

## TAKING SKEPTICISM SERIOUSLY: STROUD AND CAVELL

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### **Abstract**

Analytic philosophers tend to see skepticism as at best an intellectual game designed to introduce technical problems in their areas. In the opposite direction, Barry Stroud and Stanley Cavell have been trying to convince us of the seriousness or significance, or even the truth in skepticism. That does not mean that they are willing to accept the skeptical conclusions, at least not in the way both the skeptic and her critics interpret them; rather, their task is to provide a reassessment of the whole debate, avoiding to extract negative conclusions prematurely, thus missing the chance of learning what skepticism, if well understood, has to teach about our condition. Affinities notwithstanding, Stroud suspects that Cavell's own engagement with skepticism has failed to live up to those methodological requirements. There are two main lines of criticism supporting that suspicion which I intend to reconstruct and counteract in this paper: (1) Cavell wants to show that some of the skeptic's "claims" are nonsensical, but in order to achieve that verdict he assumes a theory about the conditions of sense which is not explicitly developed and supported in his writings; (2) Cavell proposes an alternative view of our relations to the world and other minds which is supposed to be immune to skeptical threats, but again he fails to offer a satisfactory account of that relation. I shall argue that both criticisms miss their target, and are predicated upon narrow (if natural) construals of distinctive Cavellian devices. Ultimately I want to show that Stroud has not fully taken to heart Cavell's point about skepticism being not exactly or merely an epistemological problem in need of a theoretical (dis)solution, but rather an intellectualization of our disappointment with our finite condition. This, I take it, does not affect in any direct way Stroud's own approach to the skeptical problematic, but it might indicate that it does not go as deep in probing our human plight as Cavell's go.

## 1. Stroud and Cavell: affinities and differences

Investigating the nature of human knowledge has been an important task of philosophy since its very beginning. But it was only with the advent of modernity – say around the time of Galileo and Descartes<sup>1</sup> – that epistemology became an autonomous philosophical discipline, ultimately earning the status of a First Philosophy responsible for the evaluation of all other areas of human inquiry. A distinctive concern of this new discipline is to provide a theory of the conditions of knowledge capable of meeting or circumventing the challenges posed by philosophical skepticism, particularly about the existence of the external world and other minds. For many contemporary sensibilities, both the foundational claims of modern epistemology and its fixation with skepticism might seem excessive, even “scandalous”<sup>2</sup> – at best a kind of “intellectual game designed to introduce technical problems”<sup>3</sup>. That is not an opinion shared by the two philosophers who will be the heroes of this paper, Barry Stroud and Stanley Cavell. Among the many characteristics shared by their philosophical outlooks, both authors have been engaged in the task of counteracting the more or less widespread disdain of skepticism exhibited in contemporary philosophy, trying instead to convince us of its seriousness or significance, or even its truth. That, as we shall see, does not mean that they are willing to accept the skeptical conclusions, at least not in the way both the skeptic and her traditional critics interpret them – which means that an important part of their task is to provide a reassessment of the whole debate. The crux of disagreement has to do with what both Stroud and Cavell see as attempts to short-circuit the diagnose of the real problems underlying skepticism, thus allowing its critics to extract (negative) conclusions prematurely, hence missing the chance of learning what skepticism, if well understood, has to teach about our condition.

In proposing a methodology which is more open to hear what the skeptic has at heart to say Stroud and Cavell exhibit another shared feature, namely their professed inheritance from

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Modernity’ is here used as a shorthand to describe a rather wide set of historical factors – ranging from 15th century’s Renascentist Humanism, going through the Protestant Reformation, the rediscovery of Pyrrhonian skepticism, and the discovery of the New World in the 16th century, culminating with the scientific revolution in the 17th century – all of which concurred to undermine traditional beliefs previously supported by the narrowing of the cultural horizon and religious authority.

<sup>2</sup> Alluding to Kant’s famous statement that it would be a “scandal” for philosophy not to have a definitive proof of “the existence of things outside us” (Kant 1998: Bxi, p. 121), Heidegger declared that what is really outrageous is “that such proofs are expected and attempted again and again” (Heidegger 2010: I-§6, p. 197). As it happens with most analytic philosophers who use Heidegger’s passage, P. F. Strawson quotes it with approval but out of context, interpreting it as congenial to his own “naturalistic refusal” of the skeptical challenge (see Strawson 1985: 24).

<sup>3</sup> An expression used by Mulhall (1996: 89).

(late) Ludwig Wittgenstein and from Thompson Clarke<sup>4</sup>. From the former they learned to see ordinary language as being capable both of generating and of curing the metaphysical impulse (or of its skeptical counterpart) in philosophy – a lesson encapsulated in the methodological advice “to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use”<sup>5</sup>. From the latter they learned that the procedures of traditional epistemology (including paradigmatic skeptical arguments such as the ones stated in Descartes's first Meditation) are continuous with those that characterize ordinary epistemic inquiries, hence that it will not do as an effective criticism simply trying to show to the skeptic, say, that he or she has changed the meanings of the words employed in his or hers statements (words such as ‘know’, ‘see’, ‘directly’, ‘object’, etc.). In Cavell's own words, the lesson is that everything that could be said “in defense of the appeal to ordinary language could also be said in defense, rather than in criticism, of the claims of traditional philosophy”<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, and as a kind of extrapolation from the similarities indicated above, I would risk claiming that both Stroud and Cavell want to make room for a new kind of epistemology, less concerned with establishing certainties and foundations, or even with providing a general theory of the conditions of knowledge able to meet skeptical challenges<sup>7</sup>, instead focusing on understanding the real limits that define a finite cognition – limits that we cannot fail to know, and yet try with all our intellectual might to avoid acknowledging. Hence the need for careful (Wittgensteinian) grammatical reminders, accompanied by an openness to the all-too-human disappointments which any person seriously engaged in an epistemological investigation will have to face.

Given those affinities, what differences? As I will argue in the next section, Stroud suspects that Cavell's own engagement with skepticism failed to live up to the methodological requirements just mentioned, thus presenting a diagnose (particularly in Part II of *The Claim of Reason*) which amounts to yet another attempt to short-circuit the skeptic stance, not taking it seriously enough. There are two main lines of criticism supporting that suspicion which I intend to assess:

- *First line of criticism:* Cavell wants to show that some of the skeptic's ‘claims’ are

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<sup>4</sup>See Stroud 1984: xiv and Cavell 1979: xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein 2009 (hereafter PI): §116.

<sup>6</sup> Cavell 1976: xii–xiii.

<sup>7</sup> As Stroud himself has indicated, he and Cavell are among the “very few who acknowledge [...] that the worst thing to do with the traditional question about our knowledge of the world is to try to answer it. If you get that far, it's already too late” (Stroud 2000: 56)

nonsensical, or at the very least that he/she cannot mean what he/she wants them to mean; but in order to achieve that verdict Cavell must be assuming some kind of theory or story about the conditions of making claims. However, he fails to present such a story in any clear way and, what is more important, even if he could offer it one could still try to restate the skeptical challenges in terms of any number of alternative propositional attitudes (other than claiming), such as surmising, for example. Hence the skeptic would have an easy way out of that difficulty.

- *Second line of criticism:* Cavell seems willing to present an alternative view of our relations to the world and other minds which he thinks (or rather assumes) is immune to skeptical threats, since it is not a cognitive relation of the kind that can possibly be doubted. Cavell dubs that kind of relation ‘acceptance’ or ‘acknowledgment’, but other than naming it, he again fails to offer a fully developed account of that relation, in particular failing to demonstrate its fundamental difference from knowing. And in the absence of such an account one can very well wonder whether that relation could not be equally available to skeptical criticism.

In what follows I will reconstruct those lines of criticism in more detail, arguing that both are ultimately misdirected, and predicated upon narrow (if natural) construals of two distinctive Cavellian devices. First (section 2), his use of ‘nonsense’ as a term of philosophical criticism: basically, in Cavell’s view, to think that one can only call something ‘nonsense’ if one has a background story (a theory of sense or meaning) is already to give the traditional epistemologist what he or she most desires. Second (section 3), concerning Cavell’s appeal to acknowledgment and acceptance, I shall argue that Stroud has not fully taken into account Cavell’s point about skepticism being not exactly a cognitive problem in need of a theoretical solution, but rather an intellectualization of our disappointment with our finite condition and its consequences for the way we relate to others and to the world. In other words, I take it that for Cavell philosophical skepticism (as traditionally presented at least since Descartes) is a symptom of a more fundamental malady which, if I am not mistaken, he does not think is amenable to be cured by means of philosophical argument, but can at least be shown in its real, non-intellectualized form by a philosophy sufficiently open its truth, that being part of what the notions of acknowledgment and acceptance are intended to indicate, or remind. This, I take it, does not affect in any direct way Stroud’s own approach to the skeptical problematic, but it might indicate that it does not go as deep in probing our human plight as Cavell’s (and Cavell’s Wittgenstein) go.

## 2. Stroud and Cavell on skepticism and meaning

Both Cavell (1979) and Stroud (1984) offer detailed assessments of global forms of skepticism about the ‘external world’ taking Descartes’s argument in the first meditation as exemplary. As is well known, the first step in that argument is the observation that some false opinions are commonly accepted as true, indicating that our subjective conviction is at best an unreliable arbiter in cognitive matters. Based on that consideration Descartes establishes a kind of ‘skeptical test’ designed to tell dubitable from indubitable knowledge, the latter of which could be the basis for rebuilding our entire cognitive edifice. This initial move is the aspect of Descartes’s procedure that most interests both Cavell and Stroud in their reconstructions. Leaving aside some details, we can summarize the main stages of that procedure as follows:

1) Descartes construes a scenario where a *generic object* (more on this notion shortly) presents itself to the senses of a subject S *in normal epistemic conditions*, so that we would ordinarily think that S would be entitled to believe in the existence of that object; this type of scenario is described by Cavell as a “best case” of knowledge<sup>8</sup>, while Stroud’s preferred terminology is “representative case”<sup>9</sup>;

2) Descartes then argues that if one can raise a *reasonable doubt*<sup>10</sup> about such a best or representative case, it follows that the validity of our knowledge of the external world *as a whole* does not have a safe ground;

3) Finally, Descartes offers a *skeptical hypothesis* such that, if one cannot show its falsity or outrageousness, provides a reasonable doubt concerning the knowledge we claim to have in a best or representative case.

The use of the *expression* ‘generic object’ (as opposed to ‘specific object’) in step (1) is Cavell’s, but I take it that Stroud would be in agreement with the underlying distinction Cavell wants to draw using those expressions. The reason why the starting point of the argument must be the presentation of a *generic* object (e.g., a [generic] bird that can stand for *any* bird, a [generic] table that can stand for *any* table) is that the failure to identify a *specific* object (e.g., *this* particular Goldfinch I see in my garden or *this* particular piece of Louis XIV furniture in my

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<sup>8</sup> See (1979: 145)

<sup>9</sup> See (1984: 10)

<sup>10</sup> About the reasonableness of the grounds for doubt, compare Cavell and Stroud:

the reasonableness of the philosopher’s considerations was a function of their being just those ordinary and everyday considerations that any person who can talk and can know anything at all will recognize as relevant to the claim (“belief”) under scrutiny. (Cavell, 1979: 131).

The question before us is to what extent Descartes’s investigation of his knowledge that he is sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hand follows these recognized everyday procedures for assessing claims to know. (Stroud, 1984: 26)

room) would only have implications for (i) S's competence (her vision acuity, her knowledge of birds and furniture, etc.), and for (ii) the nature of her epistemic circumstances (lighting conditions, distance from the object, etc.), and thus would not illuminate (iii) knowledge *as a whole*, i.e., the very project of getting knowledge. As Stroud puts the point: "[Descartes] starts his investigation [...] in what would seem to be the most favourable conditions for the reliable operation of the senses as a source of knowledge" (1984: 9), or again: "[w]hat is true of a representative case, if it is truly representative and does not depend on special peculiarities of its own, can legitimately support a general conclusion" (ibid: 10).<sup>11</sup>

In his assessment of the procedure just reconstructed, Cavell identifies three formal components which would constitute the conditions for a Cartesian-like skeptical argument:

- a. submitting a cognitive claim about a generic object (*any* bird or table – but not *this* Goldfinch or *this* piece of Louis XIV furniture);
- b. requiring a ground (“But how do you know?” – “Because I see” or “Through the senses”)
- c. providing a reason or ground for doubting (“But you might be dreaming”) which shows that S does not have good reasons to think he knows *anything* (and not *this* bird or *that* table)

Epistemologists interested in pointing out the failure of the skeptical argument have traditionally attacked (c), and in fewer cases (b). Cavell and Stroud, on the other hand, are both more interested in assessing (a) – the very notion of cognitive claims involving generic objects. *If* that kind of claim can be made, they both argue, *then* skeptical doubts will seem both relevant and fatal, and no (Austinian) appeal to what we ordinarily say will be able to bar the radical skeptical conclusion<sup>12</sup>; their disagreement, as we will see, has to do with the obtaining of its antecedent. Cavell's argument to deny it amounts to the presentation of a dilemma to the

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<sup>11</sup> It is precisely because Austin proceeds by appealing to the conditions of identification of *specific* objects in his analysis (e.g. in Austin 1961) that both Cavell and Stroud see a methodological limitation in his philosophy – one which would render it ineffective against a Cartesian-like skeptical argument.

<sup>12</sup> Cavell is quite explicit about this at many points in part II of *The Claim of Reason*; here is a representative statement: What “best case” turns out to mean can be expressed in a major premiss: If I know anything, I know *this*. Then it turns out that, as a matter of eternal fact, we do not know this. As a minor premiss, that discovery precipitates the right devastation. To draw the conclusion then requires no proneness to argument, merely the capability of it. (Cavell, 1979: 145).

As to Stroud I am here grounding my hypothesis in claims such as this:

[Descartes] considers his knowledge of the world around him in general by considering the particular case of his sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hand. That single case is chosen to serve as a representative of all of our knowledge of the world. *It could sustain a quite general conclusion about all of our knowledge of the world only if it were a perfectly normal case, without special features.* (Stroud, 1984: 54; my italics)

skeptic: although only generic objects allow skepticism to be generalized (i.e., applied to the whole of our cognitive claims, and thus to the very existence of the ‘external world’), no (clear or full) meaning can be provided for claims that purport to refer to generic objects. Even if those claims contain *words* which are perfectly meaningful and grammatically well-ordered, they ultimately show themselves to be *empty* or devoid of a *clear point*, and hence incoherent or imaginary, used “outside its ordinary language game”<sup>13</sup>.

It is important to emphasize that Cavell’s diagnosis does not rest on a dogmatic appeal to ‘what we ordinarily say’; it is true (as Descartes himself was the first to notice, followed by Hume) that the skeptical conclusions bring little or no conviction in our everyday lives; yet, given the absence of universal rules that would ensure certain word projections and prevent others – a result of the Wittgensteinian vision of language and grammatical criteria established in the first part of *The Claim of Reason* – determining what is a legitimate linguistic move becomes a matter of seeing what a competent user of a language would be inclined to take as such. Now supposing we accept or grant that point<sup>14</sup>, what reason would we have to think that the skeptic is no such competent user, or have less legitimacy in these matters than his critic? From Cavell’s point of view, a different, more subtle approach is needed in order to indicate the real problem with the skeptical conclusion. His suggestion is that instead of focusing on the lack of (complete) naturalness of the skeptic’s claims, we should ask whether her words really can mean what she *thinks, wishes, or believes* they mean<sup>15</sup>. Let’s see how this applies to a concrete case.

Suppose our skeptical epistemologist argues to the effect that we can never see the *whole*

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<sup>13</sup>As Cavell explains:

What is left out of an expression if it is used “outside its ordinary language game” is not necessarily what the *words* mean (they may mean what they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost. [...] What we lose is not the meaning of our words - hence, definitions to secure or explain their meaning will not replace our loss. What we lose is a full realization of what we are saying; we no longer know what *we* mean. (1979: 207)

<sup>14</sup> Limitations of space do not allow me to go into the details of the argument for this conclusion, which takes some hundred pages in *The Claim of Reason* (the whole of part I), so I will refer the interested reader to that context. I offer a critical reconstruction of that argument, also marshalling more recent texts from Cavell and his controversy with Kripke (1982) in my *Techio* (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Here it is worth noting the connection, indicated by Cavell himself, with the kind of terms of criticism with which we are constantly confronted in Wittgenstein’s writings:

I have related the initiating experience of the philosopher, and his ensuing progress, to Wittgenstein’s notion of “speaking outside language games” (or [...] that, in philosophizing, “language goes on holiday” (§38), that it is “like an engine idling” (§132) [...]), suggesting that what happens to the philosopher’s concepts is that they are deprived of their ordinary criteria of employment (which does not mean that his words are deprived of meaning – one could say that such words have nothing *but* their meanings) and, collecting no new ones, leave his concepts without relation to the world (which does not mean that what he says is false), or in terms I used earlier, remove them from their position among our system of concepts. (1979: 226)

object in front of us, say *this* whole vase, since all we can ‘directly see’ is that part which is facing us (or which appears to us), roughly its front half, and seeing this is compatible with its lacking a back half, or an interior – it could be merely a ‘façade’, etc.. From considerations like that our epistemologist might conclude that we can never see objects ‘as they are in themselves’, since to perceive them as such would imply perceiving *all their parts*. – Now what exactly would be the problem with that line of argument? It is true, of course, that the formulation used in the conclusion projects the verb ‘to see’ in a way that seems to be in conflict with our everyday uses of that verb, and this in turn seems to make that projection unacceptable – we feel it must be somehow mistaken. And yet, it is not *obvious* that it would be (always) *false* (let alone *senseless*) to claim that we do not see the whole object, if only because, under suitable circumstances, very similar formulations would make perfect sense – e.g., “You can’t see the back half, so you don’t know it’s red all over”, said in a context where it is of practical importance to make sure we know the object is red all over<sup>16</sup>. Or again, think about what would happen if I were to be challenged by a friend of mine who loves to play practical jokes, and who I know in the past has replaced an object for a façade in order to have fun at the expense of his interlocutor, to answer how does the back half of this vase looks like; in that case it would be natural to reply that *I do not know, because I do not see that part right now*.

I hope this brief illustration is sufficient to show that the real problem with the epistemologist’s projection can only be seen through a more sophisticated analysis – one that does not simply state that “The skeptic uses a form of words that makes perfect sense in certain contexts and then applies it to a case in which it makes no sense”; as Cavell reminds us:

That these words are not ordinarily used in such contexts doesn’t mean they can’t naturally be given application in them. (Using language depends on this ability to give application in new contexts.) Whether his words mean what they say here, or only produce in him the impression of a meaning, depends on whether they have been given application. And it doesn’t seem obvious that an object can’t (and even oughtn’t to) be taken to be something whose front ineluctably conceals its back. This is, of course, not all the skeptic wants. He wants us to see the rightness, the inevitability of his application; and given that, his conclusion comes fast. But it is no argument against his application to say that if he is allowed it an unwelcome conclusion follows. (Cavell 1976: 250–51)

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<sup>16</sup> See Cavell 1976: 250.

A more satisfying diagnose of what is problematic with the skeptic's preferred way of formulating his 'discovery' would have to make an effort to understand the real motivation behind that formulation, refraining from dogmatic appeals to 'what we ordinarily say' while trying to challenge the sense of 'inevitability' of that discovery. Here is a very brief outline of such a diagnosis: ordinarily, when we say that we can see only a part of an object, there is an implication that we cannot see it as a whole *on this particular instance* (since the part we cannot see might be hidden, etc.) But that is precisely not the conclusion drawn by our epistemologist – what he wants to say is (more or less) that (the whole of) a *generic object* might be simply excluded from our vision *in all cases*, "as a matter of eternal fact", to go back to Cavell's suggestive formulation<sup>17</sup>. Now what is the rationale underlying that claim? Cavell suggests it is a particular *picture*, one in which our position *vis-à-vis* all objects would be geometrically fixed, "rooted", as if we were the planet from which (at best) only the visible part of the surface of the moon could be seen at any particular time (see 1979: 202). Now, put like that, the picture should seem obviously wrong, in that in any concrete situation our position would not be thus fixed; and it suffices to imagine ourselves moving around the object for the feeling that there are 'parts' of it that we cannot see to inevitably and immediately cease to exert fascination upon us.

The important question to raise here, as always, is how could such a flagrantly misguided picture underlie so much of our epistemological investigations at least since modernity, and what would be the consequences of its rebuke. Answering those questions has been a central aim for Cavell, and I will only be able to summarize very briefly some aspects of his diagnose. First, it is important to notice how the preceding analysis can help explain the instability of the skeptical conclusion – the fact that it evaporates as soon as the philosopher's imaginary context is replaced by a fuller and more realistic one, which takes into account other important aspects of our actual interaction with objects. At least part of the motivation that leads the skeptic to distort that interaction is the "Cartesian" tendency to separate the senses from the body, or to repress the internal relation between *perceiving* and *acting*, favoring instead a fictional "set-up which positions us before objects in a manner analogous to cameras or microscopes" (Hammer, 2002, p. 53). (It is in this sense that one can say, as Cavell does, that the skeptic has *invented* something about our cognitive situation, instead of having *discovered*

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<sup>17</sup> See footnote 12 above.

something about it – which is what he *imagines* to have done.)

This diagnosis also allows us to go back and clarify Cavell's dilemma, which can now be recast it in the following, more general terms: either the skeptic employs a model that distorts our interaction with objects, thereby preventing any claim to be made about something in *our world* (but what 'other world' is there?), or it would fit our actual situation, but then it would fail to produce a *general conclusion*, applicable to the totality of knowledge. Cavell is well aware that none of this amounts to a refutation of skepticism – on the contrary, this shows the skeptic is (at least partially) right, to the extent he insists against the dogmatist that our ordinary criteria (e.g., for the use of the verb 'to see') do not provide the kind of certainty sought by traditional epistemologists. In fact, as I will try to show in the next section, instead of trying to refute skepticism, Cavell's goal is to make explicit the existential costs involved in the standing human possibility of repudiating our criteria – ultimately, the radical privacy it would imply.

Nothing I have said so far would be exactly news to Stroud<sup>18</sup>, although I would like to think I have been emphasizing aspects of Cavell's argument that are not the focus of Stroud's analysis. As it often happens, I take it that this modification of emphasis makes all the difference when it comes to an assessment of the upshot of that argument. In his own assessment, Stroud confesses a disappointment, claiming the argument is anti-climatic (2000: 59). But what did he miss? One thing he seems to miss, as I expressed in my introduction, is a general theory of the conditions for claiming something. Instead of a detailed theory, all that Cavell offers according to Stroud is "the general point, insisted on again and again by Austin and ordinary language philosophers, that saying something, stating something, asking something, claiming something, and so on, all have their conditions" (ibid: 60), yet he never identifies those conditions in a systematic and detailed way<sup>19</sup>. Besides, even if he could provide such a story, one

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<sup>18</sup>Here is Stroud's summary of Cavell's criticism

Cavell contributes the idea that, in the concrete case that the philosopher offers as the 'best' kind of case by which the adequacy of the sensory basis of our knowledge can be tested, no actual *claim* is being made. 'The philosopher's context is non-claim,' Cavell says; 'no concrete claim is ever entered as part of the traditional investigation' (p. 217). The philosopher *imagines* a claim to have been made in a context he specifies (e.g. sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hand) and he then goes on to examine the grounds for that imagined claim in that context. But that is not to imagine a real situation in which a real knowledge-claim is made. Since the examples considered and subjected to assessment as best cases of knowledge are not really examples in which a claim is made, there is nothing for the philosopher's bases to be the bases of. So the philosopher has not discovered anything when he thinks he has discovered that sense-experience is an inadequate basis for knowledge as a whole. (Stroud 2000: 59)

<sup>19</sup> Or again:

But is it true that 'no concrete claim is ever entered' in, say, Descartes's assessment of his knowledge? The thing

could still argue that claiming is too strong a requirement, in that all the Cartesian skeptic really needs is to believe, surmise, assume, think or have any other 'attitude' relative to a state of affairs such that he could later assess or review its reliability<sup>20</sup>.

Both objections, in my view, miss the target, and are based on misconstruals of Cavell's philosophical enterprise. Concerning the latter, I do not think anything of importance depends on the supposedly stronger requirement for claims instead of any other attitudes. As I understand him, Cavell's interest is much more general, and has to do with the Wittgensteinian question of whether or not a particular move in our language-games (be it a claim, a surmise, a thought, or any other propositional attitude) *has a point*, or else becomes an "idle gear". I will illustrate this point briefly by taking Moore's famous "practical example" of showing an envelope to his audience (see Moore 1953: 29) as a test case<sup>21</sup>, and then I will come back to the first, more general objection.

In his *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (Moore 1953), Moore investigates what we should say when we see a specific, concrete material object, such as the envelope he is holding, in good light, before his audience; his initial proposal is that in such cases

[w]e should certainly say (if you have looked at it) that we all *saw* that envelope" (Moore 1953: 30). In examining such a seemingly trivial (and trivially true) assertion, Cavell compares it to Descartes's equally (and equally deceptive) 'simple request', at the beginning of the *Meditations*, for his reader to imagine herself seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having a paper in her hands, etc., and concludes that both Moore and Descartes fall short of presenting *bona fide* claims to knowledge, given that the scenarios they and other traditional epistemologists ask us to imagine are actually "non-claim contexts (Cavell 1979: 218).

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to do would be to look carefully at Descartes's reflections and see whether there is a claim to know something there or not. The quite general fact that asserting, remarking, claiming, offering a basis for a claim, and so on, all have their own special conditions is not enough to establish the point. We would have to know what the conditions of claiming something are, and why they must be fulfilled in order for a claim to be made, before going on to show that not all those conditions could be present in the kind of examples the philosopher considers. And an account of *claiming* alone, as opposed to judging or believing or asserting or assuming, and so on, would not be enough. It would have to be shown that the conditions of *none* of the ways of saying something or thinking something that could serve the philosopher's purposes could be fulfilled in the kind of example he must rely on. But what are *all* the ways of saying something or thinking something that could serve the philosopher's purposes? That is what a diagnosis along these lines would have to concentrate on—what the philosopher aspires to, and why he cannot reach it. (Stroud 1984: 261-2)

<sup>20</sup> See (1984: 263) & (2000: 61).

<sup>21</sup> This case is analysed by Cavell in (1979: 219) and again by Stroud in (2000: 62-3).

In support of that view Cavell reminds us that “to ask us to imagine a situation in which we are seated before the fire is not to ask us to imagine that we have claimed (to know or believe) that we are seated before the fire” (ibid 217-18), or again, in the case of Moore, “should say' here only means: there are occasions on which we would in fact say this, claim it. But this is not one of them” (ibid. 219); actually, Cavell goes on, taken literally Moore's suggestion that we should certainly *claim*, if we looked at the envelope, that we all saw it “is mad: it suggests that whenever any of us *sees* anything we *claim* to see it, e.g., that flower, its shadow, this sheet of paper, the piano as I look up, etc. — everything catches our attention, every moment” (id. Ibid.; my italics).

In his assessment of Cavell's criticism, Stroud protests against him that Moore is not making the "mad" suggestion that in a case like that we would all *claim* to be seeing an envelope; according to Stroud Moore's purpose is only to make explicit the "uncontroversial fact that [this] is a case of everyone's seeing the envelope" (Stroud 2000: 63), or again that "Moore was simply getting his audience to see the envelope, and to agree that it is a case of seeing an envelope" (id. ibid.). Hence his criticism:

If the case does not have to be imagined from the outset as one in which a claim is made or is in the offing, then I do not see how Cavell's point that the philosopher's context is 'non-claim' can itself stop the philosophical investigation from getting off the ground. His point in the case of knowledge is that since no concrete claim is entered in the philosophical case, it is not really a case of knowing. But would he say the same thing about this case of seeing? Is it at all plausible to say that since no concrete claim is entered, it is not really a case of *seeing*? I think we are all strongly inclined to say, as I am, that if that's not seeing an envelope then I don't know what is, and if I want to understand seeing, that is just the sort of thing I want to understand. (Stroud 2000: 63)

In this context Stroud is making a Clarkian point about "twin-sentences"<sup>22</sup>, namely, that it is quite possible to assert perfectly legitimately and unproblematically *in everyday situations* sentences that "sound like" the general propositions philosophers are concerned to assert or to deny in their (extra-ordinary) treatment (see Stroud 2000: 64). Now, given that (i) those are sentences that *can be legitimately made / claimed* in (some) ordinary situations, and (ii) they are *general*, Cavell's thesis that the philosopher's context is non-claim must be wrong. That does

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<sup>22</sup> See (Clarke 1972: 756)

not mean, as Stroud himself emphasizes, that Cavell's diagnosis fails, but it would imply that a further step is necessary, showing that even if "mundane assertion of philosophical-sounding general remarks" is legitimate "what was true of that claim in that context could not possibly be taken as a conclusion that is representative of our knowledge as a whole in the way the philosopher intends" (Stroud 2000: 66).

Now my impression is that Cavell would not need to accept this challenge; the crucial question here is whether Moore is really making a "mundane assertion of philosophical-sounding general remarks" when *he, in that particular context, utters (or writes, or thinks, or surmises) those particular words* about seeing the envelope in his hands. Cavell's effort is to show, at the very least, that it is not clear that this is the case (or, in Clarke's terms, that it is not clear whether Moore is using his words as "plain" or as "philosophical common-sense" (Clarke 1972: 759); if the latter, Cavell might be right; if the former, then a fuller story has to be told, justifying the use by Moore of those words in that situation, and it will not do as such a story simply to say: "I am here doing philosophy"<sup>23</sup>, since what is at stake is precisely the legitimacy of a particular way of "doing philosophy"<sup>24</sup>.)

Now since Stroud has obviously read Cavell's analysis of Moore's case very carefully, and yet was not convinced by his assessment of the situation, I propose we turn our attention to another, analogous case, also designed by Cavell to help us to see what the commitments are that serious speech exacts upon us – call it the parable of the green jar. The parable begins with Cavell asking precisely "*when* are we 'knowing something'?"; it goes on like this:

Do I know (now) (am I, as it were *knowing*) that there is a green jar of pencils on the desk (though I am not now looking at it)? If I do know now, did I not know before I asked the question? I had not, before then, said that or thought it; but that is perhaps not relevant. If someone had asked me whether the jar was on the desk I could have said Yes without looking. So I did know. But what does it mean to say "I did know"? Of course no one will say that I *did not* know (that I wasn't knowing). On the other hand,

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<sup>23</sup> I am here thinking of Wittgenstein's anecdote in *On Certainty*:

I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again "I know that that's a tree", pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: "This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy." (Wittgenstein 1969: §467)

<sup>24</sup> I myself would side with Clarke, for whom Moore is an inveterate "philosopher's plain man: he drags us ethereal beings, back to down from our ivory towers, we reflective, our earthly selves, and confronts us with the plainness of what we do believe as plain men" (Clarke 1972: 758).

no one would have said of me, seeing me sitting at my desk with the green jar out of my range of vision, "He knows there is a green jar of pencils on the desk", nor would anyone say of me now, "He (you) knew there was a green jar . . .", *apart from some special reason which makes that description of my "knowledge" relevant* to something I did or said or am doing or saying (e.g., I told someone that I never keep pencils on my desk; I knew that Mrs. Greenjar was coming to tea and that she takes it as a personal affront if there is a green jar visible in the room . . .).

Perhaps one feels: "What difference does it make that no one would have *said*, without a special reason for saying it, that you knew the green jar was on the desk? You *did* know it; it's *true* to say that you knew it. Are you suggesting that one sometimes cannot say what is true?" What I am suggesting is that "Because it is true" is not a *reason* or basis for saying anything, it does not constitute the point of your saying something; and I am suggesting that there must, in grammar, be reasons for what you say, or be point in your saying of something, if what you say is to be comprehensible. We can understand what the *words* mean apart from understanding why you say them; but apart from understanding the point of your saying them we cannot understand what *you* mean. (Cavell 1979: 205-6)

Since the last part of this passage has been often misunderstood<sup>25</sup>, and since it is quoted by Stroud in a somewhat decontextualized way, I would like to start my analysis by making some general, clarificatory points. First, what I take Cavell to be saying when he distinguishes the meaning of "words themselves" and the *point of saying them* is, basically, that "words themselves" have meaning (the meaning a good dictionary gives) to the extent that we can imagine any number of situations / contexts where those words with those meanings could be put into use by particular speakers, for a particular purposes. Meaning in that (dictionary) sense is therefore *an abstraction*, but meaning *in a more robust sense is the use made in concrete situations*. (I take this to be one of the main lessons Cavell inherited from both Wittgenstein and Clarke.) Hence, and this is my second clarification, one should be careful not to take Cavell to be claiming (as some commentators did) that there are (determinate, specifiable) things we are not *allowed* to say, although we know exactly what *the words* employed in the purported claim mean. No such separation between semantics and pragmatics is forthcoming in Cavell's (and, I take it, Wittgenstein's) work. On the contrary, the problem with the interlocutor's suggestion

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<sup>25</sup> About the misunderstanding, see (Conant 2005).

that Cavell "knows there is a green jar in front of him" is precisely that we don't know *what is meant / said* there (in particular what the word 'know' is supposed to mean there). To grasp "the *grammar*" of his words is precisely to grasp the point of his saying them here and now, to grasp their role or contribution given the set of commitments and interests that constitutes our shared form of life. Hence Cavell's siding with *Wittgenstein's* way of appealing to "what we ordinarily say", and not with Moore's (or Austin's)<sup>26</sup>.

The tempting picture to be counteracted here is one in which our language or grammar could accomplish the achievement of (shared) meaning without *our* contribution. The problem of the interlocutor in the parable above is precisely this kind of evasion: he wants his words to have a meaning independently of what *he* is meaning by them in that particular context. His failure has less to do with 'breaking grammatical rules' or deviating from the normal meaning (the 'dictionary meaning') of the words he employs; the problem is that those words, as uttered in that imaginary context, are completely severed from the practices and forms of life that could give them any purchase, and thus lack any clear purpose.

Having that in mind, let us go back to Moore's envelope one last time, as well as to Stroud's objection that any attitude weaker than claiming would suffice for a (Cartesian) skeptic. Here is Cavell's preemptive defense:

"But", someone will still feel, "all these statements are *true*, and it is outrageous to say that they 'cannot' be said. Surely you can simply *remark* something without that being something the person may not have known". This just means: for an utterance to be a "remark" (for it to *remark* something) is an alternative way of its achieving competence as an assertion (alternative to its being intended to *tell* someone something). And to remark something equally has its conditions. Of course you may "simply remark" or note or register the presence of something, or that something is so. But that does not

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<sup>26</sup> [...] the emphasis [in Wittgenstein's work] is less on the *ordinariness* of an expression (which seems mostly to mean, from Moore to Austin, an expression not used solely by philosophers) than on the fact that they are *said* (or, of course, *written*) by human beings, to human beings, in definite contexts, in a language they share: *hence* the obsession with the *use* of expressions. "The meaning is the use" calls attention to the fact that what an expression means is a function of what it is used to mean or to say on specific occasions by human beings. That such an obvious fact should assume the importance it does is itself surprising. And to trace the intellectual history of philosophy's concentration on the meaning of particular words and sentences, in isolation from a systematic attention to their concrete uses would be a worthwhile undertaking. It is a concentration one of whose consequences is the traditional search for the meaning of a word in various realms of objects, another of which is the idea of perfect understanding as being achievable only through the construction of a perfect language. A fitting title for this history would be: Philosophy and the Rejection of the Human. (Cavell 1979: 206-7)

mean that just anything, just any time, can (grammatically, comprehensibly) be remarked [...]. That in certain contexts "anything and everything" can be remarked or contemplated [...] may be true (though we might try imagining what it would be like to remark the relation of two grains of sand on a beach, or to contemplate a crumpled handkerchief, or to become absorbed in a pin —I don't say you *can't*). My point is only that where some special context is required, it must be supplied, imagined. (Cavell 1979: 210-1)

The same goes for *surmising, thinking, assuming, believing...*, all of which have their conditions of (full) intelligibility. So, going back to the green jar and the envelope cases, no matter what attitude one is dealing with, the right question to make is whether we can supply or imagine special contexts in which their linguistic expression would have a point. Cavell is of course not arguing we *cannot* do so<sup>27</sup>. The problem is to think *we do not even need to try* – a thought connected with the (Clarkian) picture of "the philosopher as Recording Angel, outside the world, neither affecting it nor affected by it, taking stock" (Cavell 1979: 211).

I hope these considerations are sufficient to show that nothing in Cavell's argument relies in any fundamental way in his emphasis on the conditions for *claiming*, as opposed to any other number of propositional attitudes. His is a vision about the conditions of *making sense*, or *making legitimate moves* in our language-games, and it stands or falls according to how accurate one takes that vision to be.

Let us now go back to Stroud's first, more general objection, which had to do with the alleged absence of a theory of the conditions of claiming. Given what I just said, I hope I am entitled to the suggestion that it would be fairer to revise it, targeting not that specific absence but rather the absence of a theory for the conditions of *making sense*. Thus revised, I take it that what the objection would say is true: no such theory is forthcoming in Cavell's work. Only that will not seem problematic for someone convinced of the fecundity of Cavell's procedures, which

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<sup>27</sup> [...] of course it needn't at all be odd to say, "He knows there is a green jar on the desk". It may, e.g., be a way of saying "That's *all* he knows" (I haven't told him about Mrs. Greenjar's sensitivity; or, he's too stupid, or callous, to care about the implications of his actions). And here "know" contrasts with something he does not know or realize, as it does normally. Or it might be an exasperated way of saying "He ought to know better" (than to put a green jar in the same room with my pet bull). And here "know" contrasts with something he might be *expected* to know or remember. To take a statement to be competently made is to provide for it a context ("fix reality" if necessary) in which it would make good sense (*not* be "odd") to say it. The philosopher's progress then appears to be this: first to deprive a statement of such a context, then to fix reality, or construct a theory, which provides this sense another way. (Cavell 1979: 211-2)

are not parasitic on anything like a theory of meaning, but rather in the authority that any competent user of ordinary language can claim to possess (a point that is connected to the “Wittgensteinian vision of language” that Cavell articulates in the first part of *The Claim of Reason*). About this kind of authority, this is what Cavell has to say:

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 plural form: “We say ...; We want to say ...; We can imagine ...; [...] We are dissatisfied ...” 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 imagine 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. (Cavell 1976: 96)

Now I see no better way of defending those procedures than showing their results when applied to *particular cases*, which in turn might hopefully serve as models to be applied to further cases, but not because of a supporting general theory. The application is precisely not wholesale, but retail, piecemeal. Hence my emphasis in the details of his analysis of *one particular case* of skeptical argument, having to do with our supposed incapacity to see ‘the whole object’. Nothing in that diagnosis (for example, the indication of a picture of objects as moons and subjects as fixed geometrical points, the separation of action and perception, etc.) can be *directly applied* to Descartes claim that “I am here seated by the fire..”, but noticing that such a claim sounds a lot like Moore's “I have an envelope in my hand”, which in turn sounds a lot like the “I know there is a green jar on the table” might as well suffice to encourage further investigation. Or so I hope.

### **3. Stroud and Cavell on the truth of skepticism**

Now we come to one of the most difficult aspects of Cavell's philosophy – his view about the truth in skepticism. Stroud summarizes that view (quoting Cavell 1979: 241) as follows:

For Cavell, what we learn from a demonstration of the traditional sceptical philosopher's failure to give sense, or the right kind of sense, to his words, is that 'the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing'. (Stroud 2000: 66)

Stroud's first concern is to identify the Cavellian alternative for a human creature's 'relation to the world as such' – if it is not that of knowing, what is it? He points out that *The Claim of Reason* does not answer that question directly, and appeals to an earlier essay from Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love' (reprinted in Cavell 1976), where the relation is dubbed *acceptance* (see Stroud 2000: 67). From here on Stroud presents a series of questions designed to problematize that notion, pressing Cavell to give a more detailed characterization of that relation. The following passage is illustrative:

First, I do not see how any such 'thesis' or 'moral' can avoid being 'sceptical' in just that sense of the term in which Cavell rightly applied it to all those views which make good sense only on the basis of ideas that are invented and sustained by scepticism itself. What is 'the world as a whole' or 'the world as such,' and what is a creature's 'basis' in that world, or its 'relation' to it? And why is there thought to be only *one* such 'relation', or anyway one basic 'relation'? These ideas can perhaps be given content with the help of Descartes's *First Meditation* or some other traditional investigation of our relation to what comes to be called 'the world around us'. But if I agree that that investigation cannot get off the ground, and for the reasons that Cavell has in mind, then I am no longer sure that I can fill those ideas with the sense they must have if the 'moral' Cavell wants to draw from scepticism is to be intelligible. So one question I would ask Cavell is: why is his 'moral' not still 'sceptical' in that sense? (Stroud 2000: 67-8)

What Stroud is asking in this passage, in short, is whether one can give a non-skeptical meaning to the central notions involved in Cavell's alternative story about our relation to the word and others – that is, one that does not indulge itself in the skeptical craving for a general, 'wholesale' and infallible justification for our claims to know those 'things'. To my mind this is a formidable challenge, and it is my hope that in trying to meet it, taking my bearings from other parts of Cavell's work, we can arrive at a better understanding of the nature of skepticism.

Stroud's own assessment of Cavell's stance is of course negative – it "remains too close to traditional philosophy"<sup>28</sup>, and hence should be discarded, by Cavell's own lights. In order to begin counteracting that assessment, I would like to call attention to two fundamental disanalogies between the traditional picture and Cavell's, which I shall clarify in what follows.

- First, acceptance (and, in the case of other minds, acknowledgment) are not to be construed as (merely) epistemic relations. This should become clear when we realize that although the respective 'failures' (to accept the world or acknowledging other minds) might *result* in an absence of knowledge of those 'objects', they are first and foremost existential or practical stances one might take toward them.

- Second, 'the world' referred to by Cavell when formulating his alternative view is also not to be construed as something like a (Cartesian) 'big object' to be accessed in some way by a (Cartesian) 'subject'; when Cavell says, in an earlier context of *The Claim of Reason*, that the skeptical conclusion that "we do not know with certainty of the existence of the external world (or of other minds)" is true and undeniable (see Cavell, 1979: 45), it is worth to recall that what is true and undeniable is precisely that our relationship with the world as a whole and with others in general should not be interpreted as the possession of certainty about those 'entities'. If we want to take seriously Cavell's aim of presenting a fundamentally different picture of our relation to the world, then we should expect our understanding of the *relata* themselves to be transformed. This is the most Heideggerian strand in *The Claim of Reason*, and I take it that it has not impressed Stroud sufficiently as such<sup>29</sup>.

That said, I take it that Stroud's question – as to whether one can offer a more positive account of the nature of our relationship to "the world as a whole" – is quite fair. At the very least it expresses a concern that I myself cannot help raising when reflecting about these matters. I will start moving in the direction of offering such an account by drawing a parallel, exploring Cavell's diagnosis of the external world and other minds skepticisms side by side.

Notice first that both problems have been traditionally presented as concerning the justification for certain *cognitive claims or beliefs* – in the former case, those referring to the

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<sup>28</sup> It implies that, although the traditional philosopher was wrong, he was not very far wrong. He had the right conception of 'us,' and of 'the world as a whole,' and of there being one, or one basic, 'relation' between them, but he happened to pick on the wrong 'relation'. He thought it was knowledge, but it isn't—it is 'acceptance'. And he thought we knew other minds in general; but we don't, we 'acknowledge' them. But it appears that the traditional philosopher was right about everything else. (Stroud 2000: 68)

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Stroud acknowledges the bond with Heidegger in a footnote added in 1999 to the version of "Reasonable Claims" (reprinted in Stroud 2000: 67, fn. 41), yet that recognition does not seem to be taken to heart in the content of his critical analysis, which remains, as far as I can see, fundamentally unchanged.

external objects, in the latter the mental contents of other persons. And in both cases Cavell's procedure amounts to showing that there is something confused in the very formulation of these 'problems'. The diagnosis and subsequent reinterpretation he proposes calls our attention to the practical or existential difficulties (albeit repressed or sublimated) underlying the (supposedly) theoretical puzzles with which epistemology has been traditionally concerned. Taking skepticism about other minds as a starting point, Cavell's main move is to show that underlying the formulation of that problem is a distorted conception of the concepts of 'inner' and 'outer', on the one hand, and of human behavior, on the other. According to that distorted picture, the 'outer' would be identified with (mere) behavior, i.e., with (mere) mechanical movement of our bodies – which would thus be placed in the category of physical or material things; the 'inner', on the other hand, would be characterized as private and hidden, or, at best, as indirectly observable – something, therefore, that would be beyond, behind or inside our bodies. Given that picture, the problem of other minds can be easily identified, as it has traditionally been, with the (metaphysical and epistemological) difficulty to go into the mind of others, hence going beyond what the perception of their bodies and their behavior make (directly) available.

Following Wittgenstein's footsteps, Cavell radically challenges that picture of the relationship between the 'inner' / 'outer' and human behavior. For starters, the 'ontological cut' proposed by these authors is not between body and mind, but between living (animated) bodies and non-living (inanimate) ones. As a result, the vision of the relationship between body (the 'outer') and mind (the 'inner') also undergoes a fundamental change: (animated) bodies are not to be seen as something that stands between me and the minds of others, but rather as that which gives expression to those minds. (Analogously, meaningful words do not stand between me and their meaning – meaning just *is* what gets expressed by words used by competent speakers in suitable contexts.) The problem of other minds is not exactly solved (or even dissolved) in this way, but only reinterpreted: rather than a theoretical (metaphysical and / or epistemological) problem, it is now seen as a difficulty that is essentially practical: what can 'hide' the mind of the other is not her body as such, but my attitude towards it, my refusal to let its expressivity impress me, make a claim upon me. In Cavell's own words:

The block to my vision of the other is not the other's body but my incapacity or unwillingness to interpret or to judge it accurately, to draw the right connections. The

suggestion is: I suffer a kind of blindness, but I avoid the issue by projecting this darkness upon the other. (Cavell, 1979: 368)

At this point one might wonder why exactly would someone (a philosopher, say) wish to avoid the responsibility of interpreting human behaviour accurately, acknowledging its meaning and significance, preferring instead to see this as a (mere) problem of knowledge. As Cavell has shown in his insightful reading of *King Lear*, referred to by Stroud, one possibility is that “recognizing a person depends upon allowing oneself to be recognized by him” (1976: 279). In other words, acknowledgment *implicates* oneself, even *exposes* oneself – so, for example,

your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what “(your or his) being in pain” means. Is. (Cavell 1976: 263)

Of course sympathy is not the only way of acknowledging suffering – indifference and sadistic pleasure are equally human (all-too-human) responses. But the point is, whatever the response, it will implicate oneself, it will expose one's own self (one's values, one's character, one's identity) to the gaze of the other, and that might (understandably) make one anxious. In order to avoid that burden one can always close oneself to the claims of others, and an effective, 'wholesale' way of doing that is to reinterpret the entire situation in theoretical terms, transforming concrete, singular, practical difficulties of acknowledgment into one (large) problem of knowledge. (Another, less theoretical and more tragic way of avoiding those difficulties by reinterpreting them in epistemological terms was shared, according to Cavell, by Lear, Othello, Macbeth and Hamlet, “one crazed by knowledge he can neither test nor reject, one haunted by knowledge whose authority he cannot impeach, one cursed by knowledge he cannot share” (Cavell 1976: 325).)

Now compare this diagnose with Cavell's former analysis (see section 2) of the distorted picture of our relationship with objects that lies at the basis of skepticism about external world. There too an attempt was made to convince us of the need to overcome a picture underlying traditional epistemology, including skepticism's own self-interpretation, according to which our primary contact with the world would be that of a motionless spectator passively looking at (surfaces or parts of) objects; the alternative is to remind us that we are *embodied minds* (or

*animated bodies*) who can (must?) seize the world practically as a world of things that are useful and accessible for human projects ('ready-to-hand', to use a Heideggerian phrase). Hence the need for a completely redesigned picture not only of *our own nature* – as embodied perceivers and agents ('Dasein?'), instead of 'Cartesian minds' – but also of 'the *world*', which becomes the name for the set of aspects of our experience that are highlighted by a particular sort of interaction, given particular purposes and interests. In this sense one could perhaps say that the (lived, real) world also makes claims upon ourselves, and it is our responsibility to interpret those claims accurately, imbuing the things with which we interact with the human value that they normally possess in our shared practices. But again, analogously to the case of other minds, community (finding that we share a set values and practices) is not always forthcoming – I might always discover I am different, that my world is different (in this or that particular aspect), and that also can make me anxious, and I might prefer to avoid the issue by projecting my confusion and disappointment upon the world, or upon the human capacity to know the world (as such).

Perhaps one simple illustration might help understand this general point. We sometimes talk of 'the world of \_\_\_\_\_', where '\_\_\_\_\_' can be replaced by the name of a particular set of human practices, such as the world of academia, the world of fashion, the world of politics, the world of business, etc. Take the former as a test case: living in the world of academia (feeling *at home* within it) involves being able to interact in different ways with different people (students, faculty, staff...), as well as being capable of using different 'tools of the trade' (books, blackboards, chalk, projectors...). Now think of what refusing or avoiding such a world would look like: clearly it would not amount merely to *getting outside a place* (although it might include something like that) but rather to a rebuke or renouncement of a set of *practices and commitments* which previously gave meaning and purpose to our actions, perhaps in favor of another one. If 'world' is understood along these lines (roughly as an horizon of meaning), then 'denying its existence' (which is the *intellectualized* understanding of its *abandonment*, better suiting the skeptic's own self-interpretation), although always possible, will imply adopting a particular attitude towards one's own experience, practices, commitments and fellow human beings, an attitude which ultimately may isolate oneself from the world and others. But again, this isolation, which is something one is at least partially responsible to create, is always apt to be intellectualized, becoming a 'discovery' about the existence of a (metaphysical and epistemological) gap between oneself and the 'external world'. This does not

mean the gap itself is an illusion – it might be very real; only this intellectualized understanding will deflect its real causes.

Given the considerations above, I hope it can become clear that, contrary to what Stroud seems to suggest, acknowledgment and acceptance are not to be seen as *alternative relations* to the world and to others, but rather as inflections of a relation (call it ‘at-homeness’) that might in many occasions *be experienced* as one of knowledge (or its absence, say ignorance)<sup>30</sup>. The advantage of reinterpreting our stance towards the world and others as Cavell does is to show that "what stands in the way of further knowledge is knowledge itself, as it stands, as it conceives of itself"<sup>31</sup>. In other words, it is by adopting a cognitive stance in which I relate to the world and others as if they were mere sources of evidence, that as such might or might not give me certainty, that *I isolate myself, avoiding my own responsibility* in establishing other sorts of relationships. Knowledge of the external world and other minds *can* in this way be prevented, only not by *ignorance*, but by "a refusal of knowledge, a denial, or a repression of knowledge, say even a killing of it"<sup>32</sup>. What I deny or repress this way is something I cannot (simply) fail to know, namely that my very being in the world and among other people comes with responsibilities for how to respond to their claims upon me. Trying to avoid that responsibility, as Cavell never tires of reminding us, is part of what it means being a human being, and to preserve the truth in skepticism is to prevent that realization from getting repressed or displaced. Skepticism is thus seen as "the central secular place, in which the human wish to deny the condition of human existence is expressed; and so long as the denial is essential to what we think of as the human, skepticism cannot, or must not, be denied" (Cavell 1994: 5).

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<sup>30</sup> This is a point Cavell explicitly presents in *The Quest for the Ordinary* (see the Introduction to Cavell 1994), in what impresses me as an almost direct response to Stroud's criticisms.

<sup>31</sup> But I do not propose the idea of acknowledging as an alternative to knowing but rather as an interpretation of it, as I take the word "acknowledge," containing "knowledge," itself to suggest (or perhaps it suggests that knowing is an interpretation of acknowledging). -In an essay on the tragedy of *King Lear* I say, "For the point of forgoing knowledge is, of course, to know" ("The Avoidance of Love," p. 325), as if what stands in the way of further knowledge is knowledge itself, as it stands, as it conceives of itself; something not unfamiliar in the history of knowledge as expressed in the history of science. Otherwise the concept of acknowledgment would not have its role in the progress of tragedy. (Cavell 1994: 8)

<sup>32</sup> 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, as I have put it, of the interpretation of metaphysical finitude as intellectual lack. (So speaks serpentine infinity.) (Cavell 1994: 51)

The intended upshot of these considerations is that it would be mistaken to interpret the thesis of the ‘truth of skepticism’ (the view that the presence of the world for us is not a function of knowledge, but of acceptance) as an (alternative) solution to the ‘skeptical problem.’ If that were the case, Stroud would be right in pointing out that such a thesis would simply beg the real question. What Cavell wants to show is “not only that there is no such a solution, [but] that to think otherwise is skepticism’s own self-interpretation” (Cavell, 1990: 35)<sup>33</sup>.

(There *might* be an end to skepticism, but not within [what we think of as] philosophy; if philosophy could itself become literature and still know itself, then maybe.<sup>34</sup>)

### Epilogue

In the Preface of *The significance of philosophical scepticism*, Stroud points out different senses of the word ‘significance’ in his book’s title, one of which would be to indicate something about our nature:

We can also speak of the significance of something in the sense of what it signifies or what it indicates or what it shows. In that way too, perhaps above all, I am interested in the significance of philosophical scepticism. Even if the thesis means nothing, or not what it seems to mean, can the study of scepticism about the world around us nevertheless reveal something deep or important about human knowledge or human nature or the urge to understand them philosophically? I am pretty sure that the answer is ‘Yes’, but I do not get as far as I would like towards showing why that is so. (1984: ix)

It is my hope that the imagined conversation between the two philosophers who have done most to show skepticism’s seriousness can make a small contribution to that end.

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<sup>33</sup> As Espen Hammer clarifies:

What the skeptic seeks is a relation to the world for which the individual is no longer accountable – an absolute presence beyond the vicissitudes of having to establish a connection between what I say and the object before me. So to think there is a solution to skepticism is to give in to it – accept the skeptic’s vision of our predicament. (Hammer, 2002: 57)

<sup>34</sup> I am here alluding to the final paragraph of *The Claim of Reason* (Cavell 1979: 496).

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