

## **Cavell Conference Abstracts**

Sarale Ben-Asher, University of New Mexico

### **Skepticism as the Freedom to Think: Critical Remarks on Cavell's Account**

This paper examines Stanley Cavell's account of skepticism as a serious, but ultimately failed, attempt to recover the presence of the world and other people. Cavell understands the skeptical conclusion—doubt about the external world and other minds—as arising from a prior experience of loss and from the effort to compensate for that loss through certainty. On this view, modern skepticism is the ineluctable result and ultimate expression of our disappointment with the promise of knowledge.

Cavell's picture centers on this skeptical conclusion, made explicit in modern philosophy but also expressed, or acted out, in the lives of modern subjects: the world cannot be recovered as or through knowledge. This is felt as tragic, something individuals grieve. I argue that while this framing captures something important about skepticism's appeal in certain contexts, it obscures a different, and in some ways opposed, form of skepticism. Skepticism, ancient as well as modern, also names an attitude or temperament: a resistance to the tyrannical tendencies internal to thought and society, and a commitment to regarding thinking and acting as free, ongoing, and exploratory. I develop this alternative by reading Hellenistic skepticism and Emerson, and argue that Cavell's own practice retains a dialectical impulse that invigorates his philosophizing, even as his official account leaves it out.

Jocelyn Benoist, University Paris 1 Pantheon Sorbonne

### **What was there to be 'known'? Autobiography and Philosophy**

The beautiful English idiom chosen by Stanley Cavell as the title for his autobiography seems to suggest that there was something the author 'little knew.' What he could not have known before living it, of course, was life itself. On the other hand, is living life enough to know it? It is possible that the writing of an autobiography is precisely what is required for such knowledge. But does an autobiography provide knowledge of a life, strictly speaking? One might suspect that by claiming to know the Self, one actually constitutes it, and that the kind of relationship to the Self that an autobiography articulates and establishes is not primarily a matter of knowledge—but perhaps a form of acknowledgment. And yet, the philosopher's choice of terms, here as elsewhere, is of great accuracy. So, what was there to be known, that he knew so little?

Piergiorgio Donatelli, University of Rome

### **Cavell, Partiality and Acknowledgement**

In the context of the present attack on democracies the talk will ask the question about when and how one acknowledges that democratic institutions do not speak anymore in one's name.

Jeroen Gerrits, Binghamton University (SUNY)

Turning *Psycho* Inside-Out, or: What is A Cavellian Point of View?

Stanley Cavell called film a ‘moving image of skepticism’ for the distance it maintains between viewer and the world viewed. At the same time, for any film to provide such a moving image—rather than one that leaves us unmoved—Cavell insisted that our radical outsidersness will need to be address by the film itself. Few films have been more intensely debated along just those terms as Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960)—even if Cavell did not contribute to the debate himself. The respective takes on this film by William Rothman and Slavoj Žižek will be particularly illuminating. Even so, in this talk I will focus on a specific shot—discussed by neither, despite occurring at the heart of a scene dear to both—that constitutes what I would call a Cavellian Point of View. By offering us viewers a disembodied perspective from within the diegetic world, only to withhold the very scene we all want to witness most, this Point of View makes our outsidersness palpable from within.

Russell B. Goodman, University of New Mexico

Cavell’s Wittgenstein: A Survey

Stanley Cavell’s lasting engagement with Wittgenstein begins with papers from the 1960s republished in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969) and continues in *The Claim of Reason* (1979), where Wittgenstein is identified as one of four main subjects in the book. In *The Senses of Walden* (1981), *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (1988), and *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (2003) Wittgenstein appears as an ordinary language philosopher whose work is “underwritten” or supported by the attention to the common or ordinary in writers like Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau. Cavell focuses on the opening of the *Philosophical Investigations* in major essays from the nineteen eighties and nineteen nineties, and on what he calls Wittgenstein’s perfectionism in *Cities of Words* (2004). Wittgenstein is not only a subject for Cavell but a continuing guide to philosophical problems and their treatment, as he works on and with other writers.

Andrew Norris, University of California, Santa Barbara

Cavell’s Wager, and Ours: Thinking with and against Cavell in Dark Times

In both *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* and *Cities of Words*, Stanley Cavell presents his contribution to democratic thought as an addendum John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*. In this essay I consider the implications of this for Cavell’s understanding of democracy, focusing on his discussion of “the wager of democracy” in the later text. When one attends to the details of Cavell’s discussion, it becomes clear that this is not truly a wager of *democracy*, but rather one of *liberal justice*. I argue that our times require a genuine wager of democracy, one geared towards a collective future that emphasizes solidarity over equality, consent, and individualism. I conclude that if we are to bring out Cavell’s real contribution to democratic culture, we need to read him to a certain extent against himself, and much more critically of his liberal individualism than scholars have thus far done.

Paul Livingston, University of New Mexico

Selfhood and the Metaphysics of Significance inside and outside the *Tractatus*

Some recent interpretive work aiming to address the (in)famous question of the “ethics” of the *Tractatus*, while following the so-called “resolute” interpretation of the work as a whole, has also suggested a way of reading some of its remarks on subjectivity, solipsism, and the first person whereby these remarks can motivate (what Eli Friedlander has called) a “fundamental ethico-religious attitude” toward life and the world, one marked in the possibility of an individual’s active engagement in the project of constituting the *meaning* or *significance* of their own life (Friedlander, “Logic, Ethics, and Existence in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” p. 2). Such a reading also resonates, as Friedlander’s work has brought out, with some of the claims and suggestions of made by Heidegger (at least on certain readings) in his “preparatory fundamental analysis” of Dasein in *Being and Time*.

The aim of this paper is to consider critically, engaging recent texts by Friedlander, Diamond, Mulhall, and Balaska, the basis and implications of reading the *Tractatus* as involving or suggesting something like a metaphysics of the “meaning” of an individual life or of a lived Dasein that is “in each case mine.” Drawing in particular on Wittgenstein’s compressed but radical treatment of the logical form of intensionality at *TLP* 5.541-5.5423, I argue that, first, a positive treatment of the project of constituting the meaning of a life is no more supported by the *Tractatus* than is any other determinate metaphysical (or metaphysical-religious) theory or claim; second, that Wittgenstein’s interlocked conceptions of logical form, sense, and the (non-)involvement of subjectivity in meaning, in fact, makes any such individual-subjective (or Dasein-analytic) interpretation of the ethical outcomes or suggestions of his analysis quite untenable; and third, that at least part of the “ethical” upshot of the work is, rather (in line with the suggestions of 6.52 and 6.521 about the “problems of life”) to be found in the radically clarificatory work in which the *Tractatus* itself is engaged: a work that culminates, not in the project of the constitution of significance, but rather in the vanishing of the question, problem, or need to which this project sees itself as responding.