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Stanley Cavell on What We Say

Arata Hamawaki

In his early essay, “Must We Mean What We Say”, Cavell argues that the claims of ordinary language philosophers regarding “what we say when” are not empirical generalizations about a given group of speakers but are rather to be understood as measuring the limits of what counts as a coherent act of thinking and speaking. Cavell’s charge against the skeptic about the external world is that he seeks to think and speak beyond these limits. In this paper I compare Cavell’s response to the skeptic to Davidson’s. Both base their responses on a broadly Kantian approach that appeals to the conditions under which thinking or speaking about objects is possible. On this approach the skeptic isn’t giving a false answer to an intelligible question, but rather, the question to which the skeptic is giving an answer is shown to be in some way unintelligible. But while Davidson’s critique of the skeptic is based on the conditions of ascribing meaning to one’s words, and contents to one’s beliefs, Cavell’s critique is based on the failure of the skeptic to mean the words he uses in the way that he needs. This difference expresses an underlying disagreement about the meaning of “meaning”: for Davidson the world comes into view through the meaning of our words and concepts, through the contents of our beliefs; for Cavell, the world comes into view through the agreement in “criteria” that are a condition of applying words and concepts to the world. This difference illuminates what Cavell calls “the truth of skepticism”: the idea that “my relation to the world and to others in general is not one of knowing”.

Special Issue: Recovering the History of Analytic Philosophy with Stanley Cavell

Edited by Edward Guetti and G. Anthony Bruno

Stanley Cavell on What We Say

Arata Hamawaki

1. The Grammar of the Ordinary Language Philosopher's Appeals to "What We Say"

In "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy", Stanley Cavell writes,

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 feel as if we had to penetrate phenomena, repair a spider's web; We are under the illusion. . . ; We are dazzled. . . ; The idea now absorbs us...; We are dissatisfied'. But the 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 (Cavell 2002a, 95–96).

What is the significance of Cavell's point that the plural, "we", in the philosopher's appeals to everyday language is "still first person"? That is the question I want to explore in this paper.

Cavell points out here that the claims of the ordinary language philosopher (OLP) cannot be backed by a proof.¹ For Cavell the "cannot" here is logical, not empirical: absence of a proof isn't a

¹In the early pages of this paper I will be following Cavell's practice in APM of sometimes referring to "the ordinary language philosopher" in a way that does not take into account important differences between its different practitioners. I take it that one of Cavell's reasons for operating at a such general level is to raise the very general question what there could be of philosophical significance in an appeal to what we say. Different practitioners of this general approach, including Cavell himself, give or embody different answers to this

deficiency in them but rather shows what *kind* of claim it is—a feature, Cavell thinks, that links them with aesthetic judgments.² Absence of proof is a logical mark of the sort of claim these claims are, distinguishing them from matter of factual claims in form rather than in content. With a claim regarding a matter of fact you might be unnerved by the fact that others don't agree with you: you may find yourself needing to reconsider the support for your belief in order to assuage your doubts. But it is certainly conceivable that after further reflection on the evidence, you continue to maintain your claim. You could conceivably maintain that everyone *ought* to think as you do even while acknowledging that no one does. But disagreement with respect to the claims of the OLP has a different character, and has different consequences. Cavell writes, "about what we say when, we do not expect to have to tolerate much difference, believing that if we could articulate it fully we would have spoken for all men, found the necessities common to all" (Cavell 2002, 96). And if we haven't? If I have not spoken for everyone on a matter of knowledge, we disagree on what is so. That does not impugn the possibility of my *speaking* to them on matters of knowledge. But if I have failed to speak *for* others with regard to the OLP's appeals to what "we say", my ability to speak *to* another on a matter of knowledge, or for that matter on anything, is placed under threat.³ In "The Availability

question. It is the aim of this paper to articulate the answer that is embodied in Cavell's work.

²"It is essential", Cavell says, "to making an aesthetic judgment that at some point we be prepared to say in its support: don't you see, don't you hear, don't you dig?" (Cavell 2002, 93) I explore the affinity between aesthetic judgments and the judgments of the Ordinary Language Philosopher in "Philosophic and Aesthetic Appeal: Stanley Cavell on the Irreducibility of the first person in Aesthetics and in Philosophy" (Hamawaki 2022).

³Judgments regarding matters of fact can allow for the possibility of indifference. But indifference is not an option when it comes to the judgments of the OLP. This isn't because everyone must *take a stand* on what the OLP says what "we say" but because agreement on the matter is a condition of taking a stand on anything at all, on what is to count as making a claim.

of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy", another early but pivotal essay in his corpus, Cavell writes, "We, who can speak for one another, find that we cannot speak for them. In part, of course, we find this out in finding out that we cannot speak *to* them. If speaking *for* someone else seems to be a mysterious process, that may be because speaking to someone does not seem mysterious enough" (Cavell 2002, 67–68).

The universal purport of "we" needs to be distinguished from the objectivity of truth, from the idea that what is true is true independently of what anyone thinks. The objectivity of truth requires that *what* one thinks is independent of one's thinking it.⁴ Thus, *what* one thinks does not seem to have the first person within it: it is essentially impersonal. But the first person is ineliminable in the OLP's remarks regarding what "we say". In his paper, "Must We Mean What We Say", Cavell comments on this point in connection with the statement, "when we ask whether an action is voluntary we imply that the action is fishy", which in his discussion he calls "S" (note the use here of "we"). He writes,

however difficult it is to make out a case for the necessity of S, it is important that the temptation to call it *a priori* not be ignored; otherwise we will acquiesce in calling it synthetic, which would be badly misleading. . . . The feeling that S must be synthetic comes, of course, partly from the fact that it obviously is not (likely to be taken as) analytic. But it also comes from the ease with which S may be mistaken for the statement, "Is X voluntary?" implies that X is fishy' (T), which does seem obviously synthetic. But S and T, though they are true together and false together, are not everywhere interchangeable; the identical state of affairs is described by both, but a person who may be entitled to say T, may not be entitled to say S. Only a native speaker of English is entitled to the statement S, whereas a linguist describing English may, though he is not a native speaker of English, be entitled to T. What entitles him to T is his

⁴The opening of Frege's (1967) "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry" is a classic statement of the objectivity of truth.

having gathered a certain amount and kind of evidence in its favor. But the person entitled to S is not entitled to that statement for the same reason. He needs no evidence for it. . . . But there is nothing he needs, and there is no evidence (which it makes sense, in general, to say) he has: the question of evidence is irrelevant (Cavell 2002, 13–14).

This passage can be regarded as an elaboration on Cavell's remark that the OLP does not "'postulate' that 'we', you and I and he, say and want and imagine and feel and suffer together". That is, his appeals to what "we say" are not to be understood as hypotheses or inferences either from one's own case or from the observation of other speakers. In fact the OLP's remarks concerning what "we say" are not to be understood as factual statements *about* a given group of speakers, however wide the net is cast—to all human beings, to all persons, even to all rational beings—for if it were, "we" could be replaced with a suitable third person term.⁵ I take it that authority in both the singular and plural cases cannot be based on evidence because if I have to find out on the basis of evidence *what* I mean, then I will have failed *fully to mean* what my words, my actions "say", so to speak, *about* me. My words and actions would reveal *me*, without *my* revealing *myself* through my words and actions—I would, so to speak, be an object to myself.⁶ As we will see, this is "the plight of mind" of the skeptic: it isn't that he has deprived his words

⁵"We say" is not *based on* "I say" or "he says"; rather, the dependence really goes in the other direction. As I suggested above, for Cavell the coherence of "I say" or "he says" depends on agreement on what "we say".

⁶"S intends" is the content of a claim that one makes *about* S: it is one thing for "S intends" to be true and another for one to claim that S intends. But in the case of "I intend" it is not clear that we can separate the truth of "I intend" from the purported claim "I intend". My knowing that I intend a certain action seems to be constitutive of my act of intending the action, and so on for judging, promising, and other (mental and non-mental) "actions". This suggests that in those cases "I" does not figure as a content term at all, since the "content" would seem to be constitutive of the object. (Of course, this isn't to say that "I" or "we" can't figure as content terms.)

of meaning; it's that the words he uses have "nothing but their meanings" (Cavell 1979, 226).⁷

Given the commonly assumed dichotomy between the descriptive and the normative, it may be tempting to conceive of the OLP's statements as normative or prescriptive, not statements about what we do, will, or would, say, but statements about what we *ought* to say. But I think that mischaracterizes the nature of the OLP's appeals, for we must understand those appeals as lying at the limit of the distinction between the normative and the descriptive. The very idea of the normative presupposes that we can make sense of a violation of the norm. For example, suppose that it is a norm of gift exchange that if one receives a gift, one is obliged to return a gift of roughly the same value (let's say that returning a gift of obviously lower value would be considered insulting and giving a gift of obviously higher value would embarrass the original gift giver and so also be insulting but in a different way). But how would we describe a situation in which someone immediately returned the gift she was given, thinking that by doing so she would be conforming to the norm (instead of thinking what participants in the practice would think: that the gesture represented a blatant rejection of the gift)? Would such a person have violated norms regarding gift giving? It would seem rather that such a person evinces a lack of understanding of what a gift is, of what *giving* a gift is. I can give you norms of gift giving, but I can't say what counts as giving a gift so as to ward off all such possible failures of conformity to the norms of the practice of gift exchange:

⁷Cavell writes, "an expression of intention is not a specific claim about the world [including, it could be added, about myself], but an utterance (outrance) of oneself; it is countered not by saying that a fact about the world [or about oneself] is otherwise than you supposed, but by showing that your world is otherwise than you see. When you are wrong here, you are not in fact mistaken but in soul muddled" (Cavell 1979, 180, my interpolations). Cavell here anticipates recent discussions of "transparency" in connection with self-knowledge. See Moran (2001).

you cannot use words to do what we do with them until you are initiate of the forms of life which give those words the point and shape they have in our lives. When I give you directions, I can adduce only exterior facts about directions, e.g., I can say, 'Not that road, the other, the one passing the clapboard houses; and be sure to bear left at the railroad crossing'. But I cannot say what directions are in order to get you to go the way I am pointing, nor say what my direction is, if that means saying something which is not a further specification of my direction, but as it were, cuts below the actual pointing to something which makes my pointing finger point (Cavell 1979, 184).

The OLP's statements regarding what "we say" articulate those commonalities of mind that are a condition of following this or that rule or norm, and are not themselves to be cast as rules or norms. Thus, the indicative form is essential to the nature of the OLP's statements. Apart from these commonalities, the rule itself begins to stammer, "the pointing finger ceases to point".

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein writes, "every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life?—In use it is *alive*. Is life breathed into it there?—Or is the *use* its life?" (Wittgenstein 1953, §432). Wittgenstein's point was that it will only seem that the rule needs to be inspirited (given "life") because we have deprived them of the context in which they—the rules, the words, the gestures—manage to have meaning.⁸ Wittgenstein famously wrote, "if I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do'" (Wittgenstein 1953, §217). Notice that he doesn't say: "I am inclined to say 'this is simply what one

⁸This is why "life" cannot be given to a rule by an "interpretation," as it were, "from outside" our practice of following rules: in that sense the use *is* its life. Once one asks, as philosophers commonly do, how does the sound, the scribbles on paper, the acoustic blast, get meaning, there is no getting the meaning back—that is the claim. It is in these terms that John Searle characterizes the explanatory project of philosophy of language: "How is it possible, for example, that when I say 'Jones went home', which after all is in one way just a string of noises, what I mean is: Jones went home" (Searle 1969, 3).

ought to do' ". Nor should the statement be understood as reporting a psychological fact about oneself. ⁹ The statement "this is simply what I do" is inseparable from one's exercising the capacity whose very exercise is the subject of the "report", and so is recognizable by another only insofar as she recognizes it as the exercise of *her own* capacity (to follow a rule).¹⁰ While indicative, "this is simply what I do" is not an empirical description. It is neither descriptive nor normative, but is to be located in a register where that distinction breaks down. It is an exhibition of the use, and it is the use itself that is normative.¹¹ This is why it is *essential* to these statements that they are, as Cavell puts it, easily mistaken for their "synthetic" counterparts, for an empirical hypothesis or generalization. They are easily mistaken for their synthetic counterparts because "I say", and "I think", are easily mistaken for "higher order" representations of representational acts. But to conceive of the first person thus is to miss the point of Cavell's insistence on the essentially first-person character of

⁹By contrast, Saul Kripke takes "this is what I do" to be an empirical statement, either about oneself or about the community to which one "belongs". Kripke takes it that meaning is normative and bases his "skeptical paradox" on the gap between what a rule, such as the rule for addition, prescribes and what is true of someone who means to follow the rule. By contrast, Cavell takes the existence of such a gap to be essential to what it is for someone to follow a rule. The gap cannot be closed either by further rules (what Wittgenstein calls "interpretations") nor by third person facts about the speaker's "dispositions," couched in extensional language. Following a rule presupposes what Wittgenstein calls "agreement in judgments", judgments that articulate that "in this context this counts as following the rule". This is not a skeptical problem that requires a "skeptical solution" but an elaboration on what it is to follow a rule. See Kripke (1982).

¹⁰The term "this" is an odd sort of demonstrative, since its referent isn't secured by perception. One grasps its meaning only by recognizing it as an actualization of a capacity that one can only grasp "from the inside", that is, by exercising the very capacity whose actualization one recognizes.

¹¹Cavell writes, "The normativeness which Mates felt, and which is certainly present, does not lie in the ordinary language philosopher's assertions about ordinary use; what is normative is exactly ordinary use itself" (Cavell 2002, 21).

the OLP's statements. In learning the meaning of the word "gift" and the phrases "giving a gift" and "accepting a gift" and so on, the child is being initiated into

the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world. For that to be possible, we must make ourselves exemplary and take responsibility for that assumption of authority; and the initiate must be able to follow us, in however rudimentary a way, naturally. . . 'Teaching' here would mean something like 'showing them what we say and do', and 'accepting what they say and do as what we say and do', etc.; and this will be more than we know, or can say (Cavell 1979, 178).

For Cavell "this is simply what I do" is not issued as an ultimatum—in the spirit of "my way or the highway"—or as a statement of fact, but as an invitation of sorts, as he puts it, a matter of "making ourselves exemplary". While to-be-believedness—the content of a thought—does not essentially involve others, to-be-endorsedness essentially does. They are not claims *about* a community, but, as Cavell puts it, "claims *to* community" (my italics).¹² They are essentially addressed to others.

The passages from Cavell about rule following above are a commentary on Wittgenstein's remark, "In giving explanations I already have to use language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this by itself shews that I can adduce only exterior facts about language. Yes, but then how can these explanations satisfy us? —Well, your very questions were framed in this language; they had to be expressed in this language, if there was anything to ask!" (Wittgenstein 1953, §120) What the remarks are about, namely, language, can only be understood from within the point of view of the participants in a linguistic practice. In the notes that were published in *Philosophical*

¹²"The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community" (Cavell 1979, 20). See here also Foster (1957).

Grammar, Wittgenstein writes, “what is spoken can only be understood in language, and so in this sense language itself cannot be explained. Language must take care of itself” (Wittgenstein 1974, 40). In explaining what a word means we must employ words that have the very meaning that we seek to explain, or use other words, whose meaning one already understands, to explain the meaning of the word. In that sense, “I mean” or “I say” is inside any statement that gives the meaning of a word.¹³ If we were to prescind from the speaker’s own understanding of meaning that is exhibited in her acts of speech, the most that we would be able to give would be facts about the speaker’s dispositions to use signs in certain observable circumstances, and no such description could amount to using those signs with a certain meaning. In Wittgenstein’s metaphor, every sign would be “dead”, and there would be no hope of breathing “life” back into the signs.

Of course, it will be objected that if what Wittgenstein says is true, we could never explain how a child learns a language in the first place. And in a certain sense that’s right—at least on a certain philosophical understanding of what an explanation would consist in.¹⁴ But what Cavell takes from this point is not that it raises a difficulty in explaining how a child learns language. Rather, he takes it to show that in learning a language, the child is not *simply* “learning” the “meaning” of words:

in ‘learning language’ you learn not merely what the names of things are, but what a name is; not merely what the form of expression is for expressing a wish, but what expressing a wish is; not merely what the word for ‘father’ is, but what a father is; not merely what the word for ‘love’ is, but what love is. In learning

¹³For further development of this point, see Stroud (2018, 233–54). I have also been helped here by Jim Conant. See his (2020, 758–82).

¹⁴More would need to be said about the idea of a philosophical explanation of language that would be rendered impossible. It would be an understanding of language that in Cora Diamond’s phrase would involve “stationing oneself outside language”. See her (1988, 11).

language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the ‘forms of life’ which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do—e.g., name, call, point, express a wish or affection, indicate a choice or an aversion, etc. And Wittgenstein sees the relations among *these* forms as ‘grammatical’ also (Cavell 1979, 178).

If that is right, there is a lot that is already packed into any single act of saying—of naming, claiming, asking, requesting, ordering, etc. These could be called “implications” of particular acts of saying, but importantly they are not logical (in the sense of “deductive”) implications of the “meaning” of the words that are employed in their specific combination, though they are, nonetheless, “necessary” implications (in a broader sense of “logic” than deductive logic), “necessary” conditions of the coherence of my *act* of saying. It is this that the OLP’s claims about what “we say” are meant to articulate.¹⁵ Cavell writes,

Learning what these implications are is part of learning the language; no less a part than learning its syntax, or learning what it is to which terms apply: they are an essential part of what we communicate when we talk. Intimate understanding is understanding which is implicit. Nor could everything we say (mean to communicate), in normal communication, be said explicitly—otherwise the only threat to communication would be acoustical. We are, therefore, exactly as responsible for the specific implications of our utterances as we are for their explicit factual claims. . . (Cavell 2002, 11–12).

2. The Transcendental “We”: Davidson and Cavell

Earlier I spoke of disagreement regarding the OLP’s remarks about what “we say” as different from disagreement regarding matters of fact in that it threatens the possibility of agreement and

¹⁵Cavell compares the “necessity” of these remarks with Kant’s conception of transcendental logic: “When I am impressed with the necessity of statements like S, I am tempted to say that they are categorial—about the concept of action *überhaupt*. . . This would account for our feeling of their necessity: they are instances (not of Formal, but) of Transcendental Logic” (Cavell 2002, 13).

disagreement regarding matters of fact. The OLP's remarks concerning what 'we say' stake out the limits of language, the limits of thought. What lies on the other side of the OLP's "we say" is not another way of speaking—an alternative language—or another way of thinking—an alternative conceptual scheme—but nothing at all, nonsense. Like Kant's "I think", the OLP's "we say" is "transcendental".¹⁶ In characterizing the "transcendental" character of what he calls Wittgenstein's "idealism", Bernard Williams writes,

since the fact that our language is such and such, and thus that the world we live in is as it is, are, as presently construed, transcendental facts, they have no empirical explanation. Anything that can be empirically explained, as that certain external features of the world are this way rather than that, or that we (as opposed to the Hopi Indians, or again as opposed to cats) see things in a certain way—all these fall *within* the world of our language and are not the transcendental facts. In particular, in the sense in which we are now speaking of 'our language', there could be no explanation of it, or correlation of it with the world, in sociological terms, or

¹⁶In Kant, of course, the transcendental "I think" is contrasted with the empirical "I think". How should we understand this distinction? We might say that the empirical "I think" refers to or represents my thought in particular, as opposed to the thought of others, and not only my thought in particular but my thought at a particular point in time. But the transcendental "I think" does not represent anything I think in particular at some particular moment in time. As Kant puts it, it is "in all consciousness one and the same" (Kant 2003, §16, B132). The transcendental "I think" constitutes the unity of a thinker's thoughts, constitutes the possibility of the agreement and disagreement with other representations I have, or may possibly, have. But what goes for the unity of my representations goes for the unity of my representations with those of others: whatever is responsible for the possibility of agreement and disagreement among my representations is responsible for the possibility of the agreement and disagreement between my representations and yours. (Kant calls the transcendental "I think" "the objective unity of apperception," the unity that constitutes the copula "is", the synthetic unity of representations Kant 2003, §19, B141–42.) Thus, the other side of the "I think" is not a representation at all. Unlike the empirical "I think" the transcendental "I think" does not admit of opposition. Consequently, the limit of thought that is expressed by the transcendental "I think" is the limit of the world.

zoological, or materialistic, in any of the several current senses of that expression. . . . However, while we could not explain it in any of those ways, we could in a way make it clearer to ourselves, by reflecting on it, as it were self-consciously exercising it; not indeed by considering alternatives—for what I am presently considering can have no comprehensible alternatives to it—but by moving around reflectively inside our view of things and sensing when one began to near the edge by the increasing incomprehensibility of things regarded from whatever way-out point of view one had moved into. What one would become conscious of, in so reflecting, is something like: *how we go on* (Williams 1981, 152–53).

The contrast Williams draws here between empirical and transcendental is similar to the one that Cavell makes between the statements of the OLP and the statements of the empirical linguist.¹⁷ "Empirical idealism" is just the view that truth is a function of facts that could be empirically discovered about "us", understood as the empirical linguist understands "us", namely, as "this group of people". Relativism is the aggregative version of empirical idealism. By contrast the limits of the transcendental "we" are to be reached by "moving around reflectively inside our view of things and sensing when one began to near the edge".¹⁸ I want to focus on what this might mean. What does he mean by "inside our view of things"? Does it mean inside

¹⁷Notice that what "transcendental" means here is not what it is often taken to mean, namely a kind of necessary presupposition or belief, or some kind of other "propositional attitude," or for that matter embodied 'know-how' that cannot without remainder be cashed out in terms of propositional attitudes. ("Transcendental" is characterized in this way in Stroud 2000, 9–26.) Taking the meaning of "transcendental" this way evinces a failure to respect the distinction between the empirical "I" and the transcendental "I". What is "transcendental" is conceived of as a necessary presupposition—of whatever sort—of my thought, in the empirical sense of "my". For example, the principle of non-contradiction, or the principle of the uniformity of nature, or whatever is meant by a proposition that belongs to the "scaffolding" of our beliefs, must be assumed as a condition of believing, knowing, self-consciousness, or what have you. But the negation of a presupposition is intelligible.

¹⁸What is supposed to be discovered by moving around reflectively inside our view of things is what Williams calls "transcendental facts". But I worry

of our beliefs about things? Does it mean inside what we mean in saying the things we do? Williams evidently means something like the latter, since the supposed “transcendental facts” are “facts” about our language, not about our thought or our beliefs, at least not in the first instance, and since these “facts” are transcendental, they are facts about the world as well: the world is thus “our world” in the transcendental sense. But what is the relevant conception of “meaning” here? In what follows I want to consider two different ways in which Williams’s remark about moving around “reflectively inside our view of things” can be understood, corresponding to two different ways of conceiving of the meaning of “meaning,” that of Donald Davidson and that of Cavell. Both mobilize their respective conceptions of meaning to display the skeptic as skirting the edge of intelligibility. The hope is that by placing Cavell’s response to the skeptic against the background of what Cavell’s and Davidson’s responses have in common, what is special about Cavell’s approach will emerge in sharper relief.

Perhaps a logical principle such as the principle of non-contradiction (PNC) has the sort of transcendental standing that

that he is in danger of putting the wrong cast on “transcendental reflection.” He says that whatever is meant by the transcendental sense of “how we go on”, it is not a sense that admits of an intelligible alternative, and that puts pressure on speaking of a *fact* at all, for whatever this “fact” is, it seems neither to be a fact *about* us or a fact about the world. He recognizes that Wittgenstein employs the distinction between saying and showing, and so acknowledges that for Wittgenstein what Williams calls “the transcendental facts” can’t be directly described, since any statement about the dependence of the world on our language would have to be false, indeed, false by virtue of the very “transcendental facts” about our language. Williams writes, “so our language, in this sense in which its being as it is has no empirical explanation, shows us everything as it appears to our interests, our concerns, our activities, though in the only sense in which we could meaningfully say that they determined everything, that statement would be false” (Williams 1981, 153). But this does not get rid of the problem, since the problem concerns whether the limits of language are properly viewed as “facts” at all, however they might be expressed. Williams’s reading of Wittgenstein is in Conant’s and Diamond’s term an “irresolute” reading.

Williams may have in mind. We might find our way to this thought by considering the role that the PNC plays in belief and inference. The PNC seems to play a special normative role in our forming and maintaining our beliefs. However, it seems hard to cast it as a norm of belief, since it is difficult to countenance a failure to observe the norm. And while it may do no harm to cast the PNC as the content of a belief, it seems to play a role in constituting the unity of our beliefs as a whole that it would seem no particular belief could play.¹⁹ There are thus difficulties in construing the PNC as figuring in our thought either simply as the content of a belief or as a normative requirement on our beliefs. Some have observed, following Aristotle, that there seems to be an intimate connection between holding the PNC and believing anything at all.²⁰ To put it in Kantian terms, the PNC seems to belong to the universal “I think” that is a condition of the empirical “I think”, a condition of someone’s having particular beliefs. It constitutes the unity of mind—both my own, and between my mind and other minds—that is a condition of having representations of objects, and perhaps is not itself a representation at all. This would give expression to the necessity of the PNC as a principle of belief formation.²¹ It expresses the limit of thought

¹⁹I take this to be the upshot of Lewis Carroll’s parable of Achilles and the Tortoise. For an illuminating discussion see Stroud (2018, 33–51).

²⁰See, for example, Frege (1964, 14). The locus classicus is Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Gamma*.

²¹Someone might try to take an intermediate position: the principle of non-contradiction is a norm, but we have to think of our thought as normatively constituted. What does “normative constitution” mean? The idea is sometimes illustrated by appeal to examples such as dancing and houses. But the problem with the comparison is that it does not seem to have straightforward application to the case of logical principles. The principle of non-contradiction is not constitutive of a *kind* of being, like a house or dancing. It is rather constitutive of what could be called “the being of being,” (Heidegger’s term for the subject of transcendental phenomenology) that is, of the being of the copula “is”. That is not an entity in the world, but rather conditions all thought about the world. In other words, conceiving of logical principles as norms, even as constitutive norms, subjectivizes the logical, severs the connection between logic and truth.

and is not itself, at least in the first instance, a content of belief at all.²²

Donald Davidson patterns his response to the skeptic about our knowledge of the external world on such reflections concerning the transcendental standing of the PNC. For Davidson the objective validity of the principles of logic rests on the fact that they are what must be held in common as a condition of mutual comprehension between speakers. Following Quine he writes, “the only, and therefore unimpeachable, method available to the interpreter automatically puts the speaker’s beliefs in accord with the standards of logic of the interpreter, and hence credits the speaker with the plain truths of logic” (Davidson 2001a, 150). Davidson extends this point about logical truth to truth in general. He writes, “analogously, it is impossible for an interpreter to be largely wrong about the world. For the interpreter interprets sentences held true (which is not to be distinguished from attributing beliefs) according to the events and objects in the outside world that cause the sentence to be held true” (Davidson 2001a, 150).²³ He argues that it is difficult, indeed impossible, to countenance ascribing beliefs to someone whose beliefs are, in the main, false, and thus, that it is (transcendentally) necessary that the bulk of our beliefs are true.

The fact that Davidson conceives of the transcendental argument he gives as an extension of the role of the PNC in our thought is revealing from our point of view. The PNC governs

²²Similarly, it could be argued that what Descartes discovered was not that he knows indubitably that he thinks, but that “I do not think” is not a possible thought, and so for that reason “I think”—as Descartes meant it—is not a possible claim, not something that it is intelligible to subject to doubt. The “I think” is also not a content of thought but an expression of the limit of thought. All thought, that is, the relation between the mind and world takes place inside the PNC and the “I think”. Cavell arguably reads Descartes this way. See Cavell (1979, 101).

²³Like Kant for Davidson the transcendental “I” takes in more than just the principle of non-contradiction, or principles of what Kant would have called “general logic”.

a possible content of thought—no thought that knowingly violates the PNC is a coherent thought.²⁴ Similarly, Davidson argues that agreement, and so veridicality, of belief is a condition on the ascription of thought. Without agreement, and so veridicality, of the preponderance of our beliefs, it is impossible to ascribe meaning to speech acts of assertion. Belief and meaning are linked because the meaning of an assertion of “p” is given by the conditions under which “p” is true. Thus, if someone sincerely asserts “p”, what he asserts is what he takes to be true, in other words, what he believes. If someone violates PNC, we cannot read a coherent meaning either into what he asserts or what he believes—these coming to the same thing, at least in general. And if someone fails to agree with our beliefs in the main, we cannot read a coherent meaning either into what he asserts or what he believes—again, these coming to the same thing, at least in general. Davidson can be viewed as following out Williams’s idea of “moving around reflectively inside our view of things and sensing when one began to near the edge”. We begin to near the edge when we try to ascribe beliefs to another that in the main differ from our own. And what we realize when we do this is not just that we *cannot help* but project agreement with our own beliefs in the interpretation of others. Our being unable to do so is not just a fact about us, and our own limitations, whether we conceive of those limitations as “empirical” or ‘transcendental’. What we arrive at is what Kant called the “pure” or “objective unity of apperception”. What we discover is not that we are stuck behind the veil of our own beliefs, but that there is a limit to the intelligibility of the very idea of massive error. And so what we discover is that non-veridicality presupposes a background of veridicality: the veridical “I think” is prior to the non-veridical “I think”, or “I know” is prior to “I don’t know”, the objective is prior to the subjective: call this “doxastic disjunctivism”.

²⁴Of course, this doesn’t imply that we can’t have contradictory beliefs that we don’t, so to speak, “bring together” in one consciousness.

For Davidson what “moving around reflectively inside our view of things”—which is what we must do not just as radical interpreters, but as one speaker trying to understand another speaker—is a matter of determining what belief is expressed by what another speaker says. We might find ourselves needing to move around reflectively inside our view of things when the disagreement with another is so radical that we have difficulty getting it into view. In doing so, we can discover what agreements with others operate, so to speak, in the background in the ordinary cases in which interpretation proceeds more smoothly. But what Davidson means by “meaning” is not what Cavell means, and so what for Cavell would count as “moving around reflectively inside our view of things” must be understood differently.

Cavell follows Austin in looking at what “we say” as the guiding ground in assessing the skeptic’s progress. However, it is a point of emphasis in Cavell that the turn to “ordinary language” in philosophers like Austin and Wittgenstein should not be understood as a new way of doing conceptual analysis, of finding out what words/concepts, particularly those words/concepts on which philosophical issues have turned—such as “know”, “perceive”, “act”, “intend”, “promise”—really mean.²⁵ This way of understanding the turn to ordinary language has subjected ordinary language philosophy to the objection (and in some quarters ridicule) that attention to “what we say when” is able to reveal, at most, the conditions under which it is reasonable to use these words, to say, “I know. . .”, “I perceive. . .”, “I intend. . .”, and so on, not the conditions under which those statements are *true*. In the case of ‘know’ the most that attention to ordinary language could show from the perspective of the traditional epistemologist is what we know “for all practical purposes”, that is, what

²⁵This is what Barry Stroud takes Austin to be doing in “Other Minds”. By carefully observing in what circumstances we appropriately say “I know”, Austin, as Stroud understands him, means to show that what we mean by “I know” in ordinary life is not what the philosopher in his study means (Stroud 1984, 39–82).

we can be said to “know” once we factor in the pragmatic considerations that no doubt play an essential role in determining whether someone’s *claim* to know is reasonably made. But, as the traditional epistemologist will point out, it is possible that we know “for all practical purposes” without knowing *simpliciter*, without it being *true* that we know.²⁶ Cavell calls such an appeal to “what we say” a “direct criticism” of the skeptic, an approach he roundly rejects.²⁷

Cavell writes,

in the work of Wittgenstein and Austin. . . appeals to ‘what we ordinarily say’ take on a different emphasis. In them the emphasis is less on the ordinariness of an expression (which seems mostly to mean, from Moore and 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 (Cavell 1979, 206).

What, though, does the emphasis on the fact that words are used to say things “by human beings to human beings in definite contexts” come to? And what does that have to do with the *meaning* of what is said (in those definite contexts)? Why doesn’t the idea of “the meaning is the use” open these philosophers up to the objection that their very methodology confuses what is pragmatically implied by *saying* what one says and what is logically implied by saying *what* one says? Cavell goes on:

Wittgenstein’s motive (and this much is shared by Austin) is to put the human animal back into language and therewith back into

²⁶This is how Stroud describes the failure of this way of criticizing the skeptic (Stroud 1984, 69–82).

²⁷Cavell calls criticism of this form: “moralistic”: “Wittgenstein’s originality lies in having developed modes of criticism that are not moralistic, that is, that do not leave the critic imagining himself free of the faults he sees around him, and which proceed not by trying to argue a given statement false or wrong. . .” (Cavell 1979, 175).

philosophy. . . He undertook, as I read him, to trace the mechanisms of this rejection in the ways in which, in investigating ourselves, we are led to speak ‘outside language games’, consider expressions apart from, and in opposition to, the natural forms of life which give those expressions the force they have. . . 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. (Cavell 1979, 207).

The distinction between a certain combination of words lacking meaning, and *my* failing to mean anything by *my* words, is pivotal. I can fail to say something, fall into an illusion of meaning, in either of these ways: they are two different ways of, to invoke Williams’s words, coming near, and falling off, “the edge”, of sense. I can fail to know *what* I mean because I fail to know what the sentence I am using means. Or I can fail to know *what* I mean because *I* fail to *mean* the sentence I am using, even a sentence whose meaning I know (and haven’t momentarily forgotten). This implies that *what* one says is not separable from one’s saying what one says. That is, we should not understand the act of saying as an “add on” to a “proposition” that has meaning independently of the act of saying, of someone’s meaning it. Rather, there is a recognizable proposition only inside a recognizable act of someone’s saying what she does, and meaning it.²⁸ You might think of Cavell as widening Frege’s context principle.²⁹

The above distinction in ways of “hallucinating meaning” is pivotal in Cavell’s invocation of the idea of a “non-claim con-

²⁸ “[I]f the connection between “our words” and “what we mean” is a necessary one, this necessity is not established by universals, propositions, or rules, but by the form of life which makes certain stretches of syntactical utterances *assertions*. . . a place we may begin to understand how the *saying* of something is essential to what is meant” (Cavell 1979, 208).

²⁹ Just as a word has meaning only in the context of a proposition, a proposition has meaning, expresses a thought, only in the context of someone’s meaning it (in a particular context).

text” in his treatment of skepticism.³⁰ The skeptic needs to bring under examination a particular knowledge claim if the path of reflection he follows is to proceed fully naturally, as it seems to do. But the knowledge claim he needs must be conceived of in a special way: it must be conceived of as a “best case” for knowing anything about the world at all. Only thus can a conclusion that is reached about this claim have a bearing on our ability to know things about the world considered as a whole. But the requirement that the particular claim under consideration must be “representative”, must bear the weight of standing in for all of our knowledge considered as a whole, conflicts, Cavell argues, with the need to have a possible knowledge claim in view. This is because it is, Cavell maintains, a condition of performing an act that would count as making a claim 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” (Cavell 1979, 206). However, if there is a point to your claim, it would be in Thompson Clarke’s words “implained”: conclusions reached about the validity of the claim would fail to extend to the validity of our knowledge as a whole.³¹ The philosopher is thus *driven* to speak “outside language games”, consider expressions apart from, and in opposition to, the natural forms of life which give those expressions the force they have” (Cavell 1979, 207). Cavell, then, formulates the “dilemma” of “the traditional investigation of knowledge” this way: “it must be the investigation of a concrete claim if its procedure is to be coherent; it cannot be the investigation of a concrete claim if its conclusion is to be general. Without that coherence it would not have the obviousness it has seemed to have; without that generality its conclusion would not be skeptical” (Cavell 1979, 220). The philosopher, forced by the demands of his inquiry to imagine a “claim” that cannot be a

³⁰ Of course Cavell’s response to the skeptic is complex and nuanced, and I am not able to do justice to it here. I give a much fuller account in Hamawaki (2014, 389–428).

³¹ See Clarke (1972, 754–69).

genuine claim, falls into an “a hallucination of meaning”. This, Cavell stresses, does not mean that the combination of words he uses is nonsense, but that *he* “must mean” what *he* “cannot mean” (Cavell 1979, 225).³²

Cavell’s point about the non-claim context is illustrated by the skeptic’s attempt to ask the question “do you see all of the object” in the *way* that he needs to ask it. He observes,

if the phrase ‘You don’t see all of it’ means what it ordinarily means, then it implies that there is some definite object of whose existence or presence we have claimed to know; that some part of that object is hidden; where ‘some part’ means ‘some definite part’ whose identity and significance is established independently of the (merely geometrical-physical) fact that it is then and there not visible from your position. . . (Cavell 1979, 200).³³

The question is: “Does ‘the back half’, as used by the philosopher, serve to establish a part of the object, a part which is concealed?” (Cavell 1979, 200). It is crucial to Cavell’s answer not only that “see all of it” does not meet the conditions that Cavell lays out—conditions that determine the coherence of *our saying* “see all of it” in the sense that has been under discussion in this paper—but that in order for the philosopher to *mean* “see all of it” in the way that he needs to mean it, *his* use of “see all of it” cannot, must not, meet those conditions. In order to achieve the generality the skeptic desires he needs to imagine “the back half” as established “by the act of diagramming and by the geometry and visual circumstances of the context themselves”. In doing so, we “have

³²Thus, as he puts it, “what I wish to convey is not that the conclusion that sense-experience is inadequate as a basis for knowledge as a whole (or that we can never really know the experience of another person) is *false*, and in *that* sense not a discovery; but rather that it is neither false nor true, that it is not what we should call a ‘discovery’” (Cavell 1979, 223).

³³For example: “what may be, or count as, a ‘part’ can be established in various ways: it may be a named part of the object (its back, its armrest, the filter, the core, etc.)” but it may only be describable as “the part with the initials or the scratch on it”, or as “the red part”, or as “a piece large enough to retain the original glaze” (Cavell 1979, 200).

to conceive that life with that object continues in such a way that ‘the back half’ . . . is never seen, never visible. Thus, the skeptical picture is one in which all our objects are moons. In which the earth is our moon” (Cavell 1979, 201–2).³⁴ However, he doesn’t thereby distort the meaning of “see all of it” —it has the same meaning it has in “ordinary contexts”. Rather, *he* will have failed to *mean* anything by those words.

For Cavell, prescind from the criteria that figure in ordinary contexts when we use the phrase “see all of it” is to prescind from *what brings the world into view*. That is, it is to prescind from that alignment between language and the world that is a condition of making claims about it, claims such as “I see all of the object”, or “I know that there is a green jar of pencils on the desk”. In seeking to assess our knowledge from the “outside,” the skeptical philosopher no longer has the world so much as in view—there is nothing that is an object of his claims. He is no longer speaking about anything, “distorting our concept of an object *überhaupt*” (Cavell 1979, 203). The criteria for applying “see all of it” are not part of the meaning of “see all of it” but condition the possibility of *applying* “see all of it” to the world. These criteria are not part of the meaning of the phrase, do not belong to the logical (in the sense of “deductive”) implications of using the phrase, but are, nonetheless, part of what we learn in learning a language, no less a part of what we learn than the sense and reference of words.³⁵

³⁴Thus, the traditional philosopher implicitly conceives of the senses as “extirpated from the body”, since as soon as we move “the ‘parts’ must disappear, or else we *see* what had before been hidden from view” (Cavell 1979, 202).

³⁵Similarly, when Wittgenstein says that groaning, writhing and so on are criteria of pain, he isn’t analyzing the concept of pain. Thus, he isn’t saying that certain behaviors, or the disposition to exhibit certain behaviors, is implied by the statement that someone is in pain. And so he isn’t denying that it is conceivable that someone be in pain without being disposed to exhibit those behaviors. Rather, he is articulating the conditions in which someone *counts* as being in pain, conditions in which it is pain that is being *expressed*; he is articulating the conditions in which the concept of pain has *application* to the world. “Criteria”, Cavell writes, “are ‘criteria for something’s being so’,

Thus, “moving around reflectively inside our view of things” is for Cavell not a matter of moving around reflectively inside of *what* can be coherently said—as it is for Davidson, and perhaps for Williams—but a matter of moving around reflectively inside of what can be coherently *said*. The difference lies in where the italics are placed. And what is the relevance of this difference?

I have presented both Davidson and Cavell as inheriting Kant’s “transcendental” approach to understanding the possibility of what Kant called “the relation between representation and object”. Both extend Kant’s transcendental “I think” to the inter-subjective: just as Kant argued that the “I think” must be able to accompany all of my representations, they argue that the “we think” (“we say”) must be able to accompany all of my representations, at least at the limit. And both hold that the first person is ineliminable in explaining “the relation between representation and object”, for we can only understand language (thought) from inside language (thought), from inside one’s capacity to speak (to think). But this point has a different upshot for each philosopher, for each understands differently the “medium” that one is reflectively “to move around inside”. For Davidson the skeptic is found to be unintelligible once we see that the possibility of massive error in belief is unintelligible: that is the point at which we reach the “edge” of what we can comprehend. For Cavell the skeptic is found to be unintelligible once we see that the skeptic cannot claim, cannot say, what he needs to claim or to say—it is there where the skeptic has reached the “edge” of what we can comprehend. It is implicit in Davidson’s view that

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 its *being so*. Criteria do not determine the certainty of statements, but the application of the concepts employed in statements” (Cavell 1979, 45). If the criteria of pain are satisfied, then it follows that the concept of pain has application, whether the person is in pain or not, for even when he is not in pain, the concept of pain must be, as Cavell puts it, “retained”. Cavell writes, “if the groan was in those circumstances a criterion of pain, an expression of pain, then pain is, and remains, at issue” (Cavell 1979, 45). Groaning is behavior that, so to speak, purports to be “of” pain.

the world comes into view in our representations, through the sense and meaning of our words and concepts. For Cavell—and this is where we can locate what I think is both most elusive and most interesting in the vision that Cavell is offering—the world coming into view requires agreement on the criteria of what counts as *applying* concepts and words to the world, where that is not something that is implied by the meaning of the concept and word.³⁶ For Cavell my relation to the world as a whole is not through representation. The world as a whole is *shown* in the *act* of saying, in what counts as an act of saying. (Science, by the way, is part of the world as a whole, even if what science studies is not.) This is how I interpret what he calls “the truth of skepticism”: my relation to the world and to others in general is not one of knowing.³⁷

From Cavell’s perspective Davidson has not succeeded in putting the human animal “back into language and therewith back into philosophy”. And he hasn’t done so because he has in his account of the meeting of minds in linguistic communication, as subtle and in some ways profound as it is, neglected altogether what Cavell calls the coherence of what “I mean”, or what “I say”. For Davidson, the relevance of the act of assertion, the need to identify such performances in the situation of radical interpretation, is that it gives the interpreter a window onto the speaker’s attitudes of holding true. Thus, sharing a world with others is a matter of sharing our beliefs about what is so.³⁸ But

³⁶If Kant is a precursor of Cavell, it is the Kant of the third *Critique*: what Cavell calls “criteria” seem to belong to what Kant calls “the power of judgment” rather than to what he calls “the understanding”.

³⁷See Cavell (2002a, 324).

³⁸Actually, Davidson’s view that acts of holding true figure as evidence on the basis of which the interpreter can discern meanings and beliefs seems to be a holdover from Quine’s conception of radical translation: a purely extensional basis for the intensional. As John McDowell has argued, this seems to keep in place the picture of our relation to others that is an assumption of the traditional problem of other minds and is in tension with Davidson’s view that meaning and thought are immediately in view in (linguistic) behavior. See McDowell (1998, 87–107).

for Cavell we share a world insofar as we share criteria for what counts as telling someone something, making a request, issuing a command, and so on, doing all those things that can only be done in language. It is in sharing such criteria, in agreeing on the OLP's claims about what we say, that we can agree or disagree with regard to propositions. It is only on the basis of such shared criteria that we can, to use terms from the *Tractatus*, recognize "the symbol in the sign".³⁹

This point is related to another important difference. Davidson's situation of radical interpretation is not one in which one person addresses another, but is rather one in which someone who is observing an act of address is trying to discern what the speaker means and believes. Although it is not the Quinean position of the empirical linguist looking on from the outside, it is still fundamentally "third-personal". For Davidson the idea of an objective world is necessarily the third term of a "triangulation" between at least two thinkers.⁴⁰ Language is essential in the relation between thought and world because it is only through interpreting the speech of another that I can ascribe beliefs to the other, and so ascribe beliefs to myself, since, as Davidson argues, I have a conception of that which my beliefs are about only insofar as I can think of the objects of *my* beliefs as the common object of *our* beliefs. By contrast, Cavell takes the situation of one person addressing another "as you" to be fundamental, for it is in address that the speaker makes herself responsible to another, assumes responsibility for what she says, and for the coherence of her meaning what she says. For Cavell we have a world only as a participant in address. The world is not that which is shared by I and he or she, or they, but I and you, or we. For Davidson the object is the third term in a triangle whose other terms are "I" and "she" or "he". For Cavell the object is the third term in a triangle whose other terms are "I" and "you". It is only inside

³⁹See Wittgenstein (1961, 15).

⁴⁰The idea of "triangulation" is elaborated in Davidson (2001a, 107–22).

the Cavellian triangle that each term can be what it is. In fact it is only inside the Cavellian triangle that there can be a "we", a *meeting* of minds rather than just a *matching* of them. For all his talk of shared beliefs, Davidson doesn't really explain how it could be that we can believe, know, reason and act *together*, how we can constitute ourselves as "we". This is something that can only be done in language, but acts of speech, then, must be seen not just as windows onto our psychological states but as the vehicle by which we bind ourselves to one another, and so thereby constitute a "we".⁴¹ The "we say" constitutes the possibility of addressing, and so binding oneself in the act of address, to someone. For Cavell "I say"—and "we say"—are not representations, but rather express the act of committing oneself to one's addressee, taking responsibility for making sense.⁴² It is only inside acts of taking responsibility for what "I say", what "we say", that the world comes into view. This is why the first-person, both singular and plural, is essential to language. For Cavell properly acknowledging this is the beginning of "putting the human animal back into language and therewith back into philosophy".

⁴¹Richard Moran has recently argued that in telling someone something one makes a commitment not simply to the truth of what one says, so to speak, in a vacuum; but rather, one makes a commitment *to* one's addressee that what one is telling her is true. In performing the act of telling I thereby *bind* myself to another; I don't just enable the other to know what I believe by "throwing out" the relevant signs. I take Moran to be applying to the speech act of telling what Cavell insists is a general feature of performing an act of speech at all: in performing an act of speech I am binding myself to my addressee, not just giving the other access to the contents of my mind. This is a way of unpacking the idea that the "I" of "I say" is a position inside the matrix of I/you. That is, it is a way of fleshing out the thought that in speaking I am addressing my act to someone rather than merely performing an act that, so to speak, is complete without the participation of the addressee. See Benveniste (1971, 224–25) and Moran (2018).

⁴²You could say that Davidson doesn't fully take on the other half of Cavell's formulation of "the truth of skepticism": my relation to others in general is not one of knowing but of acknowledging.

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