¹ In Lear's avoidance of love, Othello's death-dealing jealousy, Anthony's and Cleopatra's world-consuming passion, Coriolanus's disgust with the world, Hamlet's inertia, Leontes's annihilating jealousy, Cavell finds interpretations and re-interpretations of the tragical structure of skepticism.

On Cavell's reading, the plays interpret the problem of skepticism, which philosophy considers as its own problem or discovery, as an interpretation or intellectualization of a prior refusal of self-knowledge. But philosophy has generally understood skepticism simply as a problem of knowledge with respect to the existence of the world and others in it. Now Cavell claims Descartes's *Meditations*, for example, are best understood as rather about the finding (or affirmation) of the existence of the self, or

¹Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 3-5; hereafter cited as *DK*.

self-knowledge.² Cavell points out that Descartes stakes "the integrity of his (human, finite) existence ...on the fact and on the idea of another being's existence, and on the possibility of proving that existence, an existence conceived from [his] own dependence and incompleteness, hence conceived as perfect, and conceived as producing [him] 'in some sense, in [its] own image'."³

A Best Case for Knowledge

In his interpretation of *Othello*, Cavell seeks to raise the Cartesian stake in the existence of another still higher "by casting suspicion on whether we know what it means to know that another exists."⁴ There is no suggestion here of a new or higher level of skepticism. There is instead an attempt to achieve a new, more adequate and philosophically satisfying account of skepticism. Cavell's hope that such an account is to be found here is reasonably based on the sense in which the dramatist, working outside the confines of philosophy's aims, methods and procedures, is free to push the skeptical hypothesis to its *practical* limits.

To begin with, Cavell finds the scene of skepticism epitomized in Othello's declaration of his stake in Desdemona: "My life upon her faith" (I, iii, 294) and "...when I love thee not/Chaos is come again" (I, iii, 91-2). Cavell claims that this is precisely the stake necessary in the philosopher's setting up a "best case for

²*Ibid.*, p. 127.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 128ff.

knowledge" for investigation, otherwise expressed in the imaginary major premise, "If I know anything, I know this." Cavell draws a parallel between Othello's precipitous progress from complete love to perfect doubt, on the one hand, and the philosopher's "astonishment" in Descartes's first Meditation on finding "that there are no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep,"⁵ on the other. According to Cavell, both the Shakespearean hero and the skeptical philosopher typically proceed to imagine "possibilities that reason, unaided, cannot rule out."⁶ Refusing to simply acknowledge the most obvious, that is, seeing himself as taking no position on the matter, the hero-skeptic demands proof one way or the other. What is interesting because instructive, for Cavell at least, is not only whether such a non-position is possible but, perhaps more importantly, what impels an individual to strive for it. In following such lines of enquiry, Cavell says of Othello:

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. The content of his torture is the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial. (DK, p. 138)

Cavell finds that tragedy interprets and portrays skepticism as a denial or *disowning* of our knowledge of the separate identity of the other, and hence of the autonomous existence or reality of the other, whether "other" be another person like ourselves or the

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 128, quotation from Descartes's first Meditation.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 128.

world as such. Near the end of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell anticipates some such relation in the nature and structure of other-minds, and external-world skepticisms.

It would not hurt my intuitions, to anticipate further than this book actually goes, were someone to be able to show that my discoveries in the region of the sceptical problem of the other are, rightly understood, further characterizations of (material object) scepticism, of scepticism as such. So that, for example, what I will find in Othello's relation to Desdemona is not just initiated by the human being's relation to the world, in particular by that phase of its career in which the human being makes to secure or close its knowledge of the world's existence once and for all, only to discover it to be closed off for ever; but also that their relation remains to the end a certain allegory of that career. The consequent implication that there is between human existence and the existence of the world a standing possibility of death-dealing passion, of a yearning at once unappeasable and unsatisfiable, as of an impossible exclusiveness and completeness, is an application that harks back, to my mind, to the late suggestion of the possibility of *falling in love* with the world, blind to its progress beyond our knowledge. (CR, pp. 451-52, *emphasis mine*)⁷

In a further and later development of this interpretation of skepticism, Cavell sees "other minds" skepticism also as a refusal to acknowledge another's knowledge of oneself, so disturbing or disappointing such knowledge may be.⁸ Since self-knowledge is always present for us (how could it be otherwise?) it is our fate (freedom, Cavell would also say) to act upon it, that is, to acknowledge or to avoid it. According to Cavell, ignorance in this domain of knowledge must be actively sought, and such ignorance as

⁷Cavell alludes here to an earlier remark of his, namely, that "to live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world." see CR, pp. 431-32.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 5-6 and pp. 206-7.

is claimed, or achieved, exacts the highest of costs.⁹

In what Cavell sees as the skeptical structure of tragedy, the skeptic as hero transforms some other into what Cavell calls a "best case" of knowledge, a generic other, so that for the hero, the other is or represents the whole world.¹⁰ Given the immensity of the hero's stake in the other, the consequence of the failure of a best case in tragedy is "withdrawal of the world." But, we may ask, why would the skeptic care about happens in tragedy? In the following passage, Cavell draws a line of connection between what he sees as the skeptical structure of tragedy and what he calls the tragical structure of skepticism.

The expression "withdrawal of the world" promises the following of various paths into and out of the collapse of the "best case" in the skeptical interrogation: the sense, as in the case of Descartes's wax or of C. I. Lewis's apple, that "if I cannot know this then I cannot know anything" and the sense that here the object stands for, enacts the position of, the world as such; and that this elicits, as in some metaphysical parody, the animism (and loss of animism) of the world; and that these paths presume that the best case of acknowledging another mind works itself out similarly to and hence differently from the best case of knowing a material object. (DK, p. 19)

On Cavell's reading of *Othello*, the hero/skeptic's investment in some one other of his whole capacity for acknowledgment is such that failure here results in the loss of the whole world, of himself and all others in it. But why is there failure and why interpret it in this way? Cavell describes Othello's dizzying leap from complete love of another, to an awareness of practically

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 138ff.

¹⁰DK, p. 17.

nothing, an imagined slight, perhaps a mere whisper, quickly culminating in death-dealing rage and jealousy directed toward the very existence of one other, who is the world to him.¹¹ There is nothing the other could now say or do and nothing the hero could hear, see, or discover that he would be willing to count as evidence against his peculiar, thorough-going suspicion and fear. The world is rendered inaudible to him; he is past caring about it. And, according to Cavell, so it goes with the skeptical philosopher.

In turning the concept of belief to name our immediate relation to the world, say our absolute intimacy, a relation no human other could either confirm or compromise, the philosopher turns the world into, or puts it in the position of, a speaker, lodging its claims upon us, claims to which, as it turns out, the philosopher cannot listen. (DK, pp. 7-8)

But what motivates the skeptic to take such a mad, incalculably huge risk, to use or abuse ordinary knowledge of objects or other persons, so as to achieve this result? In his Shakespearean readings, Cavell finds the motivation lies within the hero/skeptic himself, in his horror or disgust with himself as finite, conditioned, separate, implicated in, by and with others like himself, no more but no less human than himself. On Cavell's view, if the skeptic is to retract his refusal to acknowledge the other's separate existence, he would have to acknowledge the other as just *this* other living human being, rather than an idealized, fictionalized, theatricalized, *generic* other. He would have to acknowledge himself as only human, a being whose existence is

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 128ff.

dependent on the existence of another separate from him. And he would have to acknowledge his own peculiar strategies of, and motivations for, avoidance as revealed in the knowledge this other has of him, including now, even the knowledge of his own denial of the particular otherness (separateness, individuality, autonomy) of that other. If he is not to acknowledge himself as so known, as something less than the idealized, romantic hero he imagines or wishes himself to be, as only human after all, then he must deny the other as knower of him, refuse the other's acknowledgment of him. Cavell sums up his view that tragedy (in the present case *Othello*) is itself an interpretation of epistemological skepticism in the following passage:

What philosophy knows as doubt, Othello's violence allegorizes (or recognizes) as some form of jealousy. ... He seeks a possession that is not in opposition to another's claim or desire but one that establishes an absolute or inalienable bonding to himself, to which no claim or desire *could* be opposed, could conceivably count; as if the jealousy is directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him. ...With his 'jealousy,' Othello's violence studies the human use of knowledge under the consequence of skepticism. (DK, pp. 7-9)

According to Cavell, we ordinarily live our skepticism with respect to "other minds", live with the threat of skepticism, rather than face a "best case for acknowledgment." More importantly, we do so in order to avoid acknowledging that *this is* a best case. Cavell says that the reason one does not usually single out one living other in the way a skeptic singles out one material object is to avoid the risk of being singled out. Our fear of inexpressiveness and its possible consequences is the other side

of our fear of expressing too much.¹²

The Skeptical Spirit

Cavell finds in each of his readings of six plays of Shakespeare a peculiar interpretation of skepticism, (fear, jealousy, hatred, despair, disgust, avoidance, repugnance, arrogance, and so on) a peculiarity derived from that of the characters of the respective plays. But Cavell's claim, which he calls intuition,¹³ is that tragedy interprets skepticism *per se* as a rejection of the human, a refusal of self-knowledge, of the burden or responsibility of knowledge about oneself and one's relations to others, a theatricalization of life, as it were.¹⁴

Thus in Cavell's interpretation of tragedy, skepticism is represented as a natural or human tendency to adopt an epistemological attitude toward an existence we refuse to acknowledge as separate and independent, a refusal we then transform into an intellectual lack. This human tendency is what I characterize as "the skeptical spirit". This interpretation informs Cavell's teaching or tuition, that is, his novel characterization of skepticism as a *standing* threat not only or

¹²CR, pp. 351-52.

¹³see Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, the Carus Lectures, 1988 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 36; hereafter cited as CHU.

¹⁴According to Cavell, theatricalizing others is not just a theoretical possibility but a common occurrence in contemporary life. See *MWM*, p. 348; and Stanley Cavell, *Themes out of School* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), p. 137.

merely to the identity or integrity of the other but first and always to that of oneself, to the human as such.

Cavell says one must turn to literature to find the most consistent formulation of other-minds skepticism. His readings of Shakespearean tragedy seek to show how external-world skepticism gives rise to, and is a consequence of, other-minds skepticism and so each side collapses into its other, a conclusion not incompatible with certain aspects of the formulations of skepticism by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. But in Cavell's post-Kantian philosophy, the nature and consequences of skepticism as a *standing* threat in our everyday commerce with others are quite distinct from any earlier formulations.

What, then, do we learn about skepticism from examining Cavell's work in tragedy? Cavell's literary readings in skepticism, and on how we do or do not live it, seek to move beyond philosophy's traditional attempts to interpret and respond to it in only in epistemological terms. He turns to philosophical reflections on ordinary, everyday encounters with skepticism and how these encounters work themselves out, or not, in certain central literary works of art. Cavell views this move as providing the only available perspective from which we might find a substantial, full-bodied treatment of, and response to, skepticism as a *standing* threat one must face, not once and for all, but constantly, in every encounter with the other, and with the other of one's self.

Cavell's forays into literature in search of an understanding

of skepticism are clearly attempts to help us recover something he views as essential with respect to our relation to existence. That is, Cavell tries to restore a sense of depth to the flatness of what has become of that relation (cf. Wittgenstein on the depth of philosophical problems). Otherwise we may lose the capacity for a human possibility which alone comes out of a sense of the "unknown" or of "otherness," out of the depths of our awareness that an essential aspect of our relation to existence is the necessity of self-acknowledgment, of having bumped our heads against existence opening up, rather than closing in, the edges of our individual linguistic and analytic capacities.

If we accept Cavell's view of skepticism, then it follows that we must reject the traditional interpretation of a sense of the unknown as exposing an inherent flaw or failure in human knowledge and language. Does Cavell, then, get beyond skepticism or simply express in novel terms a "nostalgia for the absolute"? Perhaps he does both, if the latter phrase is taken to mean a profound sense of being lost, and that sense as expressive of an essential need of the human, for the human. On Cavell's readings in skepticism, only this sense is strong enough, effective enough, and sufficiently proper to its subject-matter to bring with it a deep awareness of our temptation to knowledge and the costs of succumbing to that temptation. The felt threat to existence posed by a sense of the unknown, of the other's *separateness*, is an affirmation of existence, perhaps the only truly non-question-begging affirmation possible for us. But the greatest of human pride and fear refuses

to acknowledge the presence of threat, of self-limitation, and so denies the self, deprives the self of any experience of the depths of the unknown, of existence and freedom beyond skepticism.

Throughout his many readings, Cavell is at pains to show how it is that knowledge is based on self-knowledge, and to show that and how in certain domains acknowledgment is an interpretation of, that is, the appropriate response to, knowledge. Cavell attempts to show how it is that skepticism is an attempt to avoid, deny, or refuse to acknowledge truths about oneself as a knower of the world and as an agent *in* the world. Cavell's reading of a text is a study in the motivations to, and consequences of, skepticism, both in philosophy and in ordinary life.

Cavell's self-appointed task seems not so much to teach us something we do not already know but to provoke and direct our thought about what it means to know it. His philosophical/literary elucidations attempt to repeat, amplify and translate into as many of our language-games as possible, (philosophy, art, politics, education), what he calls the *truth of skepticism*, and to heighten our awareness of the ethical and epistemological dimensions of aesthetic response. As such, Cavell's readings support the argument for a philosophical challenge from literature to modern philosophy's discovery of skepticism as a demand for indubitable knowledge of the existence of the world (external-world skepticism) or of others like ourselves in it (other-minds skepticism). His subtle and deeply engaging view of the skeptical spirit is a fresh challenge to philosophical reflection. It requires a reformulation

of one of philosophy's most persistent themes. Furthermore, it challenges philosophy's own self-understanding. It is with this challenge in mind that we next turn to Kant's confrontation with skepticism in order to assess the adequacy of his response to it. Only then can we fairly evaluate the seriousness of such a challenge.

KANT'S BARGAIN WITH SKEPTICISM

Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer. Kant

Transcendental Idealism

In Cavell's elucidations, we have seen that knowing is a performative or responsive act involving both feeling and will as well as reason. As such it has practical or moral, no less than epistemological, implications.¹⁵ Cavell's philosophical/literary studies attempt to go through or get beyond traditional epistemology to ethics via aesthetics. Such crossing of Kant's critical lines calls into question Kant's rigid divisions of existence and human experience of it into the separate compartments of the "phenomenal" and the "noumenal."

Kant's compartmental settlement with skepticism derives from, and is informed by, Kant's "transcendental" theory of experience. Hume claimed that the human mind has no access to external (self-transcendent, independent) truth or reality and he reduced the validity of the causal principle to a matter of custom and habit.¹⁶ Kant's solution to the difficulty thrown up by Hume is to demonstrate the *ideality* of both time and space as "pure

¹⁵Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 107ff; hereafter cited as *Quest*.

¹⁶D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), Bk I, Part III and IV, pp. 73ff.

intuitions" presupposed in all experience, whether "external" or "internal" -- hence, Kant's theory of transcendental idealism.

Kant distinguishes between the real or phenomenal, that is, the ordinary changing and uncertain perceptions of human beings, and the ideal or noumenal, that is, things-in-themselves, which form the unchanging and unknowable structure of the world.¹⁷ On Kant's view, the human intellect always stands between thing and knower and so reason can never directly know things-in-themselves. Accordingly, traditional metaphysics is impossible, but from a Kantian perspective, this presents no cause for Humean skepticism.¹⁸ The following are two paragraphs from Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* which are offered as a summary in Kant's own words of why this is so.¹⁹

Since the oldest days of philosophy inquirers into pure reason have conceived, besides the things of sense, or appearances (phenomena), which make up the sensible world, certain creations of the understanding, called noumena, which should constitute an intelligible world. And as appearances and illusion were by those men identified (a thing which we may well excuse in an undeveloped epoch), actuality was only conceded to the creations of thought.

And we indeed, rightly considering objects of sense as mere appearances, confess thereby that they are based upon a thing in itself, though we know not this thing in its internal constitution, but only know its appearances,

¹⁷Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan, 1961), A 249 / B306ff; hereafter cited as *First Critique*.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, A 760 / B 788- A 769 / B 797. see also, Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), sec. 32; hereafter cited as *PFM*.

¹⁹see Quest, p. 30. Quotation from Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, sec. 32.

viz., the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something. The understanding therefore, by assuming appearances, grants the existence of things in themselves also, and so far we may say, that the representation of such things as form the basis of phenomena, consequently of mere creations of the understanding, is not only admissible, but unavoidable. (PFM, sec. 32).

Kant's doctrine of the complete diversity of the ideal and the real would allow, indeed it seeks to guarantee, the possibility of a true science. That is, Kant's epistemological premise of transcendental idealism holds that human beings can study and understand phenomena because the latter are known according to the pure intuitions of time and space and the *a priori* concepts or categories of the understanding itself, namely, those of cause and effect, similarity and difference, and so on.²⁰ Accordingly, Kant claims that all experience correlates with, falls under, and is systematically determined by these categories of the understanding as the conditions of any objectivity whatever.

The Thing-In-Itself

While Kant's transcendental theory of experience would establish the possibility of knowledge of the phenomenal world, it equally establishes the impossibility of knowledge of the noumenal world, the *in itself*, as it is in itself. Certainly, the Kantian *in itself* has neither spatial nor temporal features, nor does the principle of causality or any other categories of the understanding

²⁰*First Critique*, A 80 / B 106. See also Paul Guyer's *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 98.

have any appropriate application to it. This featurelessness and inapplicability of categories raises certain concerns for post-Kantians.

Post-Kantians disagree as to whether things-in-themselves actually do exist and whether or not there is any source of knowledge outside human reason or cognition. One's position in such a debate is crucial since if the categories of the human mind are the instruments for producing *all* valid knowledge, then it might be argued that the individual is the creator of the visible universe, of "reality" as such, and there is no other reality for us. Therefore, so the argument goes, why talk of things-in-themselves at all?

Cavell suggests one way to address some of these post-Kantian concerns in the following passage:

...Suppose the categories articulate our notion of "an object (of nature)" without articulating our sense of externality. (Our sense not of each object's externality to every other, making nature a whole, showing it to be spatial; but their externality to me, making nature a world, showing it to be habitable.) And suppose that our idea of externality, of objects as being "in a world apart from me", is what is registered in the concept of the "thing-in-itself". Then the problem with the notion of "thing-in-itself" is not, as it has been put, that Kant does not, or cannot explain its relation to the objects we know, or that he oughtn't to be able to so much as imagine its relation (because in his view the categories do not apply to it). The problem with the concept of thing-in-itself is that it should itself have received a transcendental deduction, i.e., that it itself or the concepts which go into it (e.g., externality; world (in which objects are met)), should have been seen as internal to the categories of the understanding, as part of our concept of an object in general. (CR, pp. 53-54)

According to Cavell, then, an understanding of our relation to the

concept of the thing-in-itself, like other concepts related to the possibility of human knowledge, requires a grammatical investigation. On Cavell's view, "...[w]hat Wittgenstein means by grammar---...Kant calls 'transcendental'." ²¹

The Kantian Legacy

The fundamental issue for post-Kantians is that if there can be no talk of the *in itself*, there can be no talk of human freedom (and responsibility) as the basic premise of morality or of rationality (and universality) in aesthetic debate. All phenomenal experience is law or rule-governed. The Kantian compartmental settlement with skepticism is simply unable to secure a basis for practical ethics or to avoid the possibility of solipsism and contain the threat of skepticism after all. We must have, and be able to reasonably articulate, a relation to the *in itself* if morality is to be a possibility and if art is to be a shareable, hence meaningful, experience. And so we must conclude that Kant's settlement with skepticism is inadequate, resolving one difficulty as it does while creating, or at least failing to resolve, other difficulties of equal or greater importance. And so it seemed to the Romanticist. We turn our attention once more, then, to literature, this time to Romanticism.

Intellectually, Romanticism follows closely upon Jean-Jacques Rousseau's attacks on the Enlightenment ideals of reason, common sense and education and notes instead the importance of the heart,

²¹MWM, pp. 64ff.

of common feeling, of emotion, of passion and of human irrationality. Finding inspiration in the French and American revolutions and other popular wars of independence, Romanticism generally expresses an extreme and irreducible individualism, fascination with the process of creativity, insistence on the limits of reason, celebration of the dynamic nature of the imagination, together with a sense of the infinite and the transcendental.²²

Transcendental, and later in America, transcendentalism, are terms inspired by Kant but the Romanticist uses these terms in an un-Kantian sense, almost with the meaning of "transcendent."²³ However, for the Romanticist, as we will see below, through human reason in combination with feeling and the will, transcendency is both realized and overcome. In the following section, we will examine how it is that certain of Kant's own doctrines become tools in both the Romanticist critique of Kant and in the Romanticist response to skepticism.

SKEPTICISM AND ROMANTICISM

*To know the world, not love her,
is thy point.* Edward Young

²² See Eugene N. Anderson, "Response to Contemporary Crisis," in *Romanticism: Problems of Definition, Explanation, and Evaluation*, ed. John B. Halsted (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965), pp. 96ff.

²³ René Wellek, *Confrontations*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 193.

The Intellectual Background

Cavell interprets certain key texts in Romanticism as studies of the relation between ordinary knowledge claims and the existence of separate and independent *realities*, (the external world, other minds).²⁴ One of the most important achievements of Romanticism is often understood as its institution of a new literature in the spirit of an already existing realism. This new literature takes Kant's dualism seriously and refuses to be deprived of the *Ding-an-sich*, a view with which Cavell expresses sympathy: "You don't--do you?--have to be a romantic to feel sometimes about ..[Kant's settlement with skepticism]: /thanks for nothing."²⁵

From the romantic perspective, the poet, as genius-creator, might indeed apprehend truly essential reality behind appearances.²⁶ Thus Romanticism generally assumes the reality of both the sensuous and the supernatural world. The Romanticist seeks to express in realistic or concrete terms a *felt* sense of the ineffable, of intimacy with, and a profound connection to, nature, and a human aspiration toward an attainable, presentable, infinite. It is a commonly accepted view that Romanticism expresses "a common core of thought and art with respect to imagination, symbol, myth and organic nature as part of the great endeavour to overcome the split between subject and object, the self and the world, the

²⁴Quest, pp. 40ff.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁶Anderson, "Response to Contemporary Crisis," in *Romanticism*, 1965, p. 98.

conscious and the unconscious."²⁷ In this endeavour, the Romantic writers devote themselves to concreteness, precision, and to the ordinary or everyday aspects of life.

Given its concern with the local and the particular, historical Romanticism engenders a heightened and critical interest in national history and culture together with ideas and beliefs which emerge after the mid-nineteenth century as *historicism*.²⁸ There is a profound interest in a sense of "nationhood" in all the early Romantic writers. As we will see below, this interest recurs in the works of the American writers Emerson and Thoreau, as does the Romantic concern with nature and science, with reality and epistemology. These are fundamental and defining features of Romanticism, as is seen throughout European arts and letters of the Romantic era.

Turning now to Cavell's literary elucidations, it is in English Romanticism that Cavell finds a bridge between the German poets and philosophers and those of America, or between what he characterizes as the loss of philosophy (as of something philosophy lost, or something lost in philosophizing) and its possible recovery or redemption. In traversing this bridge with Cavell, I hope to show that Romanticism's traffic in animism, metaphorically portraying outward things, whether objects or persons, as animated is less to be ridiculed than to be studied as an interpretation of skepticism as a real, live possibility, a standing threat to the

²⁷Wellek (1965), p. 4.

²⁸See Halsted (1969), Intro. "History", pp. 30-35.

objective existence of the world and to the life of individuals and communities alike. As such, animism depicts skepticism in practice and hence, animism offers a way of understanding skepticism in practical terms as a way of life, its methods, its motivations, its consequences, as well as ways of coping with it.

Skepticism and Animism

The notion of animism is a crucial one both in Cavell's interpretation of skepticism, and in his view of Romanticism as a response to skepticism. In Cavell's parallel treatment of skepticism and tragedy, we have already discussed the idea that skepticism involves a false animism (or loss of animism) with respect to our relation to the world or to other persons like ourselves.²⁹ In skepticism, Cavell says animism is present in the form of a concealed, denied or repressed desire for exclusivity, an ill will, or bad faith on the skeptic's part. This subterfuge is, for Cavell, a key element in a general theatricalization of life, or what he characterizes also as "falling in love with the world."

On Cavell's reading of Coleridge, the latter's Romanticism is critical of false animism and suggests the possibility of a different *kind* of animism. The Romanticist, in the present case, Coleridge, uses false animism deliberately or self-consciously, as part of an attack launched against the Kantian compartmentalization of our relation to the world. But in presenting a different way of understanding and responding to the world, the Romanticist also

²⁹see above, pp. 75ff.

uses animism as a metaphorical, no less than theoretical, device in affirming a non-epistemic, immediate awareness of and relation to the thing-in-itself.

It is just such a relation as mentioned above which Kant found impossible to justify and hence necessary to deny. But Cavell argues that, according to Coleridge, it is through a kind of intellectual intuition, impossible in Kantian philosophy, that the integrity of both the self and of nature which we "murder to dissect" are to be restored and assured.³⁰ Such an intuitive relation to existence no doubt sounds superstitious, even mystical, but it is deliberately so for the Romanticist. Cavell finds Coleridge takes up just this issue in a moment of the *Biographia*.³¹

[Coleridge] is expressing his gratitude, his debt, to the writings of mystics, the boon he has received from them in "[preventing my] mind from being imprisoned within the outline of any single dogmatic system. They contributed to keep alive the heart in the head; gave me an indistinct, yet stirring, and working presentiment, that all the products of the mere reflective faculty partook of DEATH." It is they, he goes on to say, who "during my wanderings through the wilderness of doubt ...enabled me to skirt, without crossing, the sandy deserts of unbelief." Now since it is of objects, or what he calls "objects as objects," that Coleridge otherwise speaks of

³⁰Quest, p. 44. see also *Biographia*, chap. 12, thesis 10. In a note following his translation of a passage from Kant, Coleridge rejects Kant's exclusive use of the term "intuition" to denote that which can be represented in space and time and gives to the term a wider significance so that the term "comprehends all truths known to us without a medium." see G. N. G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism: A Study in the History of Philosophy with Unpublished Materials from Coleridge's Manuscripts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 202. Orsini credits Wellek for correctly identifying the impetus of Coleridge's criticism of Kant here and Coleridge's use of the term "intellectual intuition" to the influence of Schelling.

³¹Quest, p. 44. see *Biographia*, chap. 9, para. 6.

as "dead, fixed" in contrast to the will or to the imagination, and since he speaks of "the writings of the illustrious sage of Königsberg" as having "[taken] possession of me as with a giant's hand," I interpret the death, of which the reflective faculty partakes, as of the world made in our image, or rather through our categories, by Kant's faculty of the Understanding, namely that world which was meant to remove the skeptic's anxieties about the existence of objects outside us. (Quest, p. 44).

It is clear from Cavell's commentary above that Coleridge was an avid student of German language, literature and philosophy.³² Cavell claims that Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* can be read as a critical response to Kant's philosophy.³³ We have already found that, according to Kant, it is necessary to draw a "mental" line between the noumenal and the phenomenal world if scientific knowledge is to be possible and if aesthetic and moral knowledge are to be assured. But we also found that this compartmentalizing of experience partakes of, or leads to, skepticism rather than overcomes it, however inadvertent this might be on Kant's part. For Coleridge, as Cavell reads him, it is rather assurances gained through aesthetic and moral experience in the breaching of the Kantian mental or critical line that make science, and indeed human existence generally, possible, i.e., a meaningful and worthwhile

³²see also, Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), pp. 85-96; 112; 230; and René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950: The Romantic Age*, II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), pp. 152-157.

³³Quest, pp. 44ff. see also, H. J. Jackson, ed. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). See *Biographia Literaria*, chap. 9, para 6; chap. 12, paras. 7, 9, 14.

affair.³⁴

In what Cavell reads as a direct encounter with Kantian philosophy, Coleridge takes up the Kantian doctrine of bipolarity ("two worlds") in *The Ancient Mariner* where an implied image of a mental line is interpreted as a geographical or terrestrial border. Coleridge's famous poem tells, in the words of the poet himself in the 1798 preface of his *Biographia* "[h]ow a Ship having passed the line was driven by Storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole; ...and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancient Mariner came back to his own Country."³⁵ The poet self-consciously employs animism to express how it is that a life is lived below or beyond Kant's "critical line, in this "frozen" region, thus, under the consequences of skepticism. Here we may discover, after all, whether and how the required assurances are (to be) gained (or granted), accepted (or acknowledged), lost (or refused), found (or recovered).³⁶

On Cavell's interpretation, the Romanticist views the Kantian world-creating "categories of the understanding as ours, and hence of our carrying the death of the world in us, in our very requirement of creating it, as if it does not yet exist."³⁷ In this sense, Kantian categories, like other philosophical devices such as "empathic projection" are tinged with a form of *animism*,

³⁴Quest, pp. 46ff.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 46, a passage Cavell quotes from Coleridge.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 44.

however disguised, denied, buried or suppressed. Hence, Kant's philosophy partakes of the very fanaticism of which Kant would accuse the skeptic. However, according to Cavell, animism need neither take this skeptical or fanatical form nor be in any sense hidden. Rather, animism may be openly a symbol of, and a call for, a redemptive reading, experience, or response to the world in our relation to it. Cavell expresses the point as follows:

Against a vision of the death of the world, the romantic calling for poetry, or quest for it, the urgency of it, would be sensible; and the sense that the redemption of philosophy is bound up with the redemption of poetry would be understandable: the calling of poetry is to give the world back, to bring it back, as to life. Hence romantics seem to involve themselves in what look to us to be superstitious, discredited mysteries of animism, sometimes in the form of what is called the pathetic fallacy. (*Quest*, pp. 44-45)

In his interpretation of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Cavell views the willingness, even the necessity, of Romanticist involvement in the "mysteries of animism" as an aspect of the Romanticist response both to skepticism and to Kant's settlement with skepticism. Cavell's claim here has important consequences for philosophy and it requires some considerable spelling out. But first we need to return for a moment to Cavell's interpretation of tragedy.

The leading idea which arises from Cavell's previously-discussed reading of *Othello* is that "skeptical doubt is to be interpreted as jealousy and that our relation to the world that remains is as to something that has died at our hands...that we

have killed the world, and specifically out of revenge."³⁸ Given that the issue of skepticism is here transformed into the issue of animism, Cavell suggests in the following passage how this exchange may yet be intellectually profitable.

It may be intellectual profit enough if we come to see the idea of jealousy of the world as bringing out an animism already implicit in the idea of doubting its existence--to the extent that the uncertainty created by this doubt is pictured less in terms of whether one's knowledge is well grounded (whether, for example we can achieve assured knowledge of the world on the basis of the senses alone) than in terms of whether one's trust is well placed (whether we are well assured, for example that we are not now dreaming that we are awake. (*Quest*, pp. 55-56)

In his reading of *Othello*, we saw that Cavell interprets Othello's skeptical attitude toward Desdemona as an allegory of external-world skepticism. And this might lead one, as it once did Cavell, to the idea of external-world skepticism as derivable from other-minds skepticism, and so as less fundamental than the latter. But through his reading of the Romanticist, Cavell thinks this idea is initially prompted by the idea that solipsism may not be a genuine form of skepticism because it is livable, while external-world skepticism is unlivable--"indeed doubt of the existence of things seems impossible to live with, whereas doubt of others may seem to mark the way I live. A reasonable moral to draw from these opposite lines is that we do not know what constitutes living our skepticism."³⁹ Cavell takes Coleridge's use of animism to be at work in the poet's philosophical attempt, albeit in literary form,

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 55.

to map this traditionally unexplored region in the realm of human possibility.

In working through Coleridge's poem, Cavell takes as his starting point the Mariner's shooting of the albatross since that occurrence confronts us almost immediately with the issue of animism.⁴⁰ Cavell rejects traditional readings of the Mariner's act as a "motiveless malignity and as a kind of gratuitous violence meant to establish one's separate identity."⁴¹ Rather than focus on the Mariner's act of killing, Cavell begins with the statement in the poem, "the bird...loved the man /Who shot him with his bow." It is no surprise by now that Cavell reads this statement as suggesting that the killing is to be seen as the denial of some claim upon the Mariner. The Mariner sums up what he takes to be the moral of his experiences: "He prayeth best who loveth best /All things both great and small." But in an interpretational move wholly in keeping with the spirit and movement of his own thought, Cavell points out that since the Mariner continues to wander in penance at poem's close there is little reason to assume that the Mariner has learned the full moral or lesson of his voyage. Given his more practical and romantic interpretation, Cavell claims that the moral of the poem is more like: "let yourself be loved by things both great and small."⁴²

Cavell attempts here to engender the sense he claims Coleridge

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 56.

self-consciously portrays of "a false animism," "a mindless animation," as a kind of deformation or aberration of genuine poetry. This false animism, Cavell says, occurs "in a self-derived place Coleridge calls a wilderness of doubt, 'skirting the sandy deserts of unbelief' showing this to be as much the enemy of genuine poetry (which resists it) as it is of science (which does not, since to science the difference between a false animation and the life of things may be irrelevant)."⁴³ The suggestion here is that science, hence also that philosophy for which science is a model, is more likely in its attitude and aspiration to knowledge to fall prey to skepticism than poetry is. Philosophy traditionally shuns poetic forms, preferring to model itself after the more analytic and allegedly more rigorous ones of science.

In support of his interpretation of Coleridge, Cavell claims that the killing of the albatross in Coleridge's poem is to be viewed as less fundamental to the poem's aim than the Mariner's prior "drift into the cold country." The former transgression, the killing, is thus to be understood as a consequence of the Mariner's "original sin," his initial crossing of the line.⁴⁴ In this sense, skepticism or the loss of animism is not simply a lack or absence (of knowledge, of existence) but is first and foremost an expression of human perversity and ill will.

In his reading of Coleridge, Cavell draws a parallel between the Romanticist response to skepticism and Wittgenstein's idea of

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 57.

violating the conditions of intelligible speech, attempting to speak "outside language games," as both presenting altered views of trying to overstep the Kantian critical "line." On Cavell's reading, the Mariner's act interprets the human drive toward the inhuman, a desire to escape the human altogether. It is an interpretation of a natural response to what Cavell calls our fear of inexpressiveness (something Cavell claims Wittgenstein's discussion of privacy takes on). In driving home this point, Cavell reiterates an earlier remark of his own:⁴⁵

The wish underlying this fantasy (of necessary inexpressiveness) 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. (*Quest*, pp. 59)

Cavell's remarks above serve also to support his identification of the Mariner with the *poète maudit*, Coleridge, both of these suffering (depicting) a state of incomprehensibility as in Wittgenstein's treatment of one gripped in the fantasy of a private language. Coleridge's dream-poet seeks at once to silence the bird's (nature's, society's) claim on him and to establish a more intimate (private, absolute) relationship with it, one that goes beyond the force of ordinary human responsibility and commitment that may seem merely arbitrary or conventional.

For Cavell, the shooting of the albatross is a form of suicide but one in which the Mariner's dream of intimacy with the bird (now a dead thing) is poetically realized with his shipmates' condemning

⁴⁵see *CR.*, pp. 351-52.

him to carry the death forever about his neck and clearly (it's a very large bird) falling somewhere below the Mariner's heart. The Mariner immediately accepts this punishment (his guilt). The Mariner's quiet acquiescence is a significant point in Cavell's interpretation of skepticism as a false animism. After all, as Cavell is quick to point out, the Mariner's shipmates are not blameless, having once celebrated the death of the bird as an omen of fairer sailing, now cursing it as a false omen but denying their earlier complicity. Yet, the Mariner shows no inclination to confront his mates in any way, as if they did not really exist (matter) to him at all. In the passage below, Cavell wants us to recognize, in the Mariner's response to his mates' judgment and punishment of him, that the Mariner's mates, the world as such, are dead to him before he shoots as if his shooting of them should bring them back to life.

If Coleridge's dream poem were mine, had by me, I would take the shooting of the arrow to be a figuration for using words originally to name the world--winged words. Hence the poet may have cause to fear that his art is as fatal as science's; more fatal, because he had hoped to overcome (what has appeared to the likes of him as) science's or the intellect's murdering to dissect; whereas he now finds that he has murdered to connect, to stuff nature into his words, to make poems of it, which no further power can overcome, or nothing further in the way of power. (Quest p. 60)

For Cavell, then, Coleridge's use of animism is an interpretation of skepticism which underscores similarities between a certain kind of poetry and a certain kind of science. That is, both bad poetry and Kantian science consider the difference between a false animism and the life of things to be irrelevant.

The Mariner, as lone survivor aboard his becalmed ship, is powerless to move or be moved, cast adrift on a sea of inexpressible guilt. According to Cavell, both the Mariner and Coleridge's dream-poet express a dissatisfaction with human powers of expression. This dissatisfaction, Cavell says, produces a sense that words, if they are to reveal the world, must do more or mean more than our agreements of attunements in criteria. Furthermore, it is what drives both poet and philosopher to a false animism. Cavell drives home this point of Coleridge's critique of philosophy and poetry in the following passage:

How we first deprive words of their communal possession and then magically and fearfully attempt by ourselves to overcome this deprivation of ourselves, is a way of telling the story of skepticism I tell in *The Claim of Reason*. I note here that "being driven to deny my agreement or attunement in criteria" is my lingo for being driven to deny my internal, or natural, connection with others, with the social as such. As if my reaction to the discovery of my separateness is to perpetuate it, radicalize it, interpreting finitude as a punishment, and converting the punishment into self-punishment. *Quest*, p. 60.

On Cavell's reading, the Mariner's recovery or redemption, hence also that of the poet, the philosopher, begins when he first takes an interest in, acknowledges, responds to and celebrates life around him, other living things, separate, conditioned, finite like himself, but fellow inhabitants of a living world for all that. However, as Cavell points out, the Mariner still must make out the way to genuine community *per se*, to *human* life and its peculiar forms--living language, social practices and institutions, and so on.

A Truer Animism

Cavell ends his reading of *The Ancient Mariner* with a view of the redemptive possibilities of aesthetic experience, of writing and reading as at once world- and self- redemptive.⁶ He reads in the poem a call for a truer or more genuine fellowship or communion than is presently at large. Cavell finds a critique of modernity and its institutions (art, philosophy, marriage as the basis of social and political life, and so on) symbolized in Coleridge's treatment of marriage. Modernity is portrayed in *The Ancient Mariner* as displaying a false animation, a theatricality, as individuals engage in forced and empty intimacy as an alternative (or cover) for a desire to escape from the human, a desire philosophy interprets as an intellectual lack, namely, skepticism. But Cavell also sees the poem as pointing (hoping) beyond the present state.

If marriage so conceived, say, as letting yourself be loved devotedly and reciprocating the devotion (as if love were a ring), is the poem's hope against a false animation; if this is the poem's hope for and its recommendation of the intimacy with the world that poetry (or what is to become of poetry) seeks; then it will not be expected that we can yet say whether this projects a new animism, a truer one, or whether the concept of animism will fall away. (Quest, p. 65)

Given Cavell's reading of Coleridge, it is both reasonable and helpful to see Coleridge's portrayal of false animism, the theatricalization of life, as an interpretation of skepticism. But Cavell's mining of the Romanticist movement is meant to be

⁶see Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 185ff.

intellectually more profitable than diagnosis and description of the problem. Cavell finds an intimation of a new animism as picturing the possibility of recovery from skepticism, redemption of the world, and of ourselves and others in it. In Cavell's reading of him, it is in Wordsworth's poetry that we find an interpretation of such redemption as represented by a "truer" animism, a "genuine" poetry.

Assuming for the purpose of brevity that most of us are familiar with Wordsworth's oeuvre, I simply mention such titles as "Excursion," "Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood," "Tintern Abbey," "The Prelude," in order to recall for us Wordsworth's views on nature, experience and the development of the human personality, on faith, and on the soul. The elements of Platonism, pantheism, mysticism and heroism, so at odds with the overall thrust of Kantian philosophy, all commend Wordsworth's work to the transcendentalist no less than to the romanticist.

In Coleridge's famous poem, the Wedding-guest is forced to listen, like a child, under the hypnotic stare of the Mariner and the horror of his tale. Cavell finds in Wordsworth's "Ode", the poet-reader recalls the child's willing and imaginative response and obedience to nature's tutelage.⁴⁷ Cavell reads "birth" in Wordsworth as abandonment, but not one to be avenged for having been cast "out" of one's first home, (the womb, or childhood) but one to be celebrated, as in one's coming into one's true home

⁴⁷Quest, pp. 69ff.

(human society, adulthood) for the first time. To recollect natality in this sense requires a forgetting which is not a lapse of memory but a successful forgoing. It is not casting something aside with vengeance but letting go of something and finding a "Strength in what remains behind." This is the end of genuine grieving, but also of genuine poetry. In Wordsworth, Cavell reads a hope for, even a promise of, recovery through a new, essentially child-like animism. But we first need to see that as adults we have lost something; we need to appreciate that in our assumed maturity, or in the way we assume it, something is threatened or deadened.

For Cavell, what remains of the Wordsworthian or infantile "vision splendid" is that it "fades into the light of common day." That is, in true maturity, the child's innocence, wonder, and love of the world need not vanish leaving nothing of itself to lighten the all too often harsh reality of everyday life, leaving nothing in its place but skeptical despair. Rather, we can allow the vision the status of a cherished and living memory, a faded yet genuine backdrop against which to live out our adulthood. In true maturity, the child-like love of the world fades into acknowledgment and acceptance of the ordinary, everyday existence of the world, and ourselves and others in it. This is Wordsworth's construction of the ordinary, a measure of the risks, and the rewards, of the interestedness to be found, or placed in it. However, as Cavell points out, "acknowledgment is not an

alternative to knowing but an interpretation of it."⁴⁸ Just so, in Cavell's elucidations, false animism is not an alternative to skepticism but an interpretation of it. Otherwise, he would simply be recommending that we engage in what is called *pathetic fallacy*.⁴⁹ What Cavell means by acknowledgment and the line he draws between it and a true animism are both expressed in the following passage:

In incorporating, or inflecting, the concept of knowledge, the concept of acknowledgment is meant, in my use, to declare that what there is to be known philosophically remains unknown not through ignorance (for we cannot just not know what there is to be known philosophically, for example, that there is a world and I and others in it) but through a refusal of knowledge, a denial, or a repression of knowledge, say even a *killing of it*. The beginning of skepticism is the insinuation of absence, of a line, or limitation, hence the creation of want, or desire; the creation...or the interpretation of metaphysical finitude as intellectual lack. (*Quest*, p. 51, *italics added*)

Cavell suggests here that we acknowledge the world as separate, such acknowledgment being simply an inflection or interpretation of our knowledge of our individual separateness and finitude. Otherwise, we do commit pathetic fallacy, killing our knowledge, hence the world and others, in a childish and falsely animistic distortion of love and human relations, in a tragic desire for absolute and exclusive possession.

We are to conclude, then, that Cavell's reliance on the notion of animism is not merely an interpretational tool in a novel reading of certain literary texts. Rather it represents for Cavell

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 53.

a point of connection between literature and philosophy, a point of kinship as well as a point of antagonism. Animism, in its so-called "false" and "true" forms, interprets intellectual skepticism and recovery from it, respectively. Given the insight of Cavell's interpretation of animism, we now have a clear picture of what an unskeptical, (i.e., child-like yet "grown-up" and non-epistemological) way of relating to the existence of the world looks like as opposed to a skeptical, (i.e., childish, falsely animistic, epistemological), one. The former is a relation of acknowledgment rather than of knowledge; it is a relation that acknowledges limitation, separateness and finitude while maintaining a sense of both intimacy and wonder. *The truth of skepticism* is as fascinating as it is frightening because it demands just this of us, no more but no less.

The notion that animism is at work in a particular kind of philosophical examination of human knowledge and in literary interpretations of practical and intellectual life is the unifying or shared thread in the lines Cavell follows up in philosophical skepticism, Shakespearean tragedy and Romanticism. The presence of animism in each brings these two otherwise disparate regions into closer proximity and supports Cavell's earlier, more strictly philosophical, reading of skepticism.

Conclusion to Part III: The Philosophical Challenge of Literature

In Part II, we considered Cavell's claim that skepticism is not just an epistemological issue and that philosophy's "best case for knowledge" first raises a practical or moral issue. While his argument there was persuasive enough, the question as to just what kind of issue skepticism is, and questions about its livability, tenacity, motivations, consequences and remedies still needed to be spelled out. In section one of Part III, Cavell's notion of a "best case for knowledge" in his interpretation of epistemological skepticism reappears in his reading of tragedy. Thus, Cavell finds independent support in his literary readings for his interpretation of epistemological skepticism as the inevitable result of a prior refusal of, or insufficiency in, acknowledgment. Cavell's elucidations of Shakespeare's dramas suggest that the temptation to a certain kind of knowledge, one that is absolute or god-like and not what we would ordinarily call knowledge at all, is all too human, hence the motivation and tenacity of skepticism.

But the modern epistemologist requires more than an interpretation of a few lines from the literature of Tragedy to persuade him or her that skepticism is livable and, as such, that it is a real possibility, a way of life that is a standing threat to us all. Failing a knock-down argument, the epistemologist will require at the very least a mountain of convincing examples to serve as evidence that skepticism may not, after all, be a condition peculiar to philosophy. Only then might the epistemologist accept that literature presents a philosophical

challenge to his or her understanding of skepticism and to philosophy's own self-understanding.

In the final section of Part III, we saw that Cavell presents just such a growing mass of evidence in his work in Romanticism. Here, Cavell bases his case on the claim, already speculated near the end of *The Claim of Reason*, of a kind of animism present in both epistemological skepticism and Romanticism.⁵⁰

Doesn't the concept of empathic projection make the idea of knowing others too special a project from the beginning, as if the knowing of objects could take care of itself, whereas what goes into the knowing of others is everything that goes into the knowing of objects *plus* something else, something that, as it were, animates the object? ...This idea may have the whole process of perception...backwards. It makes equal sense--at least equal--to suppose that the natural (or, the biologically more primitive) condition of human perception is of (outward) things, whether objects or persons, as animated: so that it is the seeing of objects as objects (i.e. seeing them objectively, as non-animated) that is the sophisticated development...(CR, p. 441)

On Cavell's view, the Romanticist's use of animism is in the service of fleshing out heretofore abstract, i.e. *philosophical*, pictures of skepticism, of showing that and how life can be lived under the consequences of skepticism. And in a recent paper,⁵¹ Cavell returns once again to Shakespearean tragedy, this time to *Hamlet*, where he concludes:

Taken as summarizable by Polinus's phrase "reserve thy judgment," his precepts from a distance echo the chief points of advice in ancient skepticism--to live a customary life (Emerson says conforming) and to suspend judgment. But in the ancient world--and according to

⁵⁰see Mulhall (1994), p. 142.

⁵¹Stanley Cavell, "Something out of the Ordinary," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 71:2 (November 1997), pp. 23-37.

some, for a thousand years after--philosophy was identified, hence skepticism as an instance of philosophy was practiced, as a way of life. Was skepticism then liveable? Is anything else now liveable? What happens to philosophy? (p. 37)

But if we are convinced that this is sufficient to at least give the epistemologist pause, he or she still demands the remedy; if skepticism is to be understood as an all too human ill, the philosopher being no less but no more susceptible than any other person, what is humanly possible in terms of a cure? From a philosophical perspective, how are we now to understand our relation to existence, to the *in itself*? How are self-knowledge, and acknowledgment, to provide a way through or beyond skepticism to a living, shareable world and genuine human community in it. These matters are the subject of Part IV below.

The American Transcendentalist is particularly attuned to questions of human knowledge and its relation to the separate and independent existence of the world, of ourselves and others in it. American Transcendentalism continues and deepens the Romanticist construction of the ordinary, no less than the Romanticist critique of the Kantian philosophy. The study of American Transcendentalism extends Cavell's bridging of "two worlds," both geographically, in terms of Europe and America, and philosophically, in terms of the Kantian divide. Cavell's tracking lines of skepticism and Romanticism brings him home, finally, to seek out the native roots of the Anglo-American tradition and the unity of his own thought. Cavell claims that Emerson and Thoreau are co-founders of American culture, its philosophy no less than its literature. What, if

anything, Emerson and Thoreau contribute to our understanding of the skeptical problem, especially as it relates to the possibility of community, and to American thought in general, is our next subject for discussion.

PART IV AMERICA'S RESPONSE TO SKEPTICISM

American Transcendentalism, generally acknowledged as heir to European Romanticism, is a little known and seldom taught tradition in contemporary philosophical circles. Yet the very name of the movement implies an internal relation to philosophical matters. Why this early tradition is mostly shunned by the dominant philosophical tradition in America is one of the questions that arises in this part of the present work. But the primary aim of Part IV is to answer the question as to what insight, if any, study in American Transcendentalism might bring to the skeptical debate. If it can be shown that such study throws considerable light on the problem of skepticism, light that is otherwise absent in America's philosophy, then it is surely reasonable to wonder not just about the motivation for ignoring or neglecting this early philosophical tradition but also about the degree to which such ignorance and neglect results in distortion of the philosophical mind in America.

In pursuing these matters, I will carefully follow Cavell's elucidations of the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. I argue that Cavell's work here is prolific and deserves to be viewed as a significant achievement in Anglo-American philosophy. Section two and three below are devoted to certain of Cavell's readings in Emerson and Thoreau, respectively. But first a brief review of the American Transcendentalist movement and Cavell's interest in it should prove helpful.

TRANSCENDENTALISM IN AMERICA

*...That renounced as we have daily wrought/Or thrust with
effort from our conscious thought/Of covert striving wins
concealed support. R. A. Parsons*

Transcendentalism Defined

Transcendentalism is generally understood as a philosophical theory which postulates the existence of realities which the mind may apprehend though they are beyond the reach of the senses and the understanding alone. In American philosophy, the term "transcendentalism" generally refers to a cultural and philosophical movement that flourished in New England in the second and third quarters of the 19th century. Transcendentalism is essentially a moral philosophy intent on proclaiming the value and integrity of the person. Emerson is generally acknowledged as a leading force in bringing together individuals of various social, political and religious persuasions in an attack on institutional tyranny of any form and in an effort to turn the mind to imagination, hope, exploration, and self-reliance. The movement, indirectly and loosely traceable to or reliant upon German Idealism, has its deeper roots in a literary revolt, English Romanticism, against the materialist (Locke) and skeptical (Hume) implications of British philosophy.¹

Transcendentalism relied on the philosophies of Plato, Berkeley, Kant, Jacobi, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and Schleiermacher

¹O. B. Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965), pp. xxv; 1-46; 76-104; 105-141. see also, Wellek (1965), pp. 153ff.

for support but these philosophies were rarely accepted without modification; on the contrary, they were adapted to the ideals of American democratic liberalism and individualism. German literature, that of Goethe, Richter and Novalis, also influenced the transcendentalists as did the French writings of Victor Cousin, Mme. De Staël, and Theodore Jouffroy. But European thought found its way to America also through the literature of England, of Wordsworth, Carlyle, and Coleridge.

The American-Transcendentalist attacks what is viewed as the failure of Kantian epistemology to appreciate the full significance of receptivity in any coincidence of subject and object, hence in any knowledge of objecthood *per se*. More to the point, the Kantian epistemologist is criticized for a neglect of feeling in favour of reason and for a too hasty a dismissal of the central role of the individual's imagination in human knowledge and experience. Just as the individual self is the irreducible foundation of human existence and knowledge for the European Romanticist and transcendentalist, so also for the American Romanticist and transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson spent time in Europe and was deeply influenced by the Romanticism of Carlyle, Coleridge and Goethe.² Emerson produced a body of work which constitutes an original contribution to the literature of Romanticism. But according to Cavell, Emerson and his follower

²Stanley M. Vogel, *German Literary Influences on the American Transcendentalists* (Archon Books, 1970), pp. 79ff. See also Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America*, 2 Vols. (New York: Capricorn Books, 1977), Vol 1, pp. 397ff.

Thoreau should be recognized as at once continuing a tradition of philosophical responsiveness in literature to the problems left by the Enlightenment, as well as finding or founding a peculiarly American voice, that is, American philosophy and literature or *America, the beautiful*.³ Thus far, however, both Emerson and Thoreau, as well as Cavell, their champion, remain for the most part concealed from the student of American philosophy, and this allegedly because they are all three viewed as being hopelessly romantic, hence, unphilosophical.

On Cavell's literary elucidations, Romanticism is no longer to be seen as instigating an animistic "cult of feeling" to simply oppose or replace rationalism as unlivable, or as an attempt to poetically repudiate intellectual or philosophical skepticism which then remains, philosophically-speaking, undeterred. Following the "Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism" from America to Europe and back again, Cavell claims that the poet depicts external-world skepticism (hence, skepticism *per se*) as a *livable* and *lived* experience and so as a genuine threat and temptation.⁴

Skepticism Animated

In presenting a vision of what becomes of the individual, and of the world, under the consequences of skepticism, (given Kant's *critical line*), Cavell says that literature provides some sense of

³Quest, pp. 181-182.

⁴Pace Moore, this point is made particularly clear in Cavell's reading in Quest, pp. 56ff., of Coleridge's poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

the conditions of possibility with respect to knowledge (hence, also to skepticism), for all of us. But that is not all. According to Cavell, literature also gives us some insight into the kinds, and limitations, of justification available in any confrontation with the skeptic. Answerability becomes a matter of responsibility, and thereby more a matter of moral and practical, than epistemological, concern.

Cavell would certainly agree that the traditional epistemologist is not only barred, through the very nature of his or her investigations, from providing anything like a "justification" for our ordinary knowledge claims as to existence without becoming involved in mere and obvious question-begging.⁵ But Cavell would further claim that the epistemologist is already committed to skepticism with the initial assumption of the position of mere spectator and ultimate interpreter of human existence, detached from and disinterested in the progress of the world beyond such speculation. The epistemologist has neither the interest, nor the means, to investigate the consequences for the world, for us, of his or her decision to turn existence itself into a spectacle.⁶ But according to Cavell, the poet/artist (with heart, head, senses

⁵G. E. Moore, "Hume's Philosophy," in G. E. Moore, *PS*, pp. 149-163.

⁶In current and ongoing debates between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist approaches there is an interesting attempt to defend a "radically contextualist" coherence theory of justification that avoids the dangers of idealism and at the same time does not require any realist theory of truth. See Michael Williams, "Coherence, Justification and Truth," *The Review of Metaphysics* 34 (December, 1980), pp. 243-272.

intact) is not so barred - in literature, what happens to the world under the consequences of skepticism is brought to light, to life.

Life as Spectacle

In Part III, we saw the Romanticist depict the crossing of Kant's critical line. The poet experiences no great difficulty in imagining such an occurrence, in picturing it in such a way that all can get a glimpse of it. While the consequences of such crossings are frightful, even maddening, the poet insists *it can be done* and, poetically-speaking at least, so it is. The poet's tuition, or intuition, is that life can be lived as spectacle but to do so is to have already made an ethical or practical decision. And such decisions are not without consequences as to the kinds of questions and the kinds of replies that might, in reason, obtain.

Cavell follows lines in Austin, Wittgenstein, Shakespeare, and finally English, then American, Romanticism which say, implicitly or otherwise, that skepticism as primarily an issue of practical (ordinary, everyday), rather than merely epistemological, concern. Throughout Cavell's elucidations, skepticism carries with it real consequences, i.e., social, moral, and political consequences, and these are in turn related to or impact upon hypothetical or theoretical endeavour whether in science or philosophy.'

'We do not have to accept Cavell's elucidations in order to appreciate the threat to all human endeavour of refusing to take the skeptical threat seriously. See Tom Sorrell, "The World from

Two themes in Cavell's philosophical/literary elucidations of American literature are next taken up as comprising central concerns of the present work. These are the notion of a philosophical response to skepticism to be found in American Romanticism and Transcendentalism, and the question of the existence, nature, and origin of America from a cultural, (aesthetical, ethical, political), rather than merely historical, point of view.

EMERSON - *FATE, FREEDOM AND FOREKNOWLEDGE*

My life is for living, and not for spectacle...
Emerson

Cavell, Emerson and Kant

For Stanley Cavell, the paths leading up to and away from skepticism, paths taken or avoided in the philosophy and literature of England and Continental Europe, all converge in the Romanticism and Transcendentalism of New England. Emerson and his followers continue and deepen the Romantic critique of the tradition of modern philosophy and Kant's confrontation or settlement with skepticism. Kant sought to secure what we ordinarily call knowledge (i.e., science) against the threat of skepticism and dogmatism and at the same time to make room for faith or spirituality (i.e., aesthetics and ethics) by placing the object of knowledge in the realm of the phenomenal and the object of faith in

its own Point of View," and Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in *Reading Rorty* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 11-25; 120-138, respectively.

that of the noumenal.

Kant's conception of "two worlds" (i.e., the one of necessity and the understanding and the other of freedom and reason) lends itself to some extent to the Romantic expression of the human being's dissatisfaction with itself, on the one hand, and of the human being's yearning for its other or better existence, on the other. But in, "Experience," Emerson's question, "Where do we find ourselves?" marks the beginning of a thorough-going critique of Kant's conception. Emerson finds that Kant's offer of two worlds, attractive as it no doubt appears on first sight, nonetheless finds or places the human being precisely nowhere and, hence, that it leads inevitably to skepticism. Emerson proposes instead that we occupy "the middle region of our being" and not "climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation." Emerson invites us to live "between these extremes...[at] the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry--a narrow belt," and to be ready "to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America." In "Experience," Emerson presents some of the peculiarly American modifications and developments of the English Romantic's idea of a single, unified existence.

Cavell wants to acknowledge and inherit Emerson and his student Thoreau as leading figures in "finding and founding" American philosophy as well as literature. In his efforts toward that end, Cavell works against what he describes as a distaste for romantic writing in the philosophical establishment, a refusal

there to take such writing seriously, to give way to the idea of it, to grant it the voice of authority. Cavell says that Emerson, in his essay, "Fate," already anticipates that some will find his writing and its idea distasteful.

It is an idea that Emerson and any Romantic would be lost without, that the world could be--or could have been--so remade, or I in it, that I could want it, as it would be, or I in it. In time the idea is apt to become maddening if kept green (certainly it makes one's grown-up acquaintances impatient), a continuous rebuke to the way we live, compared to which, or in reaction to which, a settled despair of the world, or cynicism, is luxurious. This dual perspective, of hope and of despair, proves to be internal to the argument of the essay on Fate, which I might summarize as the overcoming of Kant's two worlds by diagnosing them, or resolving them, as perspectives, as a function of what Emerson calls "polarity." It is as if Emerson's present essay is prophesying the fate of his own reputation when it says, "In youth we clothe ourselves with rainbows and go as brave as the zodiac. In age we put out another perspiration--gout, fever, rheumatism, caprice, doubt, fretting and avarice." (*Quest*, pp. 35-36)

In his readings of both Emerson and Thoreau, Cavell forwards the claim that the Romantic writers of New England underwrite ordinary language philosophy, especially as practised by Austin and the later Wittgenstein, as the New England Romantics take up from their European counter-parts the "need for redeeming both from skepticism and from the Kantian settlement with skepticism." Cavell marks a redemptive point of departure in Emerson's "Fate" as leading away from or beyond certain views Emerson expresses in his earlier essay, "Self-Reliance." In "Self-Reliance," Emerson says that "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."⁸ Cavell quotes from Emerson's "Fate"

⁸*Quest*, p. 36.

to the effect that Emerson now sees us as conspirators either for or against ourselves: "In the history of the individual is always an account of his condition, and he knows himself to be party to his present estate."⁹

Language as Fate

For Cavell, the key to Emerson's "Fate," to understanding Emerson's claim for it as offering "one key, one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom and foreknowledge," is Emerson's phrase, "the mysteries of human condition."¹⁰ According to Cavell, it must first be understood that Emerson turns Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* upon itself in posing the question: "What are the conditions in human thinking underlying the concept of condition, the sense that our existence is, so to speak, had on condition?"¹¹ The following passage is part of Cavell's commentary on Emerson.

Whatever the conditions are in human thinking controlling the concept of condition they will be the conditions of "the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge," immediately because these words, like every other in the language, are knots of agreement (or conspiracy) which philosophy is to unravel; but more particularly because the idea of condition is internal to the idea of limitation, which is a principal expression of an intuition Emerson finds knotted in the concept of Fate. (*Quest*, pp. 38)

Cavell says that Emerson's first way of unravelling our concept of fate is to speak of "irresistible dictation," that is, we do with our lives what we imagine some power dominating our

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 36-37

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 36-38.

lives knows or reveals them to be; seeing fate as a book or a text, we enact the scripts we find written there. Emerson also finds expressions of the concept of condition as it is tied to our intuition of fate as predetermination, providence, calculation, predisposition, fortune, laws of the world, necessity, prevision, foresight, and omens. "But if there be irresistible dictation," Emerson insists, "this dictation understands itself. If we must accept Fate, we are not less compelled to affirm liberty, the significance of the individual, the grandeur of duty, the power of character."¹²

Cavell finds that Emerson's "dictation," like "condition," is intimately related to language, to talking, to commanding or prescribing (hence to writing) and finally to talking together, which is what the word *condition*, or its derivation, says. Cavell adds that conditions are also "terms," or criteria, that is, stipulations that define the nature and limits of agreements, or the relations between parties, persons and groups, and that "terms" is itself another repetition in Emerson's essay.

What all this comes to in Cavell's estimation is that "the irresistible dictation that constitutes Fate, that sets conditions on our knowledge and our conduct, is our language, every word we utter."¹³ But this seems to contradict anything we ordinarily mean by fortune or chance. Cavell offers a solution to this apparent paradox in the following passage:

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 39.

"This dictation understands itself," Emerson says; but the essay sets this understanding as our task. And he says: "A man's fortunes are the fruit of his character." The genteel version of this familiarly runs, "Character is fate," and it familiarly proposes anything from a tragic to a rueful acquiescence in our frailties. But to speak of the fruit of one's character is to suggest that our character is under cultivation by us, and Emerson says of it ...that it constantly "emits" something, that it is "betrayed," betrays itself, to anyone who can "read [its] possibility." ...Emerson is ...proposing us as texts; that what we are is written all over us, or branded; but here especially the other way around, that our language contains our character, that we brand the world, as for example with the concept of Fate... . (Quest, pp. 39)

Thus, on Cavell's reading of Emerson, language is our fortune and our fate. What this means is that diction, rather than prediction, is what puts us in bonds. With each utterance, we emit stipulations, agreements we neither know nor know we have entered, agreements we were always in but which preexist our participation. Our relation to our language is the key to our sense of being controlled from outside, to our sense of the alien, of ourselves as alien to ourselves, thus alienated.

In Emerson's statements that "Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free," Cavell reads that we have a say in what we mean.¹⁴ In Emerson's view, our antagonism to fate, to which we are fated and in which human freedom resides, is as a struggle with the breath (sounds, words, intentions, gestures) we emit, and so of our character with itself. Emerson's "annul" alludes to what he calls our polarity, or tendency to think in opposites, for example, in pitting together Fate and Freedom.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 40.

Cavell notes that Emerson's term "annul" recalls the term for upending antitheses (*aufheben*) in Hegelian dialectic. In its relation to the idea of voiding a law, "annul" is related to the theme of Emerson's essay that "We are lawgivers" and this in turn recalls Kant's view that Reason legislates her own laws. According to Cavell, there are implications in Emerson's "Intellect annuls Fate," for economic and political philosophy: "The terms of our language are economic and political powers, and they are to be positioned in cancelling the debts and convictions that are imposed upon us by ourselves, and first by antagonizing our conditions of polarity, of antagonism".¹⁵ Such implications of Emersonian philosophy will be more fully explored in Part V. But first, we return to Descartes, and to Emerson's interpretation of the *cogito* and its relation to skepticism.

The *Cogito* Revisited

On Cavell's interpretation, Emerson's "So far as man thinks, he is free," alludes also to Descartes's discovery of self-consciousness, his discovery of the *cogito*. Cavell claims that Emerson most fully incorporates Descartes in his essay, "Self-Reliance," as part of Emerson's engagement and critique of the modern philosophical tradition. Traditionally, the *cogito* is understood as a proof of self-existence in the translation "I think, therefore I am". But Cavell notes the emphasis on the *saying* or enacting of the *cogito* as it is expressed in Descartes's Second

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 40.

Meditation: "*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true every time that I pronounce it or conceive it in my mind."¹⁶ Cavell argues that Emerson's incorporation of the Cartesian cogito is at once faithful to Descartes's discovery of the cogito and to Descartes's finding that the cogito alone cannot overcome the threat of skepticism.

Just after announcing the cogito, Descartes addresses the skeptical implication that follows upon it, namely, that "if I totally ceased thinking, ...I would at the same time completely cease to be." According to Cavell, Descartes does not exactly mean here that the cessation of our thinking would cause or be the cessation of our existence. It could mean this if it is necessary that one thinks of oneself as having a creator (hence for Descartes, a preserver) and if all candidates for this role other than oneself drop out. Cavell says that what would make this necessary is the claim, which Descartes makes, that the mind always or eternally thinks, that the soul is immortal. There is no such claim, either asserted or denied, in Emerson.

Cavell comments on Emerson's observation that "Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage."¹⁷ On Cavell's interpretation of him, Emerson accepts Descartes's insight that I exist only if I think, but Emerson then denies that we mostly or always think or that the "I" mostly gets into our thinking, as it were. For Cavell, "it follows from this that the skeptical

¹⁶Quest, p. 107.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 106.

possibility is realized--that I do not exist, that I as it were haunt the world, a realization perhaps expressed by saying that the life I live is the life of skepticism."¹⁸ In the following passage, Cavell claims that Emerson provides pictures of life lived under the consequences of skepticism and about which philosophy can only theorize and that only if philosophy takes skepticism seriously in the first place.¹⁹

Just before the end of the Second Meditation, Descartes observes that "if I judge [anything, say the external world] exists because I see it, certainly it follows much more evidently that I exist myself because I see it." Since the existence of the world is more doubtful than my own existence, if I do not know that I exist, I so to speak even more evidently do not know that the things of the world exist. If, accordingly, Emerson is to be understood as describing the life left to me under skepticism--implying that I do not exist among the things of the world, that I haunt the world--and if for this reason he is to be called literary and not philosophical, we might well conclude, so much the worse for philosophy. Philosophy shrinks before a description of the very possibility it undertakes to refute, so it can never know of itself whether it has turned its nemesis aside. (Quest, pp. 108)

Emerson's reading of the cogito is a depiction of self-reliance as self-creation in which the human being must enact its own existence in the face of skepticism. Only if language is acknowledged as a birth-right and rite of passage, a living, rather than a dead or frozen thing, can it be the expression of a living human being, rather than a shroud which marks an empty space. Reading and writing can be a mode of enactment in so far as it

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁹See Bernard Williams, "Auto-da-Fé: Consequences of Pragmatism," *Reading Rorty* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 26-37.

acknowledges, that is, counts, accounts for, or recounts criteria so as to place one's own existence and the existence of others in a relationship of mutual implication. Cavell develops these themes of inheritance, enactment and acknowledgment in his interpretation of Emerson's remark (or gag) that "Man dares not say...but quotes."

First, language is an inheritance. Words are before I am; they are common. Second, the question whether I am saying them or quoting them--saying them firsthand or secondhand, as it were--which means whether I am thinking or imitating, is the same as the question whether I do or do not exist as a human being and is a matter demanding proof. Third, the writing, of which the gag is part, is an expression of the proof of saying "I," hence of the claim that writing is a matter, say the decision, of life and death, and that what this comes to is the inheriting of language, an owning of words, which does not remove them from circulation but rather returns them, as to life. (Quest pp. 113-14)

Inherent in Cavell's commentary on Emerson is an interpretation of the act of creation which is something other than *creatio ex nihilo*. Nor does Cavell, following Emerson, see creative imagination or genius as a special endowment. Instead, there is a claim to, and an affirmation of, the democratization of the concepts of genius, author, creator. On Cavell's view, "Genius is accordingly the name of the promise that the private and the social will be achieved together, hence of the perception that our lives now take place in the absence of either."²⁰ And it is clear in Emerson's writings that the achievement is, if it is to occur at all, an achievement in language, in our forms of life. Hence Cavell's claim that Emerson and his followers underwrite ordinary language philosophy.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 114.

THOREAU - THE WORDING OF THE WORLD

*It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped,
the discovery we have made, that we exist. Emerson*

A Place Called Walden

Throughout Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, the name of Henry David Thoreau is repeatedly mentioned in connection with religious, philosophical and literary counter-movements, i.e., away from the metaphysical and toward ordinary or everyday life. A close friend and associate of Emerson, Thoreau was allied for a time with New England Transcendentalism. Cavell interprets the "I" of Thoreau's *Walden* as displaying all the features of someone with a special calling, a solemn mission, one which must be carried out at some distance from his friends and neighbours, yet not entirely out of sight. Granted this interpretation, Thoreau is clearly influenced by the transcendentalist doctrine that the individual must follow his or her own "inner" voice wherever it might lead them, or in Emerson's own words in his essay "Self-Reliance,"²¹

Damn consistency. ...Act singly, and what you have already done singly will justify you now. ...For of one will, the actions will be harmonious, however unlike they seem. These varieties are lost sight of at a little distance, at a little height of thought. One tendency unites them all. (Emerson, p. 137)

Cavell says that "it strikes ...[him] as especially brave of Thoreau ...to have recognized the achievement of sanity as the

²¹Richard Poirier, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 131-151; hereafter cited as *Emerson*.

goal, or ratification, of his arrangements."²² And this remark clearly associates Thoreau with Wittgenstein of whom Cavell says "publicness is his goal. It would be like having sanity as one's goal."²³

Cavell sees Thoreau in a line of writers from Rousseau to Blake to Hegel, engaged in the work of secularizing Christianity, putting the human back into philosophy, and "exploring the distance between the depth to which an ordinary human life requires expression, and the surface of ordinary means through which that life must, if it will, express itself."²⁴ Cavell, as an American citizen and philosopher, claims Thoreau as founder and father of much that comprises "America" and its promise. Cavell acknowledges Thoreau's *Walden* as comprising a kind of scripture, philosophical treatise, social and political constitution, work of art, a literary theory, the underwriting of ordinary language philosophy, and, perhaps most importantly, a philosophy of persons and personhood.²⁵ Yet, as Cavell says, there are no arguments in *Walden*. It is a kind of creation story, with borrowed tools and well-worn words, clear water and fertile soil, hard work and honest toil, and all the patience and resolve required to realize a worthy crop, a fruitful life, a genuine community.

²²CR, p. 469.

²³see above, Part II, n. 12.

²⁴CR, p. 472-73.

²⁵Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, expanded edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 3-35. Hereafter cited as *SW*.

Cavell notes the writer, Thoreau, deliberately takes up his appointed task and acknowledges that the matter and manner of his making a living here, now, in this particular way, could all have been otherwise, and that his chances of success are slim to none.

It is only through chance that he has been singled out for this service; the ordination is not his to confer, though it is his to establish. And only perchance will his service have its effect; there is a good chance that it will not. (*SW*, pp. 23)

Cavell reads Thoreau throughout as making the best of his lot and his labour, intent not just on spending or expending them (this plot, this life, this time, these words) but improving them if he can through his writing (and his reading, in *Walden* another metaphor for writing). Thoreau means his work to have a clear meaning and a definite end, as if life, and the expression of it, is not a matter of doubt, speculation, and conjecture. "Writing, at its best, will come to a finish in each mark of meaning, in each portion and sentence and word."²⁶

Self, Language and Fate

One of the first things to strike Cavell in *Walden* is its opening epigraph, an expression of its author's intention not to write (as Coleridge did) "an ode to dejection," but instead "to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbours up."²⁷ As Cavell correctly interprets these words, with their most likely-to-be-deemed

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁷*Ibid.*, quoted on p. 36.

commonness or vulgarity rendered epigraphical, Thoreau means to proclaim right up front, in the most startling way possible, the simple truth that the common condition of humanity is one of quiet desperation and skeptical despair, just as the Romantics say in their odes. The question is how to interest, and hold the attention of, the would-be readers of *Walden*, inhabitants of the new world, in the plain old words of their common language, the language of Chaucer? Cavell summarizes Thoreau's immediate concern as follows:

Everyone is saying, and anyone can hear, that this is the new world; that we are the new men; that the earth is to be born again; that the past is to be cast off like a skin; that we must learn from children to see again that every day is the first day of the world; that America is Eden. So how can a word get through whose burden is that we do not understand a word of all this? Or rather, that the way in which we understand it is insane, and we are trying to buy and bully our way into heaven; that we have failed; that the present is a task and a discovery, not a period of America's privileged history; that we are not free, not whole, and not new, and we know this and are on a downward path of despair because of it; and that for the child to grow he requires strangeness and familiarity, but for a grownup to grow he requires strangeness and transformation, i.e., birth? (SW, pp. 59-60).

The first full sentence of this passage recalls Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (The Tailor Re-Tailored), a work full of challenge and optimism that was not without influence on American thought. That the moral and philosophical framework of individuals, communities, and nations is a kind of outer-garment, which represents only their appearance and not what they are in themselves, was a novel idea with enormous appeal. It suggested that the old materials could be, indeed ought to be, cast off or at

least transformed into more useful garments.

But the rest of the passage recalls Coleridge and especially Wordsworth as valued, valiant, and *exemplary* teachers. It affirms the Romanticist notion of the intrinsic relatedness between "outer" and "inner." It announces the taking up of the Romanticist struggle to find or found a new world and people it with new or renewed individuals able to stand up against or in the face of the passing of the old world and the threats of materialism and skepticism. In the following passage, Cavell focuses on Thoreau's expression of an *intrinsic* relatedness between the "outer" and the "inner" transformation of self or world.

Early in *Walden* the writer indicates how his fables of nature should be taken by the human creature. Getting us used to his mythologizing practices, he calls our garments "our epidermis, or false skin" (I, 37), which should be changed only as we are changed, not when the world asks us to change them: "Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives. The loon retires to solitary ponds to spend it" (I, 36). This use of "must be" is a key to his position. What the imperative means is that our moulting season, unlike that of the fowls, is not a *natural* crisis. Nature does not manage it for us. ...Our nature is to be overcome. ...[And] it is through nature that nature is to be overcome. It is through words that words are to be overcome. (SW, pp. 43-44)

Thoreau is portrayed throughout *Walden* as doing more than writing in the face of despair and in the hope of renewal; more is happening in Thoreau's "experiment" of language-husbandry than even Socratic midwifery. On Cavell's interpretation of Thoreau, the latter's writing is to be itself the material and the product of self and world renewal: the writing of *Walden*, word by word, is to be emblematic of the birth of a self, of a life, of a nation, of a

heteronomous people constituted philosophically, aesthetically, spiritually, a shared constitution expressive of separate and autonomous individuals in community.

Cavell sees Thoreau's task as one of having to find or (re)create himself and his abode, given whatever materials are at hand, in this case, ordinary words. Thoreau's effort is thus to be read as both an aspect in and symbolic of the work of (re)building the self, the world, anew. That is, in Wittgensteinian phraseology, Thoreau's literary/philosophical project involves the reclamation of the ground on which we stand. For human beings the ground on which they relate and align themselves, to one another and to the world, is language. But where skepticism is directed toward the very being and power of language itself, then there is a task to be done in clearing and preparing the ground for the new world or new human beings to come. Cavell presents the following observations gleaned from Thoreau.

...To write standing face to face to a fact, as if it were a scimitar whose sweet edge divides you is to seek not a style of writing but a justness of it, its happy injuries, ecstasies of exactness. The writer's sentences must at each point come to an edge. He has at all times to know simultaneously the detail of what is happening and what it means to him that it happens so. A fact has two surfaces because a fact is not merely an event in the world but the assertion of an event, *the wording of the world*. You can no more tell beforehand whether a line of argument will convince you, or an answer raise your laughter. But when it happens, it will feel like a discovery of the *a priori*, a necessity of language, and of the world, coming to light. (SW pp. 44, emphasis added)

The overriding problem for Thoreau in *Walden's* "wording of the world" is to rescue language from the grip of skepticism, to recover the power of words, to win them back from idleness and

emptiness so that they can once more thrive and properly function as the expression of ordinary, everyday human life. This requires an understanding of the specific nature of language, of our responsibility as language users to acknowledge the presence of shared criteria (publicness) and what our criteria are criteria of (whether public or private objects).

Writing--heroic writing, the writing of a nation's scripture--must assume the conditions of language as such; re-experience, as it were, the fact that there is such a thing as language at all and assume responsibility for it--find a way to acknowledge it--until the nation is capable of serious speech again. Writing must assume responsibility, in particular, for three of the features of the language it lives upon: (1) that every mark of a language means something in the language, one thing rather than another; that a language is totally, systematically meaningful; (2) that words and their orderings are meant by human beings, that they contain (or conceal) their beliefs, express (or deny) their convictions; and (3) that the saying of something when and as it is said is as significant as the meaning and ordering of the words said. (SW, pp. 33-34)

The first two features here are directed toward the specificity of every word and sentence and the fact that these are always and everywhere used by specific individuals. Writing in a way that would acknowledge these facts about language must acknowledge its necessities, the full range of definitions of words and possible orderings in sentence construction and must also acknowledge the individuality of the person who deliberately chooses certain words rather than others, and orders them here in some particular way. This amounts to an acknowledgment of the relative autonomy of both language and individual language users. Individuals choose their words, but they cannot choose the meanings of those words. Language depends for its existence on the

linguistic communities in which it is found, but it exists prior to any individual speaker and it provides the *a priori* conditions for the fullest realization and expression of the individual's membership in the human community and for whatever alignment between individual and world is to be achieved. The third feature emphasizes this interweaving of language and the practical lives of human beings: the integrity, meaningfulness, and freedom of each are both dependent upon, and independent of, that of the other.

There are clearly connections between this view of language and the previously-discussed Wittgensteinian practice of looking for our criteria.²⁸ Cavell sees Thoreau as attempting to carry out a "transcendental deduction" or "grammatical investigation" of every word he uses including the words "word," "language," "world," "freedom," and "necessity." Thoreau is portrayed not as merely recounting criteria but as rendering a full account of the relation between his words and their criteria, between criteria and the world, between himself as an individual speaker and the words he chooses and orders, and so as submitting for audit a complete and accurate statement of himself, as this individual here, now, in this place, occupied in just these ways. He means to *interest* the reader (himself as well as others) in how uncommonly ordinary a living all this really is, (whether farming, writing, reading, teaching, and so on) and what commonly extraordinary lives of *disinterestedness* we all choose to live, or to suffer, gladly.

For Thoreau, like Coleridge before him, the first postulate of

²⁸see Mulhall (1994), p. 253.

philosophy and the test of philosophical capacity, is "Know thyself if you would know anything at all."²⁹ Recovery from skeptical despair means recovery of the self or, to put it in more romantic terms, it is the attainment of a new or higher state of the self and its expression in language that is at the same time the achievement of a fuller humanity. And one way to accomplish all this, as argued above, is the method of ordinary language philosophy as practised by the later Wittgenstein and underwritten by the American Transcendentalists. In the following sub-section, we therefore continue to examine Thoreau's Transcendentalist views both on the self and its relation to the other.

Intimacy and Distance

In *Walden*, we find Thoreau going about such ordinary activities as walking, standing, bird-watching, hoeing, and making lists and records of his work-a-day, or word-a-day, life. But Thoreau's assumed "casualness" is meant to raise what we take to be quite ordinary activities to the level of seriousness or extraordinariness we usually ascribe to activities like thinking and philosophical writing. Thoreau means to excite us to a point where we are just beside ourselves. Thoreau conceives of the self in terms of "doubleness," and "nextness," as illustrated in the following passage Cavell quotes from *Walden*.³⁰

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane

²⁹*Biographia Literaria*, chap. 12, para. 13.

³⁰quoted in *SW*, p. 102.

sense....I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but a spectator, sharing no experience, but taking not of it, and that is no more I than it is you. (*Walden*, chap. 5, para. 2)

As Cavell reads this passage, and indeed the whole of *Walden*, Thoreau's writerly or readerly "disinterestedness" is to be taken as a way of getting to know oneself that challenges our ordinary understanding of what is casual or automatic and what is serious or deliberate. Thoreau's "casual" condition throughout his work is one of intense interest in the self he typically is and the one he aspires to become, the world he inherits and will inhabit, other forms of life, and others like his *self*, others to be beside besides his own self, others to be next to, to neighbour. But first Thoreau must wake his neighbours up to the nature of their present dream-like condition, namely, a want of expression which Thoreau shares. Thoreau portrays himself as a representative reader no less than writer, that is to say, a representative human being, a neighbour and co-respondent, perhaps first and foremost to himself.

If language is to be the expression of a human life, Thoreau must allow himself to be read by words, to be present in them. But writing (saying) anything requires that the writer acknowledge the relative autonomy of words, allowing them to remind him of their criteria and, hence, of the communal purpose and nature of language. If words and their criteria align Thoreau with the

world, then his allowing himself to be read by words is allowing himself to be read by the world and to be reminded by each object he encounters there of its own relative autonomy. And, if a condition of the writing is that it be read, Thoreau must acknowledge the conditionedness and conditionality of the reader's presence to his words. That is, the writer must acknowledge the relative autonomy of the reader whose interest he means to attract and to hold, however briefly.

The reader's position has been specified as that of the stranger. To write to him is to acknowledge that he is outside the words, at a bent arm's length, and alone with the book; that his presence to these words is perfectly contingent, and the choice to stay with them continuously his own; that they are his points of departure and origin. ...Nothing holds my interest, no suspense of plot or development of character; the words seen continuously at an end. The writer keeps writing things I know I ought not to have stopped trying to say for myself; and shows me a life there is no reason I do not live. An old-fashioned man would have lost his senses. (SW, pp. 49; 62)

Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau is portrayed as enforcing both our distance from words, and our presentness to them, in order "to show our hand in accepting or arriving at them."³¹ This is a fundamental point for Cavell's interpretation of skepticism as a standing threat. Cavell underscores this connection in the following remarks:

Words come to us from a distance. ...The art of fiction is to teach us distance--that the sources of what is said, the character of whomever says it, is for us to discover. ...Speaking together face to face can seem to deny that distance, to deny that facing one another requires acknowledging the presence of the other, revealing our positions, betraying them if need be. But to deny such things is to deny our separateness. And

³¹SW, p. 65.

that makes us fictions of one another. (SW, pp. 64-65)

Cavell makes clear in this passage that our having a hand in our words, in their occurrence and placement in our sentences, and in their use in specific contexts, says as much about us and the nature of our separateness as it does about language. It says that language expresses us and our shared "attunement in words" but it also says that the depth of our attunement is not bottomless, our "criteria are always open to repudiation." That is, we are each free to refuse criteria as our own, to reject or deny them as ones we ourselves share and hence to withhold or withdraw our agreement to them, and we are responsible for the motivations, methods, and the consequences of doing so.

For Cavell, this is the idea that governs and informs Thoreau's (and Wittgenstein's) view of language as the expression of human life ("forms of life"). On Cavell's reading, here is the key to unravelling of riddle of skepticism; it is what makes skepticism a genuine, and *standing*, human possibility, one that can never be overcome once and for all, one that is peculiar to the creature that walks upright and whose tendency is to wander as it wonders.

The point ...is to suggest that our words are our calls or claims upon the objects and contexts of our world; they show how we count phenomena, what counts for us. The point is to get us to withhold a word, to hold ourselves before it, so that we may assess our allegiance to it, to the criteria in terms of which we apply it. Our faithlessness to our language repeats our faithlessness to all our shared commitments. (SW, pp. 66)

Cavell places Thoreau directly in the line *between* Kant and Wittgenstein, taking up from the Romanticist task of criticizing

and completing the Kantian project of enlightenment, underwriting the Wittgensteinian projects of clearing the ground of language in order to find ground on which the individual, and the world, can stand clear. Wittgenstein practised ordinary language philosophy mostly to dissolve philosophical muddles; Thoreau's practice is rather directed toward the ordinary muddles from which the philosophical ones arise and derive whatever power and sense they have. On Cavell's interpretation, both Thoreau and Wittgenstein take Kant as their starting-point, but Thoreau goes further than Wittgenstein in his criticism, in his revisions, in his calculations of the pervasiveness of skepticism, and in his view of the moral, as well as epistemological, task of philosophy.

I am convinced that Thoreau had the Kantian idea right, that the objects of our knowledge require a transcendental (or we may say, grammatical or phenomenological preparation); that we know just what meets the *a priori* conditions of our knowing anything *überhaupt*. These *a priori* conditions are necessities of human nature; and the search for them is something I think Thoreau's obsession with necessity is meant to achieve. His difference from Kant on this point is that these *a priori* conditions are not themselves knowable *a priori*, but are to be discovered experimentally; historically, Hegel had said. *Walden* is also, accordingly a response to skepticism, and not just in matters of knowledge. Epistemologically, its motive is the recovery of the object, in the form in which Kant left that problem and the German Idealists and the Romantic poets picked it up, viz., a recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object. Morally, its motive is to answer, by transforming, the problem of the freedom of the will in the midst of a universe of natural laws, by which our conduct, like the rest of nature, is determined. *Walden* in effect, provides a transcendental deduction for the concepts of the thing-in-itself and for determination--something Kant ought, so to speak, to have done. (*SW*, pp. 95)

Cavell follows Thoreau's deduction and analysis of the

concepts of the thing-in-itself, necessity and determination. Cavell points out that for Thoreau what philosophers call "determinism" of nature fits our concept of fate. "By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity..." (*Walden*, chap. 1, para, 5). We think of our fatedness in terms of something controlled from beyond itself toward some predetermined end. On Cavell's interpretation of Thoreau, we do not read such an idea from nature, but read it into nature. It is an idea derived from our own sense of being controlled, confined, from the outside.

The world is what meets the conditions of what we call our necessities--whether we have really found them to be ours or not. "The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions" (2, 5). In particular, we have determined that we shall be governed by fate--something that denies for us the incessant exercise of our control. "We have constructed a fate...that never turns aside" (4, 10). ...What we have constructed is fate itself. That it never turns aside is merely what the word fate means. And we are not fated to it; we can turn. (*SW*, pp. 97)

The possibility, then, of turning ourselves from skeptical despair, boredom, dream-walking, death-in-life depends on a complete revolution in our attitude and orientation toward the self, the world, and others like ourselves. Cavell says that "[w]e have to learn what finding is, and what it means that we are looking for something we have lost."³² We have to learn to mourn, to accept, to trust, and to take an interest in our experiment of life. According to Cavell following Thoreau, we have to learn resolution since "[t]his is what will replace our determination, or

³²*Ibid.*, p. 98.

commitment, to fate, to the absence of freedom."³³

Thoreau's resolve to commune with himself and with nature, to sit quietly by himself, next to his "bottomless" pond, determined to fathom its exact depth, is both a feature in and illustrative of what "resolution" comes to when the opponent is skepticism. There is resolution also in Thoreau's taking his leave of Walden, distancing himself from his creation, prepared to acknowledge the state of his life there as one of his own making, complete, or completely turned around, transformed. Walden is finished, but still there behind him, as he moves on to another or further creation, secure in his own knowledge that ponds (bodies, selves, agreements) all have bottoms, however deep, but also that the matter of their exact depth need not always and everywhere be in question. As against both skeptical despair and soul-numbing conformity, Cavell sees in Thoreau's portrayal of himself as an outsider, both in *Walden* and in *Civil Disobedience*, an enactment of existence, a singular act of defiance, not meant to incite revolution but to provoke self-examination, to invite self-transformation.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 99.

Conclusion to Part IV: The World in Other Words

Walden presents a philosophical challenge from literature: there are many so-called "bottomless" ponds in the life and thought of the human; just so, skepticism remains a standing, if not constant, threat to the existence of the self, to freedom of the will, to the existence of the world and of others like ourselves in it. On Cavell's allegorical reading of Thoreau's search for the depth of the pond (i.e., the depth of the self and its attunement with others and with the world) we are to understand that a question about the depth of our agreements in language, in our *forms* of life, may sometime arise; it is a legitimate enough question which *may* lead to skepticism, that is, to theatricalization, to denial, dissatisfaction, disgust, disappointment, fear, jealousy, repudiation, and so on. The question need never arise. However, once raised, it is a question that must neither be simply denied or ignored, nor can the question be settled *a priori*. It can and should only be determined (fathomed) by and for oneself through one's own experience and self-reflection.

After Emerson and Thoreau, Cavell presents an idea of reading (hence, of writing or speaking, hence, of seeing and hearing) in which the writer enacts some aspect of his own existence, declares his criteria, is prepared to be read, to acknowledge this particular body of his expressions as his own, as his embodiment. But in so far as the writer's declarations must rely on the commonality of language, (i.e., on our agreements in judgment, on

our shared criteria), for whatever intelligibility is to be achieved, his declarations claim to be also making the existence of the world and of others in it known in and through them.

In this mode of enacting his own existence, the writer calls on others to acknowledge him and to enact their own existence by acknowledging that they are known to him, in his words. No more but no less is asked of any who would read (or write) this kind of text. Words and their criteria align the individual and the world, the individual and other language users. For Cavell, the question of the existence of the world and oneself and others in it resolves itself, or fails to do so, in the practice of declaring, taking and having an interest in, giving an account of, acknowledging, recounting, criteria.

In allowing one's words and sentences to manifest all their criteria, the full extent of their significance, not just for oneself as the writer, but also for others (i.e., readers), the writer acknowledges simultaneously the relative autonomy of language and the relative autonomy of the reader who will be able to recover from the work more than the writer intended, meanings the words carry with them to the work. Cavell finds these ideas expressed in Emerson's claims that "Men imagine that they communicate their virtue and vice by overt actions, and do not see that virtue and vice emit a breath every moment"; "He who has more obedience than I masters me": and "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a

certain alienated majesty."³⁴

What Cavell pictures is a humanist, moral not moralistic, and not *merely* literary, theory of reception, reader identification and response or acknowledgment. The aesthetical and ethical commitments required of the writer's own presence (interests, associations, responses) in the work, in incorporating readerly expectations in it, either to challenge or to satisfy them, but in any case to acknowledge them, are no less than the receptive responsibilities on the part of the reader if these modes of expression are to make the achievement of genuine selfhood and genuine community a possibility. Cavell views Emerson and Thoreau as philosophers committed to such an aesthetic, their texts as exemplary in their respective attempts to establish, and fulfil, the conditions of their reception.

The threat of skepticism is not refuted in the Cartesian discovery of self, of human subjectivity, of the *cogito*. From Cavell's elucidations we find that the *cogito* is rather the burden, and the blessing, of creatures whose fate and freedom, whose forms of life, language is. In taking on the *cogito*, one takes on responsibility for the enactment of existence, against the *standing* appeal or threat of skepticism. This is the reason, as Cavell reads Emerson and Thoreau, that good *human* posture (i.e., stance, attitude) in the on-going, rather than bankrupt, business of earning a living is upright, standing, standing up, standing for, (under)standing, as well as sitting quietly, receptively,

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 116; 120.

neighbourly. It is to seek the self not in dejection and despair but in and through community, to affirm community in and through the self.

The Transcendentalists' contribution to our understanding of the terms and conditions that make community *per se* a real possibility in the face of skepticism is what is argued for here. That contribution has been shown to be substantial and compelling. Hence Transcendentalism's deserved but generally denied place in the philosophical tradition of America must be granted; our past and current neglect or ignorance of its contribution must be acknowledged and the consequences of such neglect measured. Even more important for the present work is the question of the consequences for Anglo-American philosophy and its methodological commitments, of honouring Thoreau and his teacher, Emerson, among its seminal thinkers; of accepting them as predecessors of Wittgenstein in underwriting the practice of ordinary language philosophy. Certainly that is one of the fundamental questions Cavell's studies in Thoreau and Emerson, hence also, the sub-title of the present work, is meant to raise for us all.

Thus far, we have argued that skepticism is not, *pace* certain traditional views, just about a problem in human knowing but is rather more about the moral and practical issue of sufficiency in acknowledging what is ordinarily thought of as beyond individuals, or their senses.³⁵ Skepticism is thus more to do with self-

³⁵Stanley Cavell, "Something out of the Ordinary," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 71:2 (November 1997), p. 26.

knowledge than a lack or absence of knowledge in the ordinary sense of the latter term. Parts I and II were largely taken up with critique of and responses to tradition which brought us to this determination. In turning to literature in Part III, we studied pictures of existence under the consequences of skepticism, namely, being lost and alone having abandoned or repudiated community. There we saw that skepticism is one of the faces of freedom, a human face as familiar as it is terrifying. In Part IV, we discovered what it is to look upon that face, to put off our shame in its familiarity, to allow its (our) features to take on instead those of acknowledgment and uprightness.

Throughout Part IV, Cavell's elucidations shed light on the American Transcendentalist labour of faith in the possibility of community *per se*, as against giving oneself over to skeptical despair. But certain practical applications of the interpretation of skepticism presented here and in the previous chapters of the present work remain to be explored. In particular, the idea of a reciprocal relation of discovery and affirmation between self and community presented in Shakespearean tragedy, Romanticism and in American Transcendentalism carries over into Part V below. There, I want to examine some of the ways we can and do respond to skepticism with respect to the possibility of aesthetical, ethical and political community.

PART V SKEPTICISM AND COMMUNITY

The idea of skepticism as essentially the problem of the existence of the self, hence as necessitating an exploration of the nature of self-knowledge, is central to the understanding and practice of philosophy developed thus far. In this Part of my thesis, I explore some of the practical applications of the method of self-knowledge with respect to the possibility of community. Part V is divided into three sections each addressing a different kind of community, namely, aesthetical, ethical and political. The first section includes some discussion of a contemporary debate between Cavell and Richard Rorty as particularly helpful in throwing light on what is at issue in any discussion of aesthetical community. Section two takes up the possibility of ethical community and explores the familiar and now particularly pertinent question of the relation between aesthetics and ethics. Finally, in section three, I look at the possibility of political community, its merits and its risks. Certain views of John Rawls are taken up as providing an illuminating counterpoint to those Cavell expresses and thus as forwarding the discussion of political community.

Skepticism and Aesthetical Claims to Community

If we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard. Mill (1889)

The Logic of Judgment

In Part II above, we saw how Wittgensteinian grammatical

investigations open up new ways of doing philosophy, of understanding the self and its relation to the world and others in it. Wittgenstein's method of self-knowledge adopts and adapts the literary genres of confession and dialogue through which to look for our criteria by trying to see, in imagined contexts, what criteria we would ordinarily apply, as one way of resolving (by dissolving) philosophical problems in epistemology. In this section, I explore Cavell's expansion of the use of Wittgensteinian methods in exploring the possibility of aesthetical community in his earliest published collection of essays.¹

In "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," Cavell explores the relation between aesthetic judgments and the claims of ordinary language philosophy.² He works on making out the sense in which, on the one hand, aesthetic judgments claim general validity or universal agreement, and on the other hand, to account for the fact that when we make such judgments we continue to claim this agreement even though we know from experience that it is seldom, if ever, to be had. Cavell takes up Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste," and he expresses some sympathy with the Humean notion of agreement. But in the following passage, Cavell takes exception to the suggestion, one which is defended by certain of his own contemporaries, that aesthetic judgments are inconclusive or irrational.³

¹MWM, p. 73.

²Ibid., pp. 86ff.

³This matter of contemporary counter-views is explicitly taken up in the second division of the present section, pp. 159ff.

Hume's descendants, catching the assumption that agreement provides the vindication of judgment, but no longer able to hope for either, have found that aesthetic (and moral and political) judgments lack something: the arguments that support them are not conclusive the way arguments in logic are, nor rational the way arguments in science are. Indeed they are not, and if they were there would be no such subject as art (or morality) and no such art as criticism. It does not follow, however, that such judgments are not conclusive and rational. (*MWM*, pp. 88)

It was, of course, Kant who first systematically broadened the whole study of art, its nature and its effects, to encompass not only the beauty of nature and artistic representations of it, but also such phenomena as human rationality, conduct and behaviour. In his commentary on Hume, Cavell turns to Kant's defence of the notion that an aesthetic judgment expects or demands universal agreement, even given the realization that consensus is more a shared hope as starting point than achieved goal or end point. Adapting Kant's own examples, Cavell defends the Kantian distinction between what Kant calls "aesthetical judgments" or judgments of taste: (a) judgments of sense, which merely concern what we call pleasant; and (b) judgments of reflection, which concern the beautiful in the more familiar sense of aesthetic.⁴

If A claims that canary wine is pleasant, and B takes exception to the claim by saying that it tastes like canary droppings, A might go on to defend his claim or simply say that he likes it, that is, the wine is pleasant as far as he is concerned, even if his interlocutor does not find it so. It is just a matter

⁴*MWM*, pp. 88ff. See also Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), sec. 7, pp. 51ff.

of personal taste. However, if A claims that a musician plays beautifully, and B objects by claiming "there was no line, no structure, no idea what the music was about. He's simply an impressive colorist," we would clearly not think A much of a critic if, "Well, I liked it," is how he responds to such an evaluation. "Of course he can; but don't we feel that here that would be a feeble rejoinder, a retreat to personal taste? Because B's reasons are obviously relevant to the evaluation of performance, and because they are arguable, in ways that anyone who knows about such things will know how to pursue."⁵

Cavell says, in effect, that there are established (known) ways in which to pursue critical aesthetic debate and that aesthetic criticisms and counter-criticisms make sense because, as in any kind of criticism, it makes little or no sense to appeal to personal taste to support, explain or justify them. Cavell wants to show, as against emotivist and subjectivist theories, that aesthetics is a perfectly rational human practice since, only in so far as it is so, is the aesthetic, as a communicative, instructive, transformational experience, a real possibility. Cavell therefore insists that issues of artistic merit are arguable because there are established criteria that govern our practice in making such judgments. There are established ways (i.e., traditional, publicly known) in which art is created, studied, evaluated, and received which are different with respect to other kinds of objects, say edibles or wearables. As to the nature of these differences,

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 91-91.

Cavell offers the following comments:

Those of us who keep finding ourselves wanting to call such differences "logical" are, I think, responding to a sense of necessity we feel in them, together with a sense that necessity is, partly, a matter of the ways a judgment is supported, the ways in which conviction in it is produced: it is only by virtue of these recurrent patterns of support that a remark will count as--will be--aesthetic, or a mere matter of taste, or moral, propagandistic, religious, magical, scientific, philosophical. (*MWM*, pp. 93)

Cavell presents here a way of understanding the rationality of aesthetic judgments by reminding us that there are public and objective criteria, i.e., rules, techniques, and so on, that govern aesthetic practices and serve to distinguish aesthetic judgments from those concerning matters of personal taste. That there are such criteria, however, does not overcome the possibility that critical debate may continue endlessly, or terminate without agreement. So what is the point of the claim of rationality or logic in aesthetic judgments? Cavell's response to this point is as follows:

I do not know what the gains or disadvantages would be of unfastening the term "logic" from that constant pattern of support and justification whose peculiarity is that it leads those competent at it to this kind of agreement, and extending it to patterns of justification having other purposes and peculiarities. All I am arguing for is that *pattern* and *agreement* are distinct features of the notion of logic. (*MWM* pp. 94)

Cavell is not claiming here that logic is a matter of the existence of patterns (of support, justification) as opposed to a matter of agreement (conclusion). He is rather suggesting that logic might be helpfully viewed as a matter of agreement in patterns or ways of proceeding rather than an agreement in

conclusions.⁶ This brings us to the role which the Wittgensteinian notion of criteria plays in learning what are our concepts (eg., of logic, of truth, of rationality) with respect to different domains of human knowledge and practice. For example, those competent in formal logic employ agreed-upon procedures (definitions, rules, techniques, truth-conditions, and so on) designed to produce conclusions acceptable to all.

But the rationality of such procedures derives from the knowledge of and commitment to these agreed-upon forms or patterns of support and justification rather than from any guaranteed consensus in conclusions which such patterns generate. On Cavell's view, there is an analogous situation in the practice of aesthetics which renders criticism perfectly rational, though agreement in conclusions is not guaranteed. In other words, the difference between disputes in logic and science, on the one hand, and aesthetics, on the other, is not that one is "objective" and the other is "subjective" but that in each domain different criteria govern so that subjectivity is differently in play.

For Cavell, the aesthetic is a sphere of imaginative creation, at once interpretative and transformative, which addresses itself to the whole person and thereby reflects the unity of thought and life.⁷ It is in such a view of art that Cavell discerns another

⁶see Mulhall (1994), p. 26.

⁷CHU, p. 34; 39. Cavell refers to Nietzsche's remark "I have always composed my writings with my whole body and life," as quoted by Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, trans. Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz, 1935 (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965).

possibility, namely, that of genuine and lasting human community.

If we say that the hope of agreement motivates our engaging in these various patterns of support, then we must also say, what I take Kant to have seen, that even were agreement in fact to emerge, our judgments, so far as aesthetic, would remain as essentially subjective, in his sense, as it were. Otherwise, art and the criticism of art would not have their special importance nor elicit their own forms of distrust and of gratitude. The problem of the critic, as of the artist, is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it; not to overcome it in agreement, but to master it in exemplary ways. Then his work outlasts the fashions and arguments of a particular age. That is the beauty of it. (*MWM*, pp. 94)

In the above passage, Cavell deliberately resists a Peircian interpretation of his view of aesthetic practices while he emphasizes both the individual and the universal dimensions of aesthetic practice in pointing out that the achievement of art is, in so far as it succeeds, an achievement in a mode of self-expression as representative of human expression in some universal aspect of existence. That is, the aesthetic object is a dynamic equilibrium of many and varied particular life-interests which at the same time represents a further or more universal interest which transcends the purely personal and hence is elevating and liberating.

This freedom is not, however, a return to a pre-philosophic, un-self-conscious, "natural" state, but a progression toward a fuller, more self-conscious, and therefore more complete, freedom

Cavell's following what he reads as Emerson's (and Heidegger's) idea of reading and writing as a work of building together with their anti-Kantian idea of thinking as receptive rather than as merely conceptualizing or analyzing and synthesizing concepts is as reminiscent of Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, as it is of Nietzsche.

that is only truly constrained through its own exercise. On Cavell's view, the artist brings a certain deliberateness and "conceptualization," that is, vision and creative imagination, to bear upon the work, however much historical or biographical influences and personality are also present in the work. Artistic creation or interpretation is revelatory, or exploratory as in certain modernist works of art, of that sphere of value-judgments (i.e., practical or moral) which govern and inform the work and which the work is.

The "aesthetic object" is a misnomer if the term is referred to anything existing or to be known in the same way as any other object or artifact. Yet, to present artistically, or to experience an aesthetic object is not, according to Cavell, to transcend the spatio-temporal world; rather it is to experience in the work of art (the work that it does) in so far as it succeeds an enlargement and deepening of insight into the world, ourselves and others.⁸ Cavell claims that art must be felt and not merely known or, as he prefers to say it, art must be known for oneself. For Cavell, this is "a statement of the fact of life--the metaphysical fact, one could say--that apart from one's experience of it there is nothing to be known about it, no way of knowing that what you know is relevant."⁹

⁸cf. Peter J. McCormick, *Fictions, Philosophies and the Problems of Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 140ff.

⁹*MWM.*, p. 218.

Culture and Art

In Cavell's aesthetic, inspired as it is by Thoreau, Emerson, and Wittgenstein, value-judgments are not to be understood in the either/or terms of logical discourse, but rather in the context of a dynamic, reciprocal, and progressive movement between life and thought. In theories of 'art for art's sake,' aesthetic experience does not rate higher than morality, but where aesthetics refers to the totality of human conduct and experience, then for Cavell, the aesthetic becomes both a goal and a means of human edification and "upbuilding." Only in so far as the personal combines with a universal appeal or attraction in an artwork does it make sense to say that art is rational, (i.e., universally valid) or that aesthetics is philosophical. Cavell underscores this connection between aesthetics or art and (ordinary language) philosophy in the following passage.

The philosopher appealing to everyday language turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself. He is saying: Look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I wish to say. Of course he often seems to answer or beg his own question by posing it in the plural form...But this plural is still first person: it does not, to use Kant's word, "postulate" that "we," you and I and he, say and want and feel and suffer together. If we do not, then the philosopher's remarks are irrelevant to us. Of course he doesn't think they are irrelevant, but the implication is that philosophy, like art, is, and should be powerless to prove its relevance; and that says something about the kind of relevance it wishes to have. All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own. (MWM 95-96)

Cavell's methodological approach to literary debate is his way (there may be others) of bringing the aesthetical and the

philosophical into closer proximity through their shared insistence on the non-coercive, non-rule-governed and tentative dimension of aesthetical and philosophical claims to community. But Cavell opposes the attempt by certain of his contemporaries, Richard Rorty for example, to insist that art *supplants* philosophy as the basis for a liberal-pragmatic community.¹⁰

Cavell would share Rorty's idea of the artistic genius as in some sense a possible saviour of modern humanity and the custodian of freedom and morality. There is even the shared sense of the artist's often violent or revolutionary imposition of her vision upon an unsophisticated, uninformed, or otherwise mystified audience. But that is where the similarity ends. Unlike Cavell, Rorty sees nothing mindful, lawful, criterial, or necessarily truthful in the creation of art or the practice of aesthetic debate. Indeed subjectivity or mind as a rational or self-transcending principle is for Rorty an unfortunate and distorting metaphor philosophers have visited upon Western civilization with dire consequences. This development in human history is for Rorty a purely contingent and unnecessary one, a kind of self-inflicted illness we best recover from as quickly as possible. Rorty wants to purge art of the universal or objective dimension which is essential on Cavell's view of the aesthetic. Rorty demands a debunking or demystification of art itself. Philosophy is

¹⁰Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), hereafter cited as *PMN*; and *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1982, hereafter cited as *CP*).

thoroughly "aestheticized," though only on a non-rational, or post-rational view of art as descriptive, deconstructive, ironic, and so on, which itself implies a certain philosophy of art. In the process of appealing to an aesthetic model of philosophy conceived in such terms, Rorty reduces art to a dogmatic philosophical view of the world.¹¹

In what Rorty calls "epistemological behaviorism," there is no room for an other or higher "self" that is in any genuine sense distinct from the present empirical self or body, in his pragmatism, there is no room for "letting truth happen," but only for purely instrumental, contingent beliefs whose validity depends on mere convention.¹² Rorty's theory of interpretation makes little if any distinction between art, philosophy and science.¹³ There are no "privileged representations," no hierarchies of systems of value.¹⁴ Philosophy is valid only in so far as it

¹¹Cf. Charles Taylor, "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition," *Reading Rorty*, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 257-275.

¹²Rorty did once defend a Peircian view of enquiry and truth but more recently argues, along with Michael Williams, that such a view is untenable. See Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 130, n.10.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 76.

¹⁴Rorty would see disciplines such as philosophy and literary criticism replaced by something like "cultural criticism," and psychology replaced by "epistemological behaviorism." Science would be aware that it offers, not insight into the nature of the world, but only new vocabularies, making possible the invention of new objects that offer us new ways of coping better. These vocabularies are made possible by the capricious inventiveness of the "strong poet" and novel metaphors. The appropriate overall "theory" of cultural criticism, on Rorty's view, is hermeneutics.

playfully and artfully disrupts, destabilizes, deconstructs.

On Rorty's reading of the so-called "counter-tradition," (Nietzsche, Foucault, James and Dewey, Heidegger and Derrida), it brought about the undermining, if not the destruction, of the whole tradition of Western philosophy is so far as it sought to discover or construct stable structures of meaning and certainty. It is in the counter-tradition as Rorty interprets it that culture supposedly acquires a status and legitimacy it was otherwise denied. Such legitimacy pertains only to that art which suffers no pretensions to seriousness or truth, art which is essentially un or post -philosophical and decidedly ironic.

Thus in Rorty's "hermeneutics," he is unable to establish (nor would he wish to), much to less defend, any criteria for the objective appreciation and evaluation of art.¹⁵ In sharp contrast to Cavell, who sees art as philosophical and moral tutelage, one among other Wittgensteinian, criterial, language-games which are not always and everywhere rule-governed but are perfectly rational for all that, or Emersonian modes of "upbuilding" the human and its world, Rorty views literary language-games as unintelligible, irrational, devoid of operational rules or reference points.

For Rorty, the philosophical is itself only artful, and provides art with the material for its play. Such play is hardly instructive, in the way of character-building, or expressive, in the sense of representative of the human, as in Cavell. It is

¹⁵Michael Fischer, "Defining Philosophy as Literature: Richard Rorty's "Defence" of Literary Culture," in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan R. Malachowski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 233-43)

merely pleasant, delightful in its imprecision, its capriciousness, and its lawlessness. The only point of the literary/artistic game is determined wholly by the pragmatic result. On Rorty's view, artistic interpretation is really only the tool of a technocratic pragmatism.¹⁶ He would argue that any criterion for the objective element in the aesthetic sphere lies only in the result that through this or that interpretation one copes better, i.e., the valid or objective is the technologically most successful/effective. This accords with Rorty's remarks with regard to questions of reception, success, canonization:

...[The literary work] succeeds simply by its success, not because there are good reasons why poems or novels should be written in the new way rather than the old. There is no constant vocabulary in which to describe the values to be defended or objects to be imitated, or the emotions to be expressed, or whatever, in essays or poems or novels. The reason "literary criticism" is "unscientific" is just that whenever somebody tries to work up such a vocabulary he makes a fool of himself. (CP, pp. 142)

In *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, Cavell describes a discussion with Rorty on the process of recanonization through which Cavell and others promote certain texts and demote others. Rorty commends this process but then remarks skeptically that for Cavell "to go on to worry whether certain of the texts ...[Cavell] promotes are philosophy or are something else (say literature) is unnecessary; or rather, it is something deans worry about."¹⁷

¹⁶Rorty (1991), p. 193.

¹⁷Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Living Batch Press, 1989), pp. 3-4. Hereafter cited as NYUA.

Cavell describes his immediate response to Rorty and the beginning of his later reflection on the discussion as follows:

I muttered something about there being different ways of raising the worry and about my caring in principle not at all which texts get on a list but rather how a text is to be discovered and taken up - taken up, of course with my interests. (So the unnecessary worry arises here? But I do not know that my dean is worried about the source and constitution of my interests. Yet I am.) Would it have helped to add that what I care about in a work is what the work shows itself to be, to let happen, to care about, and that this is not something that can be known by how a dean, or anyone else, decides to classify texts and thereupon to invest in them? (NYUA, pp. 4)

Cavell sees his work or progress or tasks in philosophy as intimately related to what Wittgenstein means by "leading words home," back from the sublime into our poverty.¹⁸ He relates what engages his thought also to Emerson's picture of thinking as stepping, lasting, grounding, achieving, and succession. Cavell connects certain of his own, as well as Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian, preoccupations through the Emersonian image of finding ourselves thinking, or in thinking, as on a path or journey.

Cavell's progress report, which includes his two lectures, "Declining Decline,"¹⁹ and "Finding as Founding,"²⁰ would hold little interest for the reader if the work were purely biographical, solely the story of Cavell's variously losing and finding himself on his way - to literature? to philosophy?

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 3ff; 32ff.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 29ff.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 77ff.

Cavell's claim for his writing, for its relevance, is a claim of community, a claim that his losses and gains, in reading and writing, in literature and philosophy, are also statements or accounts of the community or communities whose forms of life (which he acknowledges, hence shares) are expressed there. And on the reading side, to acknowledge the statements as accurate and up-to-date, to acknowledge them as faithfully picturing the writer finding his own way to and through the work and offering it up at the end of the day as a completed diary or journal entry representative of the life of the community, is to acknowledge that literature and philosophy are to be found there or that these show aspects of themselves in motion there. No doubt this has a romantic sound to it but then Cavell is either a romantic or - what?

Ethics and Aesthetics

In his literary/philosophical elucidations, Cavell variously sees the quintessentially modern discourse between philosophy and literature about ethics and aesthetics portrayed in Romantic writings and more recently in what he calls "comedies of remarriage," in their images of a public, to some, a loud, gaudy, distasteful, adolescent, even self-destructive display of a pair's mutual attractions and aversions, their mutual shunning of enforced intimacies in the quest for more genuine individuality, more genuine community in new strategies of engagement, disengagement

and reconnection.²¹ Or he imagines this discourse portrayed in Shakespearean tragedy as question of progeny by father and mother over the coming, or failure to come, or premature or belated coming, or the naming or custody or legitimacy or loss, of the child. Perhaps there are two children and questions of inheritance and inheritability arise.²²

Cavell sees this discourse between philosophy and literature also in Platonic and Emersonian writings where it is portrayed as a question of growing up and of tutelage, what can or is to be taught and when, by whom or what and how, to whom, and how success is to be determined. Perhaps there is an offspring who shuns both father and mother, wife and brother, and instead writes *Whim* on the lintels and makes matters of success, and succession a more serious, i.e., a more casual, affair.²³ Such pictures as those presented here emerge in Cavell's recent forays into the contemporary war between philosophy and literature for the heart and mind, for the soul of modernity.

For Cavell, philosophy and literature are not one, any more than husband and wife are integrally one. But one can respectfully

²¹Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

²²Stanley Cavell, *DK*, esp. "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," pp. 39ff.; and "Recounting Gains, Showing Losses: Reading *The Winter's Tale*," pp. 193ff.

²³*Quest*, p. 114. The reference is to Cavell's commentary on Emerson's remarks in "Self-Reliance:" "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. ...I hope it may be better than *Whim* at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation."

stand for the other if need be, in some aspect or other of their separate being, of their relative autonomy. On Cavell's view, the philosophical challenge of literature is its openness to this Wittgensteinian possibility of aspect-seeing. Certain so-called "literary" works challenge that mind-set which denies itself in its own otherness or refuses to acknowledge one of its own aspects as appearing in its other and chooses to strangle itself in a rarefied atmosphere of dead signs or signs of the dead rather than descend to the mean and lowly ground of its being--to the everyday, the perfectly ordinary, the simply human.

That such "literary" works are for "letting truth happen"²⁴ or for creating something, not *ex nihilo* but from "materials strewn along the ground"²⁵ and hence that they aspire to do some cultural work, building up philosophy and literature simultaneously as it were, does not mean that such works are necessarily either literature or philosophy. According to Cavell, it would rather be a moral or spiritual call for both, for community, from each to the other, to be for what they are (to be), and not for nothing after all. It is an acknowledgment that there is a bad smell in the air, but that it need not be the end of the world, or the death of us in it.²⁶ What *becomes* of the human or philosophy or literature in the

²⁴NYUA, p. 3. Cavell alludes to a phrase in Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art."

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 8. Cavell quotes from Emerson's "The American Scholar."

²⁶An allusion to an image in both Nietzsche and Emerson which Cavell deploys in various texts and ways.

progress of this building is not to be decided *a priori* but, as with any work-in-progress, can only be determined by each step in the progression of the work, how it appears from this view or that, and whether each portion or fragment has sufficient integrity and flexibility to be itself and to support the whole or free-standing structure of which it is a part.

In Cavell's literary/philosophical readings and re-readings of the paths to and from skepticism, in both the tradition and the so-called "counter-tradition," Emerson is not calling for the romantic but for the common and for us to see the ground (the world) under the aspect of romance (peopled, people calling people).²⁷ Nietzsche is not calling for the death of the human but for human transfiguration and whatever comes of (with) that.²⁸ Wittgenstein is not calling for an end to philosophy but for peace in and from philosophy.²⁹ Thoreau is not looking for the end of night but for the coming of light.³⁰ Wordsworth is not looking for the end of the day but for strength in the remains of the day, remains that simply do not vanish or disappear with the fading of the day but that fade into our common experience.³¹ Cavell is not looking for

²⁷NYUA, p. 9.

²⁸Quest, p. 111. An allusion to Nietzsche's "Zarathustra's Prologue," sec. 5 and his *Gay Science*, sec. 125.

²⁹Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 133, to which Cavell often alludes.

³⁰SW, chap. 2.

³¹Quest, p. 75. Cavell quotes and comments on a passage from Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," stanza 10.

the Absolute but for the absolutely ordinary, that is, the human.

Cavell is not alone in his interest in exploring the relation between ethics and aesthetics. B. R. Tilghman, in his recent book, *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics*,³² summarizes the lines of contemporary debate in the following manner:

It has been said that art must serve moral purposes, that art must not be required to serve any (particular) purpose, or, more radically, that art must be disconnected from all other aspects of human life. ...Wittgenstein ...said that ethics and aesthetics are one. (WEA, pp. 43)

For Cavell, the question of whether ethics and aesthetics are one remains open, not because it is undecidable, but because the work of human expression, or the expression of culture, of humanity, is an on-going work, a work of progress. It is a matter of interest, of investment and investiture, of willingness and handiness, of recounting criteria, of being accountable, of finding that these things matter (or otherwise) and in what ways they do, of seeing the aspect of acknowledgment in the concept of knowledge, of conceding that a refusal of acknowledgment is not a failure of knowledge, or anyway, not just that.

Cavell's response to the question of labelling the work would be that it comes too early, or too late, or anyway call it what you will, only let it be, or become, for what it is, for the human, for community, for modes of expression of human being in the world. Along the way, this letting be is for Cavell a matter of finding

³²B. R. Tilghman, *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics: The View From Eternity* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991); hereafter cited as *WEA*.

after Emerson after Wittgenstein³³ (and Heidegger and Nietzsche after both) that given the way we are (to be) and the way the world is (to be) constituted, language (poetry) is our common home, shelter or prison, arrange it as you will given what you have to work with, and the work given you to do. Its (the work's) standing is a question of the kind of relevance it seeks and whether it satisfies the conditions established for being so relevant.

SKEPTICISM AND THE ETHICAL VOICE OF COMMUNITY

Ethics and Aesthetics are one. Wittgenstein

Discerning Differences

In finding oneself at a place where Anglo-American and Continental philosophical and literary traditions all converge, one cannot do better than look to Stanley Cavell for guidance. Cavell risks marginality in insisting on the importance of certain questions and he confesses to partiality in promoting certain writers and texts rather than give in to the threat of intellectual foreclosure or the temptation of cultural (aesthetic, moral, political) bankruptcy.

Cavell claims that the nature of rationality (reason or knowledge) in aesthetic, no less than scientific, debate is such as to reside in agreed-upon patterns and structures rather than any guarantee of consensus in conclusion. As Cavell views the matter,

³³The provocative subtitle of Cavell's *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*.

it is agreement in or commitment to specific procedures and canons that permits particular disagreements to be resolved (or not) in certain ways. While this view highlights the objective aspects of both, aesthetic judgments nonetheless differ from empirical or scientific judgments in that the former impute subjective, rather than the purely objective, universality of the latter.

Cavell views aesthetic judgment as an individual's claim to community, a claim that the subjectivity expressed in the art work is exemplary, subjectively universal, and in that sense representative of a point of commonality in human (feeling and thinking) beings. Aesthetic debate allows participants to reflect on the whole range of their own responses, including the ethical dimension of those responses, as compared to those of the artist's and each other's, to deepen their self-knowledge in so doing, and to thereby acquire the possibility of creating a freely-willed community. While an individual may never, for whatever reasons, be a member of or participate in such a community, understanding the nature and conditions of possibility of the existence of aesthetic community (artistic production, reception, criticism) sheds light on the nature and conditions of possibility of moral and political community. For Cavell, anything which contributes to our understanding of the latter is eminently valuable, since membership and participation in the latter is an unavoidable fact of modern life, however the particular individual, as an agent in the world, may respond to it.

Reason and Morality

In the case of moral and political argument, what is significant for Cavell is not any imputation of or claim to universality, subjective or otherwise - there is none. In this domain of human knowledge and existence, Cavell says there is rather a universal willingness to respect individual differences within or even across communities, in the quest (hope) for consensus, and hence, perhaps especially, a willingness to agree to disagree. Cavell asks that we "...suppose that it is just characteristic of moral arguments that the rationality of the antagonists is not dependent on an agreement's emerging between them, that there is such a thing as *rational disagreement* about a conclusion."³⁴ And this suggests, as against an emotivist system of ethics, that what makes reason(s) relevant to such debate is not the fact of attitudes, beliefs, or systems of belief, nor any effectiveness in determining or altering these, since this would apply equally to any kind of argument whatever. Indeed, from Cavell's point of view, an emotivist theory is at once a symptom and consequence of skeptical despair. Cavell says "the disillusionment, the discouragement, comes ...from being told that one man may treat me morally and yet act only in terms of his attitudes, without necessarily considering me or mine. If this is so, then the concept of morality is unrelated to the concept of justice."³⁵

³⁴CR., p. 254.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 283.

According to Cavell, the rationality of moral argument, what makes reasons relevant here, is primarily that they are addressed to the cares and commitments of the individual(s) with whom one engages in argument. Cavell insists on a concept of justice which relies upon and acknowledges an essential relation between moral and political conceptions of the person.

...However justice is to be understood--whether in terms of rendering to each his due, or in terms of equality, or of impartiality or of fairness--what must be understood is a concept concerning the treatment of persons; and that is a concept, in turn, of a creature with commitments and cares. But for these commitments and cares, and the ways in which they conflict with one another and with those of other persons, there would be no problem and no concept of justice. One can face the disappearance of justice from the world more easily than an amnesia of the very concept of justice. (CR, pp. 283)

In a judgment of morality, as opposed to aesthetic judgments, one can attempt to speak for another, but only if one confronts the other's position in terms of the other's own cares and commitments. In such confrontation, the other may find their declared position false to themselves and to the pattern of interwoven cares and commitments that shows itself to be their life or they may counter-claim that such pattern as there is has been misread or misrepresented. In any case, in judging the rightness or wrongness of an action, one need not claim to be speaking for oneself but rather to be listening with an ear to the moral or universal voice of the community (of rational beings).

Words of Inducement

On Cavell's view of morality, there is an important

distinction to be made between the notions of "commitment" and "care" that bear significantly on the meaning (sense) of the words "must" and "ought." The word "must" is ordinarily, (i.e. appropriately), used in relation to commitments we have made and to register the claim that commitments are not arbitrary or external to who a person is, for example, to the character and biography of a person or to the conduct and behaviour in which a person engages and which go to make up the life of that person as a moral (rational, free) agent. Commitments can be *explicit* ways of acting, as in promises, but they need not be.

There are any number of ways, other than promising, for committing yourself to a course of action: the expression or declaration of an intention, the giving of an impression, not correcting someone's misapprehension, beginning a course of conduct on the basis of which someone else has taken action and so on. (CR, pp. 298)

What this passage implies is that what persons "must" do is a matter of their overall commitments, actions, behaviour and conduct, both explicit and implicit, and not merely a matter of attitudes or beliefs. It is its relation to those commitments which renders an action morally significant, and any challenge to such an action is morally relevant only in so far as it is entered in terms of those commitments. The "ought," as opposed to the "must," of moral argument implies that there is an alternative, morally-justifiable, course of action the speaker is advising against which is related to the interlocutor's *cares*, rather than to his or her *commitments*.

Just as the fact that not everything in human life is a matter of moral commitment and yet a person's commitments are nonetheless

not entirely arbitrary, the fact that individuals are selective to some extent in what, or to what degree, they care about something detracts nothing from the element of necessity which attaches itself to some of the cares and concerns that individuals, as moral agents, have. It is such cares and concerns, (eg. truth, freedom, family, community) that are the source of the reason(s) we ought generally "to keep promises, pay debts, tell the truth, do my 'duty', etc." Cavell summarizes these points about the substance and forms of reasons in moral argument as follows:

In ...morality, there are two main sorts of reasons with which we may be confronted: the one I might call a "basis of care" - it provides whatever sense there will be in your confronting someone with what he "ought" to do: the second I call a "ground of commitment" - it grounds what you say "must" be done in that person's commitments, both his explicit undertakings and the implications of what he does and where he is, for which he is responsible. (CR, pp. 325)

The essential claim which Cavell makes for morality, as with aesthetics, is the claim of rationality, together with the insistence that reason in science is peculiar to that domain of knowledge but is not identical with reason as such; there are other domains of knowledge in which reason takes on other patterns and forms. The fundamental distinction for Cavell between aesthetic and moral community is that the presence and controlled disposition of subjectivity and self-knowledge is the basis of the possibility of the aesthetic community, whereas the existence of moral community is the starting and constant point of reference in one's quest for genuine and deepening self-knowledge.

I have described moral arguments as ones whose direct point it is to determine the positions we are assuming or

are able or willing to assume responsibility for; and discussion is necessary because our responsibilities, the extensions of our cares and commitments, and the implications of our conduct, are not obvious; because the self is not obvious to the self. To the extent that responsibility is the subject of moral argument, what makes moral argument rational is not the assumption that there is in every situation one thing that ought to be done and this may be known, nor the assumption that we can always come to agreement about what ought to be done on the basis of rational methods. Its rationality lies in following the methods which lead to a knowledge of our own position, of where we stand: in short, to a knowledge and definition of ourselves. (CR, pp. 312)

Cavell's methodological investigations of aesthetics and morality serve in turn to illuminate the nature of his peculiar practice of ordinary language philosophy and present it with independent support, in its claim(s), as against skepticism, of/to community with oneself (self-knowledge) and with others like oneself (knowledge of "other-minds"). Cavell's work in the field of politics is no less reflexive and productive. In the following section, I follow up certain lines in Cavell's thought with respect to the possibility of political community.

SKEPTICISM AND THE RISKS OF POLITICAL COMMUNITY

The great majority of those who speak of perfectibility as a dream, do so because they feel that it is one which would afford them no pleasure if it were realized. Mill (1828)

The Principled Society

In his Carus Lectures,³⁶ Cavell presents an Emersonian perfectionist (i.e., moral, as opposed to a purely political and

³⁶Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The Carus Lectures, 1988 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990). Hereafter cited as *CHU*.

anti-perfectionist) view of the person, of community, and of justice. Cavell means Emersonian Perfectionism to challenge both Utilitarianism (a teleological theory based on a concept of the good) and Kantianism (a deontological theory based on a concept of the right).³⁷ It will emerge below that Cavell's view here is, *pace* John Rawls, that Emersonian Perfectionism is necessary to, and not merely tolerable within, liberal democracy. However, I will also show that Cavell's view of the individual is not *idealist*: the individual human being, as a moral agent, is always a person just as they are (or stand), considered (valued) as such, and not in terms of what they ought to be. But first, I want to present a summary of Rawls's political liberalism as a way of illuminating Cavell's moral liberalism and as offering some insight into the spirit of the community which Cavell addresses and with which he claims (seeks, acknowledges) membership.

In *A Theory of Justice*,³⁸ John Rawls attempts to construct a theory of justice as fairness. The principles of justice are "derived" from or agreed upon in an "original position" of equality by "free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests."³⁹ In terms of the diversity of individuals, the diversity of their communal backgrounds and affiliations, and their peculiar commitments and cares, one of the most significant things

³⁷CHU, pp. 1-2.

³⁸John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971). Hereafter cited as *Theory*.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 11.

about the "original agreement" or "joint act" as Rawls presents it is that it takes place behind a "veil of ignorance." That is, the individuals who are to so contract "the principles which are to assign basic rights and duties and to determine the division of social benefits,"⁴⁰ are denied knowledge of certain particular facts about themselves. Thus, for example, no one knows their particular place in society in terms of class or social status. No one knows their own peculiar "fate in terms of natural endowments and abilities. And no one knows their own conception of the good."⁴¹

The centrality of Rawls's political (i.e., "thin" or "abstract") conception of the person in the original and hypothetical situation is readily understood in relation to the question of legitimacy. If a system of political governance including its laws and institutions is to be justified and validated for/by all citizens so governed, the underlying principles and aims of such governance must be such as to be intelligible and acceptable to all. It is not that the person *qua* citizen is somehow insubstantial, disembodied, prior to or separate from the person *qua* moral agent, embodied and embedded in society. It is rather that Rawls thinks that we can, and indeed that we ought to, distinguish between the two if the initial situation from which principles of justice might emerge is to be a fair one for

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 12.

all citizens.⁴²

In Rawls's view, the principles that would be agreed upon (comprehended and accepted) by individuals so understood and in the original position so characterized would be the following:

Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. (*Theory*, pp. 302)

While the statement of these principles will undergo some relatively minor modification in Rawls's later writings,⁴³ the fundamental ideas of the original position and the veil of ignorance, the sense in which the principles are "derived" from the original position, and the system of priorities, are all established from the outset. The question, then, is do "we" so agree? and if not, how might we enter our objections, whatever these might be?

Rawls assumes from the outset that an "overlapping consensus" or state of "reflective equilibrium" can be achieved by individuals in the original position. This is because Rawls conceives of these

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 12. I say "all citizens" rather than "all concerned" since it is an important point in Rawls's theory, and a point of some controversy, that its principles and procedures are developed solely, in terms of those who are, or who will be, citizens of a closed and exclusive particular geo-political state, namely the United States of America, and not, say, North America (incl. Canada and Mexico) or the world (humanity).

⁴³See especially John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) pp. 5-6. Hereafter cited as *PL*.

individuals as consenting adults having two moral powers, namely, a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of the good. Together with the powers of reason, Rawls says that "their having these powers to the requisite minimum degree to be fully cooperating members of society makes persons [free and] equal."⁴⁴ Rawls may be considered, then, to assume what he needs but refuses to explain and justify, namely, a moral, no less than political, conception of the person as the basis of liberal democratic tradition.

In confronting Rawls with what he calls "Emersonian Perfectionism," Cavell criticizes the Rawlsian conception of the consenting adult, the moral and political agent, as ignoring, or neglecting, the conditions of the very possibility of the individual so described (constituted), that is, the existence and role of the community as an extension of individual autonomy, as the field and context for the development and expression of political freedom, choice and institutions and all that this implies for the relation between individual, community, and state. This is one of the central issues of communitarian, and Cavellian, critique of Rawlsian liberalism.

Emersonian perfectionism, according to Cavell, embodies the idea of the individual's attainment of genuine self-hood as representative of the fullest possible expression of humanity; it is an understanding of the self or soul as on a progressive journey of ascent that begins by feeling itself alienated from the society

⁴⁴PL, p. 19.

which it now freely turns from in seeking a more elevated and cultivated state of the self and society. The perfectionism of the myth of the journey does not entail perfectibility; for Emerson, no given state of the self is final rather than simply not surpassed. Emersonian perfectionism as described in the Carus Lectures expresses the idea that each attained state of the self constitutes a world that the self can and does desire and one to which it is, and might remain, committed. Still, the important point here is that the self need not remain so attached, but rather might envision, become attracted to, and pursue a further state of the self and, hence, a yet-to-be constituted world.

Cavell draws on Plato's *Republic* as a seminal work that presents the terms or features of perfectionist thought, however differently articulated by other and later writers.

Obvious candidate features are its ideas of a mode of conversation between (older and younger) friends, one of whom is intellectually authoritative because his life is somehow exemplary or representative of a life the other(s) are attracted to and in the attraction of which the self recognizes itself as enchained, fixated, and feels itself removed from reality, whereupon the self finds that it can turn (convert, revolutionize itself) and a process of education is undertaken, in part through a discussion of education, in which each self is drawn on a journey of ascent to a further state of that self, where the higher is determined not be natural talent but by seeking to know what you are made of and cultivating the thing you are meant to do; it is a transformation of the self which finds expression in the imagination of a transformation of society into something like an aristocracy where what is best for society is a model for and is modeled on what is best for the individual soul, a best arrived at in the view of a new reality, a realm beyond, the true world, that of the Good, sustainer of the good city, of Utopia. (CHU, pp. 6-7)

In all his fields of investigation, Cavell makes use of the

Platonic image of the older and younger friends, variously casting in the role of elder the Wittgensteinian philosopher and therapist, the dramatist of the Shakespearean tragedies, the author of *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience*, and the author of "Fate" and "Self-Reliance." Cavell sees those who are attracted to the elder(s) in the image of the Platonic youth, as patient, audience, skeptic. It is in this sense that Cavell invites, indeed requires, his own reader to study and evaluate him, in the manner in which he writes or expresses his life and confronts the skeptic in himself, as a philosopher in the tradition of ordinary language philosophy, as an exemplary or representative teacher, writer, reader, person, citizen--in quest of the ordinary, of the good life.⁴⁵

[T]he burdens placed on writing in composing this conversation may be said to be the achieving of an expression public enough to show disdain for, its refusal to participate fully in, the shameful state of current society, or rather to participate by showing society its shame, and at the same time the achieving of a promise of expression that can attract the good stranger to enter the precincts of its city of words, and accordingly philosophical writing, say the field of prose, enters into competition with the field of poetry, not--though it feels otherwise--to banish all poetry from the just city but to claim for itself the privilege of the work poetry does in making things happen to the soul, so far as that work has its rights. (CHU, pp. 7)

It is clear from this passage that Cavell sees ordinary language philosophy, the philosophical practice of recounting criteria, which he interprets as the enactment of existence through a determined faithfulness to the conditions of speech and the relative autonomy of language and language-users, as both

⁴⁵see Mulhall (1994), pp. 266.

representative of and an aspect in the work of perfectionism with respect to the spiritual or moral being whose form of life language is. Cavell insists upon a moral or perfectionist view in his vision of the constitution of the individual and of the freely-willed (political) community. And I agree with Cavell that Rawls stands opposed to view of the individual in his purely rational, anti-perfectionist (i.e., mechanical, rule-governed, external, hence, moralistic rather than moral) theory of justice.⁴⁶

Speaking of Justice

A moral perfectionist spirit of community is an aspect of the divide between Anglo-American and Continental thought and it is emblematic of the distance Cavell has travelled from the Anglo-American tradition is his own attempt to bridge the gap. Cavell's claim of Emersonian and Thoreauvian perfectionist writing as the foundation of American thought opposes America's otherwise pervasive and almost complete denial of such a claim. Cavell sees this denial as a failure of acknowledgment or a mode of repression requiring interpretation is its very excessiveness. His interpretation is that the unknownness of those he would claim as founders of American cultural and political life is a consequence of their culture's perception that such spirit and thought as they reflect in their writings and demand from their reader(s) pose a threat to, or impose a demand, on American culture as it stands

⁴⁶see Mulhall (1994), pp. 266ff.

which that culture would deny or refuse.⁴⁷

As discussed in Part IV, the themes of self-reliance, willingness to withdraw from society as a refusal of conformity, expressions of chagrin and rebuke directed toward society as it stands and presented in the name of a higher, attainable state of individual and society alike, are fundamental to American Transcendentalist thought. These themes underscore the political dimension of self-reliance, the implication that individuals who enact a proof of their own existence and so overcome skepticism, not through conformity but by acting singly, can be thought of as engaging in a form of civil disobedience and yet in an act that liberal democracy, in so far as it is *moral*, is called upon to countenance and to honour. Cavell's most recent writings attempt to demonstrate the centrality of Emersonian perfectionist (moral) writings to liberal democratic tradition and thought.

I might at once declare that the path from the *Republic's* picture of the soul's journey (perfectible to the pitch of philosophy by only a few, forming an aristocratic class) to the democratic need for perfection, is a path from the idea of there being one (call him Socrates) who represents for each of us the height of the journey, to the idea of each of us being representative of each of us--an idea that is a threat as much as an opportunity. Emerson's study is of this (democratic, universal) representativeness... as a relation we bear at once to others and to ourselves: if we were not representative of what we might be, (or what we were, in some Platonic or Wordsworthian past of our lives), we would not recognize ourselves presented in one another's possibilities; we would have no "potential." ...The distance is measured by the difference between Plato's progress of conversation in the form of argumentative exchange and dialectical progression eventuating in the stratum of mythology, and Emerson's preparation of the 'American

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 264-65.

Scholar' for a long period of stammering, poverty, and solitude eventuating perhaps in a text in which "we recognize our own rejected thoughts...come back to us with a certain alienated majesty"(CHU, pp. 9-10)

In an attempt to delineate points of agreement (and disagreement) between his own political thinking and that of Rawls, and so to discover the relevance of Emersonian perfectionism, and of indeed his own work, to modern political life, Cavell examines Rawls's reasons for explicitly ruling out any idea that perfectionist doctrines might have a role to play in modern liberal democracy.⁴⁸ Cavell acknowledges that any perfectionism, democratic or aristocratic, secular or religious, philosophical or debased, will claim to have found a way of life measured against which all other ways of life will be found inferior. Rawls's ideal of justice would reject any proposed principle of justice designed to favour or empower one way of life (i.e., one conception of the good) over another where each way of life meets the two principles of justice chosen in the original position (discussed above). But Cavell denies that Emersonian Perfectionism as he understands, describes, and prescribes it asks for or requires such favour. Cavell also defends this perfectionism against charges of anti-democratic elitism.

Cavell criticizes Rawls's definition of perfectionism as a teleological theory which might be presented in both moderate or more extreme versions.⁴⁹ According to Rawls, in the moderate

⁴⁸CHU, pp. xxiii-xxvii.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 48ff.

version the principle of perfectionism is one among others and "[directs society to arrange institutions and to define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence, in art, in science, and culture."⁵⁰ But Cavell raises the issue of Emerson's and Nietzsche's disdain for cultural institutions or institutionalized culture, including universities, religions, and so on, in so far as these are supported by public funds. Since, according to Cavell, "the distribution of nothing of high culture as it is now institutionalized is to be maximized in Emersonian Perfectionism, ...[it] is in that sense not a teleological theory at all".⁵¹

Rawls's extreme version of perfectionism is one in which maximization, as a teleological principle, implies that the maximization of excellence is the sole principle of social institutions, and it is this version that Rawls sees epitomized in a passage he quotes from Nietzsche's third Untimely Meditation, *Schopenhauer as Educator*: "Mankind must work continually to produce individual great human beings--this and nothing else is the task ... for the question is this: how can your life, the individual life, retain the highest value, the deepest significance? ...Only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable specimens".⁵²

On first reading, the implication of this passage is that

⁵⁰*Theory*, sec. 50, p. 325.

⁵¹*CHU*, p. 48.

⁵²quoted in *Theory*, sec. 50, p. 325, n. 51.

there is a separate class of great individuals for the sake of whose good, and for whose conception of the good, the rest of society must live and govern itself. Cavell agrees with Rawls that any such implied principle of justice is to be rejected, but Cavell argues that Rawls is wrong to draw this implication from Nietzsche's remarks in the first place. Cavell reads Nietzsche here as a virtual transcription and elaboration of certain Emersonian passages related to self-reliance and education.

On Cavell's interpretation of the nature and role of the "specimens" to which Nietzsche refers, Nietzsche's word, *Exemplare*, is best translated as "exemplars" and so loses the biological connotations of the term "specimens." The term "specimens" suggests that the grounds for identifying an individual (and assessing its value) are specifiable independently of the instance in view and its effect on you, as is the case with samples of a class, or a species, genus, whole. However, as exemplars, the fundamental relationship is not between class and instance, but the instance and the individual other for whom it is in some way exemplary: "The acceptance of an exemplar, as access to another realm (call it the realm of culture...) is not grounded on the relation between the instance and a class of instances it stands for but in the relation between the instance and the individual other--for example, myself--for whom it does the standing, for whom it is a sign, upon whom I delegate something".⁵³

Cavell sees Nietzsche's *Exemplare* and Emerson's "older

⁵³CHU, pp. 50-51.

friends" as synonymous terms: Emerson and Nietzsche address themselves to the "youth," not to be idolized or for any personal gain or general utility, but for the youth's sake, in the hope of turning the youth against skeptical despair and conformity and attracting him or her to a higher possible state of self and community. One source of the relevance of this thinking to modern political life is that "the promise of Emerson and of Nietzsche is that youth is not alone a phase of individual development but--like childhood for the earlier romantics--a dimension of human existence as such."⁵⁴

Cavell describes the relation between the older and younger friends in terms of an attraction the older holds for the younger as a calling or sign of the younger's own higher and attainable self. In response, the youth consecrates the self, not to its present state or to its present consecrations as if these were fixed, absolute, or beyond, as Rawls interprets Nietzsche, but to self-transformation, accepting his or her own genius together with full responsibility for the present state or balance of the self, its achievements and failures, its attractions and repulsions. Emersonian perfectionism is thus the reverse of anti-democratic or "elitist" in the Rawlsian sense of that term. Rather it seeks to show what it means to be, and how one becomes, a consenting (rational, moral, free, equal) adult.

As Cavell describes the moral spirit of Emersonian political life, and thus the spirit of the community to which he claims

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 52.

membership, Emersonian perfectionism neither favours nor requires any unequally distributed goods, including the good of liberty, nor does it presuppose inequalities of talent or ability. Emersonian perfectionism shares the Rawlsian concern for individual liberty but, given the relative state of affluence in modern democracies, Emersonian perfectionism addresses itself to the exercise, rather than the distribution, of the good of liberty. This difference in focus is another, and for Cavell, crucial, source of the relevance of Emersonian perfectionism to modern political life: contracted community, with its focus on utilitarian rules and distributive issues, is not alone sufficient for the full development and expression of individual liberty. The difference here hinges on the notion of consent, on when and how consent might be given, and hence also withdrawn, as it appears in what Cavell calls "the conversation of justice."⁵⁵

In Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, the conversation of justice takes place over two intervals: (a) during the time of the imaginary or original position wherein the principles of justice for/by citizens to be are chosen; (b) thereafter, in the state so constituted and by actual citizens who must now judge the degree to which the state (its institutions) as existing actually does express, or is the embodiment of, the ideal of justice. Cavell favourably assesses this Rawlsian picture of the manner of socio-political constitution as achieving an advance on traditional contract theories in its avoidance of a context of violence and

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, chap. 3.

therefore in its contribution toward a theory of constitutional democracy as a Utopia. Nonetheless, Cavell expresses some reservations because he believes that "the full Utopia must give a place to Perfectionism in a way Rawls seems not to leave open."⁵⁶

During the first interval, that is, at the time of the original position during which the principles of justice are first chosen and agreed-upon, Rawls imagines the conversation of justice as ordered in such a way that a state of "reflective equilibrium" is its realizable goal. Here, initial intuitions and judgments about ideal justice serve as standards against which initial formulations of certain principles of justice are checked or matched. On reflection, initial intuitions may be revised in accordance with increasingly refined principles until the two are brought into harmony with one another. Cavell grants that Rawls is successful in demonstrating that one particular set of principles will emerge from the process undertaken here. Cavell's greatest concern is with the way in which Rawls imagines the conversation to take place over the second interval, when actual citizens must take the measure of the distance of the existing society and its institutions from the ideal of justice.

Rawls is less explicit about the process over the second interval but he does say that existing institutions are to be judged according to their degree of compliance with "the principles that characterize a well-ordered society under favorable

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 106.

circumstances"⁵⁷ and he goes on to say that "[t]he measure of departures from the ideal is left importantly to intuition".⁵⁸ According to Cavell, there is an assumption here that even in the course of the second conversation, intuition can only be checked, or rationalized, or brought into harmonious balance, by principles. Anyone who puts forward a claim of injustice "must be prepared to show why certain institutions are unjust or how others have injured them,"⁵⁹ otherwise society (as represented by those with whom or against whom the claim is lodged) may rest assured that its "conduct is above reproach."⁶⁰

Consent Matters

Cavell opposes Rawls's anti-perfectionist claim that a rational plan of life is one that can be lived "above reproach," together with the Rawlsian assumption that intuition can only be checked by abstract principles even at the later practical stage where the conversation of justice concerns actual persons and existing institutions. According to Cavell, such an assumption misrepresents how the appeal to intuition in arriving at the original state of reflective equilibrium differs from the appeal to intuition in reflective *judgment* (a Kantian term) as it is brought to bear on everyday moral issues arising in the later stage of the

⁵⁷*Theory*, p. 245.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 533.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 422.

conversation.

In the former case, intuition is left behind; in the latter case intuition is left in place. In both cases there is ...an idea or picture of matching in play. In arriving at reflective equilibrium the picture is that judgment finds its derivation in a principle, something more universal, rational, objective, say a standard, from which it achieves justification or grounding (though the principle will typically undergo challenge and modification by the intuitive force of judgment in order to fit itself for this role). In reflective judgment, rather, the idea is of the expression of a conviction whose grounding remains subjective--say myself--but which expects or claims justification from the (universal) concurrence of other subjectivities, on reflection; call this the acknowledgment of matching. (CHU, pp. xxvi)

Cavell alludes here to Kant's formulation of aesthetic judgment as a claim to be speaking with a universal voice. Cavell suggests that moral judgment might be analogously formulated in Kantian terms as the claim to be listening to the universal voice (the moral law, which commands respect from all rational beings). Cavell claims here that in the political realm also there is a general representativeness in an expression of personal judgment or conviction of injustice; as a rebuke of society, such an expression claims to be speaking at the same time for (giving voice to) a genuine though unacknowledged conviction shared by those to whom the expression is addressed. As a rebuke, however, a claim of social injustice includes also an unacknowledged rebuke of one's present or attained self as a consenting member of the socio-political community and thus self-implicated or self-compromised in all its arrangements.

The idea of the self must be such that it can contain ...an intuition of partial compliance with its idea of itself, hence of its distance from itself, space for consciousness itself, or of consciousness denied. The

companion concept of society is such that partial compliance with its principles of justice is not necessarily a distancing of oneself from it, but may present itself as a sense of compromise by it or conspiracy with it. (CHU p. xxxi)

On Cavell's view of the universal political voice and the idea of the self and society that it requires, the modern political notion of consent cannot be constrained by principles, as Rawls would have it. In the Rawlsian picture of the later stage in the conversation of justice, the matter of one's consent continues to be directed (in its granting and its withdrawal) to the principles on which society is based rather than to one's present perceptions. This implies that our consent to society can be precisely proportioned to the degree to which it diverges from those principles. It is this understanding of the direction of consent in the conversation that Cavell sees at work in Rawls's view that so long as society governs itself in accordance with a rational plan it has adopted for itself, it may consider itself above reproach when it is not. Cavell criticizes the Rawlsian reinterpretation of the myth of the social contract for its over-emphasis on principles as defining the very substance and range of our consent in the following passage:

The idea of directing consent to the principles on which society is based rather than... to society as such, seems to be or to lead to a effort to imagine confining or proportioning the consent I give my society--to imagine that the social contract not only stated in effect that I may withdraw my consent from society when the public institutions of justice lapse in favour of which I have forgone certain natural rights (of judgment and redress), but that the contract might, in principle, specify how far I may reduce my consent (in scope or degree) as justice is reduced (legislatively or judicially. But my intuition is that my consent is not thus modifiable or

proportionable (psychological exile is not exile): I cannot keep consent focused on the successes or graces of society; it reaches into every corner of society's failure or ugliness. ...Consent to society is neither unrestricted nor restricted; its content is part of the conversation of justice. (CHU, pp. 107-08)

Cavell sees Rawls's social contract theory at this point as too contractual and thus as ignoring, neglecting, or otherwise denying the full implication of one's bond or identification with one's society. According to Cavell, a judgment of the divergence of society from the principles of justice it has adopted may demonstrate the degree to which society has distanced itself from us and forfeited our loyalty. But since "we know in the original position that any actual society will be imperfectly just,"⁶¹ then according to Cavell a judgment of divergence may also demonstrate the degree to which we have at the same time given our consent to injustice, or to imperfect justice. In this sense, repudiation of the moral and political community is self-repudiation and transformation of society thus begins first and foremost with transformation of the self.

Cavell criticizes the Rawlsian analogy between games and morality, according to which, for example, one can think of someone asking to be excused from a promise being cited a rule in the institution of promising, similar to the way someone asking for four strikes might be cited the three strike rule in baseball. Cavell insists, *pace* Rawls, that no rule can function in the moral sphere as the three strike rule functions in its game. In the

⁶¹CHU., p. 107.

latter case, one who asks for four strikes in the game of baseball is incompetent at the game and can perhaps be taught what it is. Cavell goes on to say that:

[in] the moral life the equivalent finality is carried not by a rule but only by a *judgment* of moral finality, one that may be competently opposed, whose content may then enter into a moral argument, one whose resolution is not to be settled by appeal to a rule defining an institution; a judgment, hence, that carries consequences unforeseen or forsworn in games. (CHU, p. 113)

In Cavell's criticism of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls's rule-governed, contractual picture of agreement and consent misses the idea that since no actual society, by the light of its own principles of justice, will be found to be perfectly just, the full range and substance of our consent to society is not determinable in advance by any such principles. Rather our consent is felt to be beyond the reach of anything (eg. rules, principles, criteria, and so on) that prior agreement might have fixed, implicating us in the whole array of public circumstances in which we live and participate and from which we profit. These public circumstances "are ones with an uncertain measure of injustice, of inequalities of liberty and of goods that are not minimal, of delays in reform that are not inevitable."⁶² The reach of our consent to them, of our responsibility for them, and whether or how far we continue to be a party to them, cannot be fixed in advance of such particular circumstances; the content of our consent is itself part of the conversation of justice.

What this means is that in arguments over everyday moral

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 108.

issues the fact that a judgment is grounded in a subjective conviction of injustice not subsumable under principles is not a reason for rejecting it but for respecting it and allowing it to challenge our own.⁶³ Cavell associates the rejection of Emersonian or Moral Perfectionism with the Rawlsian deontological idea that an appropriate response to an accusation of injustice which is not grounded in a broken principle accepted by all is simply to say, "Our conduct is above reproach."

It should be clear by now that on Cavell's view of democracy and its demand for consent no one individual, as representative of liberal democracy, can consider themselves simply or necessarily "above reproach." For Cavell, to claim in a moral encounter that society is "above reproach" because no principle is broken or rule violated is to confuse the scene of the child's instruction and initiation into language and its culture with the circumstances in which grown-ups must carry on the conversation of justice in everyday life.⁶⁴ In the scene of instruction, when explanation and justification comes to an end, the one in authority may reasonably say "This is simply what I do," and wait for the pupil to follow suit. But in the moral encounter, it is the pupil, or say victim, the one out of authority, who first finds something unacceptable and justifications exhausted. There is nothing the victim could

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 108. Cavell further illustrates this point through the concrete example of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, pp. 109ff. See also, Mulhall (1994), pp. 276ff. Mulhall's discussion of Cavell's interpretation of Ibsen's play is particularly helpful.

⁶⁴*CHU*, p. 112.

say that would count as reasons given the way society is and thinks. But to respond to the accusation of injustice by saying, "This is simply what I do," is to retreat to a deontological approach to morality; it is to reiterate right rather than present an alternative.

Cavell insists that it is not that something more need, or could, be said, but that something must be shown, and this by the one in authority, society's moral representative. Cavell drives home this point in the following passage:

...[M]y consent, say my promise, compromises me; that was something I always knew to be possible; that I know change is called for and to be striven for, beginning with myself. But then I must also show, on pain of self-corruption worse than compromise, that I continue to consent to the way things are, without reason, with only my intuition that our collective distance from perfect justice is, though in moments painful to the point of intolerable, still habitable, even necessary as a stage for continued change. (*CHU*, p. 112)

What Cavell calls for on the part of the one in authority is sympathy with society's victim, a shared (universal, hence impersonal) sense of shame, outrage, dishonour. Cavell interprets a response of moral rectitude, in the face of a charge of injustice made by someone who sees themselves as victimized by the current socio-political arrangements of society and so, by injustice generally rather than by any particular person or institution, as at once a symptom and consequence of skepticism. To resort to such a response is to theatricalize our lives, to enchain each other, and hence also society, to a present or attained state.

This is why Cavell attempts to show that Emersonian Representativeness and Moral Perfectionism are essential to the

life of justice in a constitutional democracy, to keeping the democratic hope alive in the face of its failures and disappointments.

That we will be disappointed in democracy, in its failure by the light of its own principles of justice, is implied in Rawls's concept of the original position in which those principles are accepted, a perspective from which we know that justice, in actual societies, will be departed from, and that the distance of any actual society from justice is a matter for each of us to assess for ourselves. I will speak of this as our being compromised by the democratic demand for consent, so that the human individual meant to be created and preserved in democracy is apt to be undone by it. (CHU, pp. 56-57)

Our shared complicity in societal departures from justice can become duplicitous and we can practise duplicity on ourselves as well as on others. However, the representativeness of democracy demands that we be truthful and intelligible to ourselves and to others and that others be similarly truthful and intelligible, as members of a democratically-constituted state.

Conclusion to Part V: Possible Communities

Community with others is always a risk; the possibilities of community, of successes and failures in its achievement, mirror those of skepticism. Our responsibility here cannot be delegated, either to others, which simply denies our own responsibility, or to a set of rules, principles or ideals, which trades moral freedom for external morality or moralism. Our efforts in finding our selves, our own voices and those of others, are advanced, however, through openness to the possibility of a further and attainable state of the self, and of society, wherever and however we might find such pictured or illustrated for us. And, as Cavell has persuasively argued in ethics, aesthetics and in politics, it is a matter of historical fact, whatever the necessities for it might be, that perfectionist pictures and the modes of life and thought which they attempt to illustrate are to be found in writings which philosophy traditionally deems and denounces or apotheosizes as literary, not philosophical. The philosophical challenge of such "literature" is that philosophy bring itself to reflect on why this is so and with what consequences.

I have argued throughout Part V that the *possibility* of community is a matter of *choice* and *commitment*, just as the truth of skepticism is human freedom and responsibility. If we do not accept the truth of skepticism, there is no freedom; if we do not choose community, none exists for us. And this argument is not in response to questions about what is but about who and what we are (to be). That these are questions we pose for ourselves is itself

a defining feature of the human and of the nature of existence for
such as we are.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental claim of this thesis is that skepticism is primarily a moral or practical issue rather than simply an epistemological one. The question skepticism raises is more one of acknowledgement than of knowledge as such. The subject of skepticism is a rather pervasive and unsettling presence in the history of Western thought. In structuring this thesis on skepticism, I first proposed certain parameters for the present study. These parameters effectively limited my exploration to modern skepticism with the stated purpose of determining what skepticism is or is not about.

In Part I, my examination of the views put forward by Moore and Austin revealed that Moore dogmatically asserts our ordinary, everyday view of the world while Austin just as dogmatically assumes from the outset the validity of that view over against what he characterizes as the nonsense or absurdity of skepticism. More importantly, both Moore and Austin fail to approach the skeptical debate at the point where the problem of the well-groundedness of our ordinary knowledge claims really does become an issue. This is the point where the justification the skeptic seeks and finds lacking is with respect to any representative object as such, that is, *existence in general*. Neither Moore nor Austin give any indication that either of them fully appreciates that, given the philosopher's context, the skeptical conclusion is inevitable.

Still, our discussion of Moore and Austin helped illuminate the questions which needed asking while, in Part II, Cavell's

practice of ordinary language philosophy carried us some distance toward articulating an intellectually satisfying and practically helpful interpretation of skepticism. We examined Cavell's Wittgensteinian-inspired critique of the Austinian practice of ordinary language philosophy and Cavell's assessment of the merits of any criteria-based refutation of epistemological skepticism. This examination centered first on Cavell's distinction with respect to the notion of criterion, between Wittgensteinian criteria on the one hand, and ordinary or Austinian criteria, on the other. We then followed Cavell's application of his heuristic distinction between "generic" and "specific" objects to discover that within the philosopher's context the object under investigation is a "generic" or representative object and not any specific object that might be the subject of the kind of knowledge claims we make everyday.

Rather, in the philosopher's context, what is sought is the basis on which we claim to know anything at all about any object whatever. Here we determined that the skeptical conclusion is immune from any criteria-based refutation since the question that has arisen is precisely a question about what if any criteria there are for saying that something or other exists for us, is there for the knowing, in the first place. Only with this question settled, so the skeptical argument goes, might epistemological questions rightly arise.

But if our knowledge of existence is itself challenged, we found that there are no criteria for a thing's *being*, over and

above our criteria for a thing's being so. When a question of existence arises, we saw that what is at issue is not just a matter of knowledge but is first and foremost a matter of acknowledgment and responsibility. Criteria are ours, only ours, and as such they are always open, indeed must be open, to repudiation. In challenging Wittgensteinian criteria, the signposts of our attunement in judgments that underlie the whole edifice of human knowledge, the skeptic challenges our capacity for language as our forms of life, the very threads of those fabrics woven in creation of ordinary human community and individual autonomy. But we found that traditional philosophical interpretations of, and responses to, skepticism fail to appreciate skepticism as a common threat to our ordinary, everyday existence. Indeed, we found in philosophy's peculiar response to skepticism that disparagement of, or disappointment with, the ordinary that Cavell calls the truth or moral of skepticism.

In Part III, we took up Cavell's interpretations of Shakespearean tragedy and Romanticism in an attempt to understand and respond to philosophy's failure. Here, we saw skepticism treated of as in some sense natural, rooted in ordinary, practical life and so also part of the subject-matter of certain key literary works of art. Cavell's literary elucidations were used to support the overall argument of a philosophical challenge from literature to philosophy's understanding of skepticism and to philosophy's self-understanding. In its varied interpretations of, and responses to, skepticism, philosophy had utterly failed to treat of

questions about the livability, tenacity, motivations, consequences and remedies of skepticism beyond philosophical environs. Given philosophy's understanding of skepticism as strictly an epistemological issue, together with certain methodological commitments, these questions simply never arose, at least not in any serious, that is practical, manner.

But Cavell's elucidations of Shakespearean tragedy claim that the temptation to knowledge of a sort that is exclusive and for which the individual knower bears no responsibility is all too human, hence the motivation and tenacity of skepticism. We saw how Shakespeare's dramas picture in literary forms the tragical structure of skepticism's investigation of a "best case for knowledge" with its inevitable conclusion of the loss of one's whole capacity for knowledge and the withdrawal or loss of the world as such. Tragedy's skeptical plot is one in which the hero/skeptic is motivated by fear of the other's hold on (knowledge of) him together with an all-consuming desire for exclusive and absolute possession (freedom) without personal responsibility. Such, then, is skepticism, but is it livable?

We saw in the Romanticist's use of animism that and how, *pace* philosophy's traditional assessments, life can be lived under the consequences of skepticism. But what has become of that life? It is a life spent haunting a world it will not, it dare not, acknowledge, a mere spectator of a drama in which it refuses to take part, denies that refusal was first its to make and, finally, refuses to acknowledge its hand in, its responsibility for, all

that then ensues.

Having come to the conclusion that skepticism is not just an epistemological or intellectual problem, we found that Shakespearean Tragedy and Romanticism provided the framework for a new and compelling understanding of the structure and targets of skepticism. But if skepticism is to be understood as an all too human ill, the philosopher being no less but no more susceptible than any other person, what are the practical consequences and remedies in ordinary human life? How are self-knowledge and acknowledgment to provide a way through or beyond skepticism to a living, shareable world?

In Part IV, we found the American Transcendentalist particularly attuned to questions of human knowledge and its relation to the objective existence of the world, of ourselves and others in it. In Emerson, we discovered that language is our fate, but also that we have a hand in its terms and conditions. In Thoreau, we saw that language is the pond of human life and that we have muddied its waters in giving ourselves over to skeptical despair.

But we found as well that in aligning ourselves to the world and others through language, neither the self nor its attunements are empty or bottomless. They daily confront, sometimes to resist, sometimes to give way to, the life that washes over them so that all together are subject to change, to growth, to complete transformation, or alternatively, to death and putrefaction. So we found that the question of existence resolved itself (or not) as we

are resolved, in the practice of finding and declaring, taking and having an interest in, giving an account of, acknowledging, recounting, our shared criteria.

We found that skepticism, on the other hand, is the wilful repudiation, not of our criteria, but what they are criteria of, together with a refusal to accept responsibility in the reach of our criteria, however terrifying, or disappointing, their reach must sometimes appear to us. Skepticism refuses to acknowledge our criteria as *good enough for us*; but in the final analysis, we found that it is we, and not our criteria, that are responsible for whatever unites us or keeps us apart.

Finally, in Part V, we saw that the Transcendentalist faith in the possibility of community as against skepticism, a faith founded upon the power and efficacy of language, can bear fruit in aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Following Cavell's guidance, our exploration of the writings of Thoreau and Emerson laid the ground for assessing certain practical applications of an understanding of skepticism as a moral or practical, rather than epistemological, issue with respect to the possibility of community. Here we found that community with others is not without risk; the possibilities of community, of successes and failures in its achievement, mirror those of skepticism. Community is a matter of choice and commitment, of honesty, responsibility, and acknowledgment in standing to account, to count and to be counted.

A central idea in the present work is the notion of a dialectical relation between philosophy and literature. That is,

a literary work may take up rival interpretations (ordinary, artistic, philosophical, and so on) of some matter of human interest, testing and retesting its own interpretation of the matter against these others. Philosophy, on the other hand, can find in literary representations sufficient, perhaps even necessary, motivation to still further philosophical reflection.¹

The present work argues that certain literary texts challenge philosophy's understanding of skepticism, hence, also philosophy's self-understanding. That is, this thesis argues that skepticism is not just an epistemological or intellectual problem but, more importantly, that it is first and foremost a moral or practical issue. As such, skepticism constitutes a real, *live* problem, a *standing* threat to ordinary human existence and a constant temptation to inhuman knowledge.

A fundamental point in the philosophical challenge of literature this thesis presents is the claim that skepticism is not simply the result of a certain kind of philosophical enquiry. Rather, when viewed from a more literary perspective, such enquiry is merely one of the ways skepticism manifests itself, perhaps even the least serious of these. In literature, skepticism names forms of self-denial, denial of other or of community, world-denying pride and arrogance, insatiable thirst for knowledge that refuses anything as such, a demand for love beyond all care, apathy, the tendency to live in "quiet desperation and skeptical despair." Skeptical practices present themselves in forms of relativism,

¹McCormick (1988), pp. 80-81.

conformity, cynicism, and nihilism but also in forms of racism, sexism, totalitarianism and in the many other ways there are to flee from the human toward the inhuman in us.

The question of what the world is for us is a question of meaning, of what it means to be *human*. This question of self-knowledge is taken up in certain works that are traditionally considered literary, rather than philosophical. To raise the issue of whether there is anything at all, as philosophy is wont to do, is more a response to, than a question of, meaning, of what matters and how. It is a response that denies the human by transforming what is essentially a moral and practical response into an intellectual problem. It is nonetheless one response, albeit one of repudiation, open to a creature that must make its own way and knows that to be so. That such knowledge is hard to call one's own, even unbearable for some, is an indication of what is at stake in the skeptical debate. Skepticism is a real, live possibility and it is not without real, live consequences.

The present work argues that ours is a skeptical spirit; we are necessarily free to express ourselves in skepticism, to choose it as our lot and life. And that says something about the nature of skepticism, that it is human, all too human. But it also says something about the world that is the target of skepticism, a world that would be otherwise but for us, a world peculiar to the form of life we call human.

What is clear is that the problem of skepticism is the problem of the human and as such it is neither intractable nor to be solved

once and for all. This is a finding we can lament, or be grateful for, and with good cause in either case. But it is not something we can either affirm or deny out of hand or with impunity.

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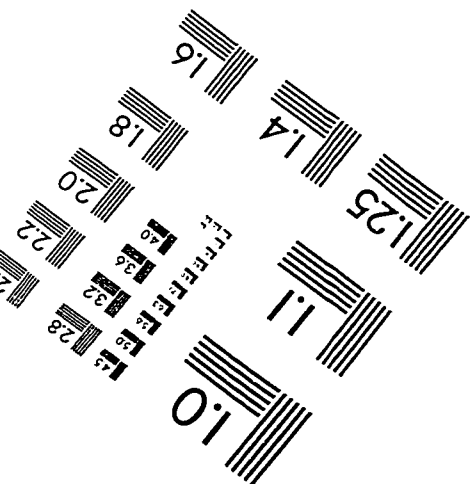
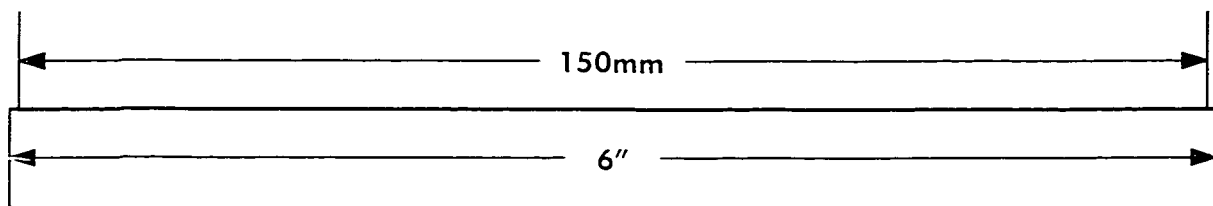
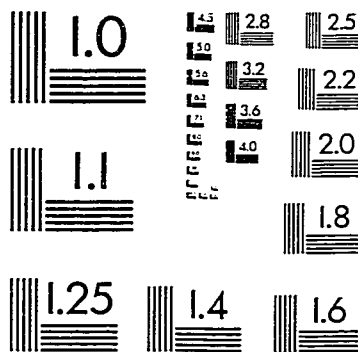
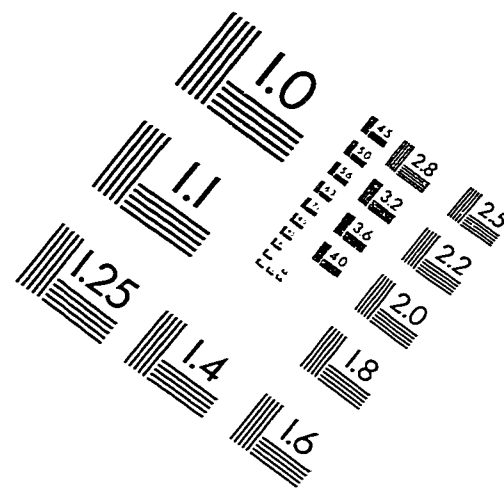
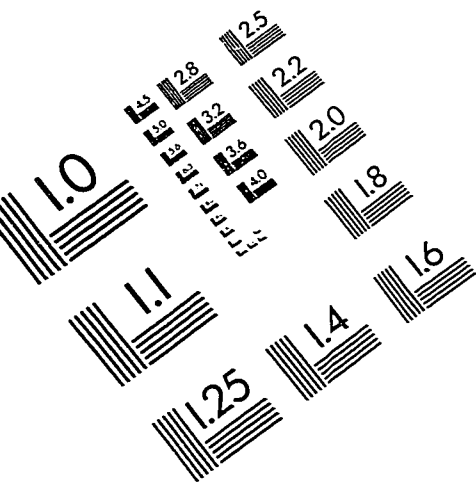
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