

From “ghost in the machine” to “spiritual automaton”: Philosophical meditation in Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Levinas

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Received: 15 December 2005 / Accepted: 23 February 2006 /
Published online: 10 November 2006
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Abstract This essay discusses Stanley Cavell’s remarkable interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas’s thought against the background of his own ongoing engagement with Wittgenstein, Austin, and the problem of other minds. This unlikely debate, the only extensive discussion of Levinas by Cavell in his long philosophical career so far, focuses on their different reception of Descartes’s idea of the infinite. The essay proposes to read both thinkers against the background of Wittgenstein’s model of philosophical meditation and raises the question as to whether Cavell and Levinas do not indirectly shed light on the early modern motif of the spiritual automaton.

Keywords Wittgenstein · Cavell · Levinas · Philosophical meditation · Skepticism · Other minds · Spiritual automaton

“skepticism with respect to other minds cannot be skeptical enough” — Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*

In his remarkable interpretations of Wittgenstein and skepticism, Stanley Cavell has investigated the genres of confession and meditation—more precisely, of “philosophical meditation.” He has suggested that, in the historical development of skepticism regarding other human minds, such practices have culminated in a modern understanding of “the problem of the other” as “a replacement of the problem of God”(Cavell, 1979, p. 489). Such “philosophical meditation,” he argues, has moved toward—but is not fully identical with—the function that religion and theology, in their argumentative styles, idiom, imagery, and rhetoric, have historically played and, indeed, continue to play. Cavell takes meditation to express a deeply metaphysical and existential concern that is too often glossed over, forgotten, repressed, or sublimated in the scientific, epistemological, and moral discourses of modernity, although modern artworks and aesthetics are often an exception to this rule. Cavell writes, “the

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subject of self-knowledge, both as a phenomenon and as a source of philosophical knowledge, has been blocked or denied in modern philosophy.” Yet, paradoxically, precisely a conception and practice of self-knowledge as revealed in “meditation” is “necessary to philosophical advance” (p. 146). In this paper I will examine in what sense this is so.

An observation Cavell makes about his own sources of inspiration, first Austin’s lectures at Harvard, then a rereading of Wittgenstein, indicates that “philosophical meditation” is intrinsically related to “confession” (as it is to “prophecy” and “conversion,” though I will leave those aside for now):

the moment I felt that something about ordinary language philosophy was giving me a voice in philosophy, I knew that the something was the idea of a return of voice to philosophy. . . , as if what philosophy meant by logic demanded, in the name of rationality, the repression of voice (hence of confession, hence of autobiography). Thus when in my second paper, the first in response to reading Wittgenstein. . . I identified the *Investigations* as a form and work of confession, I set words out that I am following to this moment¹

In what sense, I would like to ask, does Cavell’s own subsequent work, well beyond its continued glossing of Wittgenstein’s later oeuvre—somewhat surprisingly, he never addresses the earlier or latest writings, such as the *Tractatus* or *Über Gewissheit* (*On Certainty*)—follow the “form and work of confession”? How, exactly, does it relate to the model of “philosophical meditation” that is analyzed and pursued in *The Claim of Reason*?

A further reason for discussing Cavell in these broadly theological—or, as we will see, “spiritual”—terms has to do with his stunningly original interpretation of the skeptical exercise as formulated in Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Indeed, the discussion of “philosophical meditation” in *The Claim of Reason* takes its point of departure less from Augustine’s *Confessions* (as Cavell had in the earlier paper) than from Descartes’s *Meditations*. In Descartes’s argument, rhetoric, and imaginary, he finds a guiding thread to the concerns of “modern” thinking as a whole—including “secularization” and its reflex, “Romanticism.” This is so even—or especially—where modernity’s philosophical project gets bogged down in the minutiae of epistemology. (This, Cavell argues, it does from the start. *Pace* Richard Rorty’s critical appraisal of *The Claim of Reason* in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, the resulting predicament cannot simply be avoided and has literary and artistic, indeed, even visual ramifications.) As a “scene of instruction,” the Cartesian meditations, in their attempt to establish the principles of mathematical physics together with two proofs for the existence of God, have wider—metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic—repercussions as well. A telling example, Cavell suggests, can be found in the “idea of the Infinite” as received—and displaced—in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, from *Totalité et Infini* (*Totality and Infinity*) on (Levinas, 1961, 1969). After introducing Cavell’s early assessment of Wittgenstein’s method, I will discuss “philosophical meditation” in *The Claim of Reason*, then examine how, in a recent essay by Cavell, meditation is put to contrasting and complementary uses in Descartes and Levinas. Interestingly, the historical filiation from Augustine through Descartes to Wittgenstein, Levinas, and Cavell will in consequence shed light on the questions of kinship and community—their non-naturalist “naturalness” and literary fictionality, their tragedy and comedy—as well.

¹ Cavell (1994) is referring to his 1962 essay “The availability of wittgenstein’s later philosophy,” later included in Cavell (2002).

The confessional “style”

In the concluding section of his pivotal “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” Cavell addresses the question of the “literary style” of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Noting that Wittgenstein explicitly says he will not propound theses in this work, Cavell remarks: “he does not report, he does not write up results. Nobody would forge a style so personal who had not wanted and needed to find the right expression for his thought. The German dissertation and the British essay—our most common modern options for writing philosophy—would not work; his is not a system and he is not a spectator” (Cavell, 2002, p. 70). Beyond responding to a “lack of the existing terms of criticism,” Wittgenstein, Cavell suggests, adopts his peculiar “literary style” because it provides him with a “method for self-knowledge” (ibid.) It is this pursuit of “self-knowledge,” this quest for selfhood, that Cavell will bring out so forcefully in *The Claim of Reason*. Indeed, I am convinced that the “form” of Wittgenstein’s “work” allows—and the form of Cavell’s own book enables—Cavell to claim nothing beyond this; no thesis, no system, no report, no result is put forward in either the *Philosophical Investigations* or *The Claim of Reason*. On the contrary, in both works a combination of argumentative rigor and idiosyncratic wit testifies to a confessional genre whose proper features can be appreciated only by those who “are able and willing to meditate seriously” with the author, as Descartes, in his *Meditations*, urges in the Preface to his readers, not in order to “withdraw their mind from the senses and from all preconceived opinions,” but by way of a return to the “ordinary,” the “common,” and the “low,” as Cavell envisions via Emerson and Thoreau.

How are we to understand this “method” or “literary style”? And how will a modern “skeptical recital” of the Cartesian meditation, especially as it involves the question “concerning other minds,” modify its various—and, as we shall learn, often self-contradictory—“claims”?

Cavell characterizes Wittgenstein’s philosophical genre via telling historical parallels: “In its defense of truth against sophistry, philosophy has employed the same literary genres as theology in its defense of the faith: against intellectual competition, Dogmatics; against Dogmatics, the Confession; in both, the Dialogue. Inaccessible to the dogmatics of philosophical criticism, Wittgenstein chose confession and recast its dialogue” (Cavell, 2002, pp. 70, 71). In this passage, “dogmatics” refers to the theology of Adolph von Harnack, as well as to Karl Barth’s revolt against the culture of Protestantism for which it stands. “Confession,” of course, alludes to Augustine, whose scene of the instruction in language is invoked and criticized starting with the very first paragraph of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The “dialogue” Cavell invokes is that between “the voice of temptation” and “the voice of correctness,” which alternate and are the real “antagonists” throughout Wittgenstein’s “philosophical album” (to cite the designation Wittgenstein himself uses in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*) (Cavell, 2002, p. 71).

More important here than the question of style per se (and its fascination) is the fact that confession expresses—or, rather, elicits—a “method of self-knowledge” whose aims are neither those of science or epistemic certainty, nor those of morality, religion, art, or aesthetic pleasure: “In confession you do not explain or justify, but describe how it is with you. And confession, unlike dogma, is not to be believed but tested, and accepted or rejected. Nor is it the occasion for accusation, except of yourself, and by implication those who find themselves in you” (Cavell, 2002, p. 71).

In this sense, Cavell concludes, Wittgenstein's writing is also "deeply practical and negative, the way Freud's is"; its critical mode prepares a way of life, not a better theory of it. Cavell continues:

And like Freud's therapy, it wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change. Both of them are intent upon unmasking the defeat of our real need in the face of self-impositions which we have not assessed. . . . or fantasies ("pictures") which we cannot escape. . . . In both, such misfortune is betrayed in the incongruence between what is said and what is meant or expressed; for both, the self is concealed in assertion and action and revealed in temptation and wish (Cavell, 2002, p. 72)².

These remarks are reminiscent of the tradition of spiritual exercises outlined by Pierre Hadot, whose early essays on Wittgenstein as a "philosopher of language," published in *Critique* in 1960, introduced this thinker to the French reading public (as, some thirty years earlier, Levinas had introduced Husserl and Heidegger). This notion of spiritual exercises seems to have become a whole new venue of research (not least in Hadot's own subsequent work), one anticipated but not exhausted by Michel Foucault's work on the motif of the "care of the self," starting from its ancient Greek and Hellenistic sources. Hadot, in interviews with Arnold Davidson published as *La philosophie comme manière de vivre*, has insisted on the importance of Wittgenstein's "vision of language" (cf. pp. 168ff.) for the elaboration of his own conception of philosophy as a "way of life," an exercise, rather than as a theory, a contemplation, a praxis, or even an aesthetics. The writings that make up the tradition of spiritual exercises, to the extent that they have not been subject to a philological violence that erases the *lectio difficilior*, glossing over the "apparent incoherence of the philosophical authors of Antiquity," consist in meditations in which self-transformation—indeed, conversion—is the implied, if not always professed, aim (Hadot, 2004, p. 11). Wittgenstein's notion of "language games," Hadot says, enables him to articulate in what sense

the principal occupation of these authors was not to inform their readers about an ordered grouping [*agencement*] of concepts, but to form [*former*] them. . . . One must therefore resituate the philosophical discourses, with their language games, within the form of life that they engendered, that is to say, within a concrete personal or social situation, within the *praxis* that conditioned them or in light of the effect that they sought to produce. To this end, I began talking of "spiritual exercise," an expression that was perhaps unfortunate, but which enabled me to designate an activity, almost always of a discursive nature, whether rational or imaginative, aimed at modifying, in oneself or others, a way of living and of viewing the world (Hadot, 2004).

Hadot's central insight brings out a surprising trait in Cavell, who, like Wittgenstein, understands philosophy to be "the criticism a culture produces of itself," a "self-scrutiny" that is "not moralistic" but, in an altogether novel sense, made "methodical" (pp. 175–176).

It is not difficult to see an at once historical and systematic link between the tradition that defines "philosophy as a way of life" and everything Cavell has to say about "moral perfectionism." I am thinking not so much of Hadot's comments on Thoreau (at a conference at the École Normale Supérieure devoted to Cavell) as of the ways

² Cavell (2002) refers to paragraphs 108 and 115 of the *Investigations*.

in which the traditional concept of the examined life undergoes a radical rethinking in Cavell's relentless interrogation of "the philosopher's [not, as Bunyan would have said, the pilgrim's] progress" (p. 136). If philosophy's "arrogation of voice" cannot be identified with those of science, literature, or psychoanalysis, then, Cavell writes, an "ancient answer" to why this is so is that "philosophy begins with, say, in the Socratic ambition, and may at any time encounter, an aspiration toward the therapeutic, a sense of itself as guiding the soul, or self, from self-imprisonment toward the light or the instinct of freedom" (Cavell, 1994, p. 4).

Here I do not have time to explore moral perfectionism in its proper Cavellian context, that is to say, in its dependence on the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, its debate with John Rawls, and its reinterpretation of contractual theories of natural right. Instead, I will read Cavell's many literal references to philosophy as a "way of life," in *The Claim of Reason* and elsewhere, against the backdrop of Hadot's central idea, as well as in light of Cavell's episodic references to "religion" and the ways the theological and existential problem of God finds an echo, translation, and continuation in the question of non-epistemic certainty concerning the other or, as Cavell says with Austin, the "other mind" (of which, as in Levinas, there is always more than one, if only because in the face of the one other—my neighbor, the stranger—virtually all other others call out for my responsibility, as well). I am thinking less of Cavell's stunning modification of Wittgenstein's phrase "The body is the best picture of the human soul" into the "crucified body is our best picture of the unacknowledged human soul" (which, we should add, remains a picture nonetheless, and nothing more; p. 430) than of the fact that the whole discussion of skepticism with respect to other minds, as differentiated from skepticism concerning material objects in the external world, hinges on the possibility—perhaps the necessity—of allowing oneself *virtually or potentially* to view "[a]nother's mind as God" (p. 97). By slightly extending Cavell's argumentation, one could demonstrate that this figure regulates the relationship between the self and *all other others*, whether animate or inanimate, natural or artificial, human or not—that is to say, "the difference between human beings and non-human beings or human non-beings" (p. 417), or "the difference between things and beings," which, Cavell adds parenthetically, is "*the* difference" (p. 468). But is it?

All along, I will argue that Cavell's work, instead of being a reflection upon our humanity and finitude (as most interpreters, and often Cavell himself, have claimed), charts the grounds of a certain *in-* or *an*humanity, as well as *infinity*, in a far more challenging way. In this, Cavell proves to be a truly Levinasian thinker, albeit it with certain reservations (ones that are entirely legitimate, not so much in terms of Levinas's own philosophy, but insofar as they result from an immanent critique of its presuppositions, as I have argued elsewhere (de Vries, 2005).

How, then, would invoking the other mind—or, more broadly, *any* other (whether mind, body, physical object, or material sign)—as "God" convey and acknowledge this other mind's (or, for that matter, any other's) significance? Moreover, is my relationship to my own self any different from the fundamental difference that the reference to God—as in reading "another's mind as God"—suggests? If "knowing oneself," Cavell writes, means acquiring "the ability to make oneself an other to oneself, to learn of oneself something one did not *already* know... [a] sensible axiom of the knowledge of other persons would be this: that one can see others only to the extent that one can take oneself as an other" (p. 459). Would this not mean: as other as God, as just and yet another "God," or replacement and (to cite Derrida's technical term)

nonsynonymous substitution for what was once and still must be considered to be the one and only God?

Such an organizing idea of God, whether heuristic or merely strategically employed, functions in various ways. One, as indicated, is the skepticism concerning other minds. If “another’s mind” absolves itself, like God—but thus is also authoritative, strangely present, all too present, virtually omnipresent—then we are confronted with what Cavell calls the “worry, if it is a real one, that there may at any human place be things that one cannot tell from human beings” (p. 416). We might be dealing, in fact, with, well, God: with angels, animals, puppets, golems, zombies, mutants, androids, replicants, cyborgs, automata, machines—in short, with an uncertainty that is only human and to which the denial of humanity (calling such worries and doubts, say, “unnatural”) would be a human, an all too human, response. One feels, Cavell writes, that “One who knows better than I would have to be free of human nature. God, for example” (ibid.). Here, the *sub specie aeterni* would be the negative (or, if you like, positive) foil against which human finitude assumes its specific profile, its perils and chances. But then, since we humans tend to make a leap of faith all the time anyway, relying on an altogether different type of “knowledge”—namely, acknowledgment—which leaves the ultimate non-availability of others intact even as it calls out and affirms their presence, we adopt a godlike perspective *sub specie aeterni* wherever we choose not to fall into the skeptical trap.

This brings me to a different use of the idea of God, according to Cavell—this time, as it were, an immanent rather than a transcendent one. That is “transcendental logic” as a condition intrinsic to finite human experience as such. We find an example of this, Cavell writes, in Kant’s critiques, which strive “to show the possibility of knowledge, i.e., to show that knowledge is limited not in the sense that there are *things* beyond its reach but that there are human capacities and responsibilities and desires which reveal the world but which are not exhausted in the capacity of knowing things. This is something his Idea of God is meant to show: that I have, and must have if I am a rational creature, a relation to reality which is not that of knowing” (p. 54).

Yet another way of naming God is as a reference (albeit it one among several) to all those instances that no longer or, perhaps, do not yet fit our modes of inhabiting our world, “like the way God or love or responsibility or beauty do not exist in our world; we have not mastered, or we have forgotten, or we have distorted, or learned through fragmented models, the forms of life which could make utterances like ‘God exists’ or ‘God is dead’ or ‘I love you’ or ‘I cannot do otherwise’ or ‘Beauty is but the beginning of terror’ bear all the weight they could carry, express all they could take from us” (pp. 172–173). Here God is but a functional equivalent and—as, again, Derrida would say—a “non-synonymous substitution” for love, beauty, existential resoluteness, and the like, perhaps the example par excellence, but an example nonetheless, which is to say, both less and more than the transcendental condition of exemplarity as such.

In this motif, Cavell suggests that we *must* and *ought to* avoid the practical assumption, let alone the theoretical postulation, of an in principle available, expressive, or intact someone (or something?) for which “the other”—ultimately (or is it provisionally?) figured and, as Wittgenstein would say, pictured by “God”—could stand when called upon by me, or when calling upon me and for my responsiveness alone. Paradoxically, like God—and this must mean *as* God, *just* as God (is)—I am a *hapax legomenon*, appearing *as I now am* only once in the texture of worldly events, the exemplary, indeed, sole “example” of my “kind.” Theoretical knowledge, moral perfection, and aesthetic judgment all require that the other—that is, whatever is external

to the orbit of our phenomenal horizon (first material objects and then other minds, or is it the other way around? Can these truly be distinguished, as Cavell also claims?)—remain separate, in need of my “call” or “acknowledgment.” The world is not so much “my representation” (as Schopenhauer famously states, in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* [*The World as Will and Representation*]) as it is, literally and figuratively, “my call.” In other words: “The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged” (Cavell, 2002, p. 234). Other minds are not so much known by me—through, say, analogical appresentation, as Husserl claims in the fifth of his *Cartesianische Meditationen* (*Cartesian Meditations*)—as “called upon,” and above all welcomed and/or denied in their calling upon me. This possible welcoming, or “annihilation,” as Levinas terms it, transforms the “I,” as Cavell says, into the very “scandal” around which skepticism, at least in its modern variety, revolves. Yet, as Cavell puts it, in a phrase that could have been written by Levinas: “my power comes to an end in the face of the other’s separateness from me” (p. 122). Does this mean that skepticism comes to an end here, too? Or is one, with respect to other minds never skeptical enough? (As Cavell says, “skepticism with respect to other minds cannot be skeptical enough”; p. 426.)

For one thing—and here a further, now negative, characterization of the term or name *God* comes into play—skepticism can also be seen as the vain attempt to adopt a God’s eye point of view, a “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1989). Seen from this vantage point, the skeptic fails to make explicit the position or situatedness from which he speaks. When we adopt the skeptic’s perspective, we pretend to assume an impersonal stance, one that cannot be claimed by (finite) humans: “It is as though we try to get the world to provide answers in a way which is independent of our responsibility for *claiming* something to be so (to get God to tell us what we must do in a way which is independent of our responsibility for choice); and we fix the world so that it can do this” (p. 216). Does an appeal to our “acceptance” of the world and “acknowledgment” of other minds—making them both our call and our calling—enable us to escape the skeptical stance, with its idolatrous usurpation of (rather than non-synonymous substitution for) God’s place? Not quite. As Espen Hammer points out, in Cavell’s view, paradoxically, the shortest (or, indeed, any) way out of skepticism leads straight (back) into it: “What the skeptic seeks is a relation to the world in 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” (Hammer, 2002, p. 57). This indeed makes unavoidable the God’s eye point of view, or at least the risk of an idolatrous usurpation of God’s place. Even the least assuming call–acceptance or acknowledgment, avoiding the skeptical stance—is a leap of faith, which in its very claim and proclamation risks the worst. Hence its horror.

Philosophical meditation

The mental, indeed, spiritual exercise of philosophical meditation, which Cavell analyzes in depth in *The Claim of Reason*, follows a procedure that, as in Wittgenstein, results not in formulating theses but in making—and acknowledging—different sorts of claims. Cavell makes two related observations.

First, he emphasizes that the traditional philosopher, who generalizes a particular doubt concerning a particular (more precisely, “generic”) object into a totalizing claim

that the world as such is not accessible to certain knowledge without further support—for example, from the divine—faces a peculiar “dilemma”: “he ‘must,’ and ‘cannot,’ mean what he says” (p. 225); he expresses a view that is “at once inevitable for the human being and a denial of the human” (p. xxi). Indeed, skepticism’s “work” consists in “removing our access to context, to the before and the after, the ins and outs, of an expression” (Cavell, 1994, p. 112). This “erasure of context in philosophy” (ibid.), while existentially induced and amplified in “meditation,” is methodologically—and, inevitably, theoretically—exaggerated by the “skeptical recital,” especially in its Cartesian orientation.

The traditional epistemologist, of whom Descartes in the *Meditations* is at once the principal representative and the nemesis, evokes, dramatizes, and on the whole mistakes for a theoretical position the uncanny “experience” of “seeing ourselves as outside the world as a whole,” of “looking at the world as one object (‘outside of us’)” (pp. 236–238). The “experience” that the traditional skeptic—along with all those who seek to refute him—tends to misdiagnose as a theoretical claim (i.e., a hypothesis or thesis) expresses the “feeling” of being “sealed off from objects, enclosed within my own experience” or, in the “comparable” experience of “persons,” of “feeling them to be closed off from me (within, as it were, *their* own experience)” (p. 161).

We don’t know, Cavell writes, nor do we need to know whether the experience of the world “dropping out” from under us—or of us dropping out of the world we thought (or didn’t know) we shared with others (by going mad, being driven into exile, choosing rebellion)—is the end result, the theoretical conclusion or “moral,” of the skeptical investigation, or whether this feeling of the world’s (or lifeworld’s) “distance” or “inaccessibility” might not be, on the contrary, the skeptical operation’s very beginning, its “initiation” (p. 145). It would need “further work,” Cavell writes, to determine what to make of this “circling of the experience,” which suggests that “phenomenologically the form of the skeptical investigation is, after the fact, that of having confirmed our worst fear for knowledge” (ibid.). But the non-knowledge this fear expresses, Cavell insists, may not be the worst thing at all: “Then the question of skepticism (or of its possibility) becomes. . . : what makes just this particular fear possible?” (ibid.) It may well result from unreasonable expectations concerning the very nature and range of epistemic claims as such. But what, exactly, could put those expectations—or those claims—into doubt? And what, if only momentarily, can put to rest this doubt—with its characteristic unrest and “horror” (pp. 418–419), expressed nowhere more tangibly than in the “necessary reflexiveness of spiritual torture” (p. 493) that we find in tragedy? There is no simple answer to this question, nor does there need to be one.

The central question discussed by Cavell in his treatment of the Cartesian mental experiment is simply this: “How does the philosopher’s meditation begin; what prompts it?” (p. 136). In other words, how should we understand the “initiating experience, the fearful surmise, the wonder” (p. 161) that brings it about in singular ways? The skeptic, Cavell writes, “possesses a conceptual scheme (i.e., our conceptual scheme—what other is lived?), but in the resolve and the intensity of his meditation he discovers that he must relinquish, with moans of delirious terror, the basis of its employment” (p. 47). Or again: “The skeptic insinuates that there are possibilities to which the claim of certainty shuts its eyes; or: whose eyes the claim of certainty shuts. It is the voice, or an intimation of the voice, of intellectual conscience” (p. 431).

This brings me to my second claim, namely, that “the sense which makes confessions possible” (p. 109) can only be made in a confessional mode, in a confessional

style—that is to say, not in a “declamatory” but in a “proclamatory” way. Meditations—such as “expecting the Kingdom of God” or “beatitude” and its contraries “corruption (or envy? sloth? charity?)”—represent or, rather, express “states of the soul” (p. 98), albeit a “soul muddled” (p. 180). In consequence, like the ways in which ordinary language philosophers remind us of “*statements of initiation*,” philosophical meditations “cannot be countered by evidence because they are not supported by evidence” (p. 179). In them, the traditional epistemologist (i.e., the skeptic as well as his foundationalist or modestly realist critic), like the ordinary language philosopher, “is not claiming something as true of the world, for which he is prepared to offer a basis—such statements are not synthetic; he is claiming something as true of himself (of his ‘world’ . . .) for which he is offering himself, the details of his feeling and conduct, as authority” (p. 179). Again, this is not to claim that skeptical investigation or meditative proclamation are immune to defeat or that they do not defeat themselves, like performative contradictions, which, as modern reason knows—and as Husserl states in so many words in *Logische Untersuchungen (Logical Investigations)*—demonstrate *in actu* what they deny *in thesi*. On the contrary, the possibility of failure necessarily inheres in them. But the response to this predicament will just be a further proclamation. In Cavell’s words: “We may, of course, be wrong about what we say and do or will say and do. But that failure is not one which can be corrected with a more favorable position of observation or a full mastery in the recognition of objects; it requires a new look at oneself and a fuller realization of what one is doing or feeling” (p. 179). Hence, the internal dynamic of the skeptic’s operation, and thus of all philosophical meditation, in the end also resembles the one traditionally and paradoxically described as religious belief, that is to say, as “faith (which may begin by seeing something that will knock you off a horse, and in which the goal and the position coincide)” (p. 98). Descartes’s meditation, rather than propounding theoretical propositions—or theses—*claims* a different thought, acknowledges existence. In proving the existence of God, he approves existence *tout court*, his own to begin with. There is a pressing need to do so, given that it is the sole thing that is not in doubt. Cavell asks:

Has such a one never felt his or her existence slighted, presented to blindness; never felt like insisting upon it, declaring it? Descartes’s insistence on it, I mean his proof of it, just depends on declaring it; anyway asserting it, anyway silently. It would truly have been ludicrous of him to have tried giving it out as a piece of information!

My thought here is this: When Wittgenstein presents himself to us as denying or slighting our existence, our inner life, we may be prompted to respond to this apparent denial with a parabolic gesture of insistence upon our existence. The parable is to teach not just the fact of my existence, but the fact that to possess it I must declare it, as if taking it upon myself. Before this, there are no others for me. (p. 462).

But at this point a Levinasian—and alternatively Cartesian—objection emerges: Would the reverse not be true as well? Is the very possibility of (and need for) acknowledgment not precisely opened up and provoked by the existence of an other, of virtually or potentially *all* others (whether human or not, one would have to add, making one further inference that neither Levinas, Descartes, nor Cavell seems willing to face, even though their writings, when pushed to their logical extreme, allow no other option).

Cavell between Descartes and Levinas

In a recent engagement with Levinas, Cavell limits himself to Levinas's reception, in *Totality and Infinity* and "God and Philosophy" (Levinas, 1986, 1998) of the Cartesian motif of the idea of the Infinite. *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas's "essay on exteriority" is the first systematic treatment of his ethical-metaphysical philosophy of the other—of the other human, not as an "other mind" but as a "neighbor." Taking a somewhat arbitrary cue from Wittgenstein's observation, in *Philosophical Investigations* (para 286), that in responding to someone who feels pain in his hand "one does not comfort the hand, but the sufferer: one looks into his face," Cavell picks up on Levinas and on Levinas's central argument, a reinterpretation of Descartes's Third Meditation. He disagrees with it in ways that invite revision in the light of Levinas's later, more direct and consistent treatment of the perennial problem of "skepticism and reason," in a chapter of that name in *Autrement qu'être (Otherwise than Being)*, which Cavell chooses to ignore. In fact, the argument of *Otherwise than Being*, whose subtitle adds a distinctive—un-Cavellian—direction *beyond Essence* (Levinas, 1974), is the foil against which a full comparison between Cavell and Levinas should be undertaken. I will not attempt this here, but will only spell out some preliminary considerations in such a virtual dialogue.

In "What is the Scandal of Scepticism? Moments in Schopenhauer and Levinas," first presented as a lecture in Amsterdam in 2000³, Cavell turns to Levinas's views on the metaphysical—rather than merely axiological, let alone empirical—primacy of the Other (*l'autre, l'Autrui, autrui, Autrui*, both capitalized and in lower case) and its apparent confirmation in Descartes's invocation of the "otherwise inexplicable presence in him of the idea of an infinite being" (PDT 144). Descartes's Third Meditation is important, Levinas stresses, not because "the proofs of God's existence" matter, but because this thought that thus thinks more than it could have produced signals an asymmetry testifying to "the breakup of consciousness," a "devastation of thought," a "trauma of awakening"—in other words, "the monstrosity of the Infinite put in me" (Levinas, 1998, pp. 64–66, English, trans. modified/106–110 French), which reveals the formal structure—more precisely, the very de-structuring—of my relationship to a finite human being whose claims come to me from an exterior dimension of height. Furthermore, in the "face" of this singular other we face all finite others; which is another way of saying that in the face of this other—and all other, finite others—the infinite Other leaves its trace.

Cavell is torn between fascination and hesitation in response to this seemingly similar invocation of Descartes's meditation on the motif of the idea of God as a trope

³ The pairing of Levinas with Schopenhauer (whose statement "The World is my representation" is cited centrally in both p. 185 and 1994) might at first seem surprising. Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will and its correlative escape route in an ethics of resignation and compassion is arguably at the furthest remove from the metaphysics of evasion, of infinitizing desire, and the otherwise than Being toward which Levinas moves with increasing radicality. Yet similarly, in Cavell's genealogy of what he terms "this new yet unapproachable America" (Cavell, 1989), and elsewhere the route from Emersonian transcendentalism and moral perfectionism runs through—or, more specifically, up to—the Nietzschean affirmation of a certain "will," not to its Schopenhauerian denial and its corollary, metaphysical pessimism. For an interpretation of Schopenhauer's views on these matters, see my "Zum Begriff der Allegorie in Schopenhauers Religionsphilosophie" (de Vries, 1991). On Cavell's *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, see my "Stanley Cavell: Filosoof van het gewone," the introduction to its Dutch translation (de Vries, 1998). Quotes from this lecture will be cited from its publication as Cavell (2005) and will be given in the text with the abbreviation PDT.

for the (modern) problem of the other, of other minds. Mindful of his own earlier reference, in *The Claim of Reason*, to the “other mind” as “a replacement of God,” he writes:

I evidently had there derived something like an opposite conclusion, or moral, from the passage in Descartes, in connection with the finite other, from the conclusion or moral that Levinas draws.

Where Levinas finds in Descartes’s proof the opening to the finite other, I have been struck by the fact that these others—the existence of what Descartes there calls “men similar to myself”—are in that passage not revealed but instead passed by. Descartes specifically claims that, unlike the case of God, where the idea of such a being is beyond the power of a finite creature to create, the idea of a finite other creature is, by contrast, fully within the compass of such a creature’s power to create. But I have expressed my lack of conviction in this casual claim, since given Descartes’s view of the essential separation of body and mind, however intimate the relation between them which he knows from his own case, what, given his demand for proofs (of his existence, and that of God, and of the external world of things), is his proof that the human bodies he perceives as he perceives other things, are each related with that particular intimacy to a mind, one which he does *not* perceive? The idea of that other (finite) mind is not said by him—it is implicitly denied by him—to be irresistibly forced upon him. Can Levinas be understood to have supplied Descartes with such a proof? (PDT 145)

It should be noted, first, that Cavell’s claim is not fully accurate, since Descartes does in fact claim that we “know” the existence of bodies—in the plural—given that we “know” how either to seek out or to avoid them. But such forms of “knowledge” are not based on clear and distinct ideas, and hence, by Cartesian standards, constitute no knowledge at all. Moreover, such “knowledge” does not convey epistemic certainty—or, for that matter, moral (Kant would say, ethico-theological) or existential “certainty”—concerning the presence of minds inside these sought for or avoided bodies.

Second, it should be stressed that Levinas, while providing a transcendental argument of sorts, does not aim to prove the existence of others—whether bodies or minds or both. The formal structure of the Cartesian idea of the Infinite can only be *attested to*, in ways that are singular and intractable and that require more “proof” as the testimony deepens. The relation to the other—that is to say, to the neighbor, the stranger, the widow, children, proletarians, indeed, all those who in a state of ontologico-empirical deprivation come to me from a metaphysico-religious dimension and teach me what I know not, disturbing and inverting my *conatus essendi*, my very perseverance in Being—adopts an *infinite* mode in which the other absolves itself from the very relation that seeks and desires, or avoids and annihilates, it. Absolving itself, the other becomes ‘itself’ (the) absolute (i.e., Other).

How does Cavell’s modernism, in its thinking of finitude—that is, of the truth and moral of skepticism, especially concerning “other minds”—respond to this infinite gesture and the paradox of its *ever more absolute* Referent and Requisite? The answer is subtle and puzzling. Establishing a further link between the two alternative (or are they complementary?) readings of Descartes’s Meditation and the concluding pages of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell writes:

Levinas's idea is that my openness to the other—to a region “beyond” my narcissism—requires a violence associated with the infinite having been put into me: he speaks of this intervention or aggression in images of trauma, breakup, monstrosity, devastation. This event creates as it were an outside to my existence, hence an isolated, singular inside. Now when I say, in response to Descartes's Third Meditation proof, that in Shakespearean tragedy (immediately in connection with *Othello*) this traumatic effect of the recognition of the existence of God is *replaced* by the idea of a finite other, violence and *some sense of an infinite nevertheless remain*. But in originating now in the face of a finite other, violence and infinitude cannot be thought to arise from a comparison of myself with the other but from a recognition that this particular other, this creature among all the creatures of the earth similar to me, is also, or rather is therefore, *absolutely different*, separate from me, I would say, *wholly other, endlessly other*, the one I single out before whom I am I, *eternally* singled out. It is the unbearable certainty of this separation to which the torture of skepticism over Desdemona's faithfulness is preferable. (PDT 145, my italics)

Let's leave aside that, for Levinas, the “unbearable” separation is not even a “certainty.” Things are, in fact, increasingly worse, as Levinas works out with ever more consistent rigor between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*: the other/Other is more and more seen as an “an-archical” Referent and Requisite and less and less as the $\alpha\rho\chi\eta$ or *primum intelligibile* from which the first book starts out. I will simply note that, for Cavell, Levinas's adoption of the Cartesian idea becomes the foil against which the flight—as well as the “truth” and “moral”—of skepticism gains its specific, uniquely modern profile. In this passage, absolute difference, the separation of “the wholly other, endlessly other” before whom I am “eternally singled out” is, in its structural infinity, nonetheless characterized as finite. The theological or metaphysical idea of the Infinite is “replaced” by a “finite other,” yet “some sense of an infinite nevertheless remains.”

One is reminded of Derrida's dictum “La différence infinie est finie,” a statement that, as his later discussions of negative theology make strikingly clear (Derrida, 1987, 1989), can be seen as in principle reversible. Such reversal might, Derrida points out, be unavoidable, even though it is not thereby necessary. One may not want to choose to describe the analytical distinction of other minds via the idea of the Infinite, as replacements for God, but one cannot prevent this structural analogy and functional equivalent from playing its revelatory, now illuminating, then confusing, historical and systematic role in the life of individuals, communities, kin groups, and so on.

Cavell invokes Levinas for three reasons. First is the fact that Levinas, in the words of *The Claim of Reason*, seeks “to understand how the other now bears the weight of God, shows me that I am not alone in the universe” (p. 470), whereas Descartes seems to pass over finite others—though, as we have seen, not their bodies—in silence. Levinas would thus seem to provide an answer that Cavell, in the early work, finds lacking in the Cartesian *Meditations*. If Descartes's “motive” is “to find what is beyond doubt, viz., to know beyond doubt that he is not alone in the world (third Meditation),” one must ask “why it is Descartes does not try to defeat that possibility of isolation in what would seem. . . the most direct and the surest way, by locating the existence of one other finite being” (p. 482). This avenue might seem especially promising under the (modern? secular?) conditions in which, Cavell confesses in his autobiographical exercise, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, “for the likes of me, certainty in relation to the presence

of the idea of God—Descartes’s solution—was not an option of seriousness” (Cavell, 1994, 115, cf. pp. 451, 482).

Where “seriousness” is *de rigueur* (but is it an option?), where matters of philosophical meditation, notably the question of other minds, are at issue, religion, like magic, superstition, mythology, mysticism, and so on must be kept at bay. But is this connection so obvious? How does “seriousness,” in Cavell’s sense, relate to “certainty” in Descartes—or, say, *Gewissheit* in Heidegger and Wittgenstein? Indeed, does “seriousness” exhaust the meaning of answerability, that is, responsibility, to the world and to others?

The second reason for addressing Levinas’s work in a retrospective assessment of *The Claim of Reason* has to do with a certain assessment of “passivity” (Cavell, 2001). As Cavell phrases it in his recent *Cities of Words*, what he has said, in *The Claim of Reason* and elsewhere, about

skepticism with respect to the other can be related to Levinas’s claims for the other. Levinas requires our recognition of the other to be taken in passiveness, a way of saying that we are subject to the other and, contrariwise, that the other is presented to us in an accusatory mode, as if reflecting our inability to recognize him or her. As if the alternative to passiveness—receptiveness—is rejection, which I take as a certain kind of confirmation of the intuition I have expressed in saying that skepticism with respect to the other, the failure of a proof of the existence of the other, is not a discovery but an annihilation (Cavell, 2004).

This is another way of saying, as Cavell does in his lecture on Levinas, that modern skepticism concerning “another’s mind” is “not a generalized *intellectual* lack, but a stance I take in the face of the other’s opacity and the demand the other’s expression places upon me; I call skepticism my denial and annihilation of the other” (PDT 150). This negation is of the other’s “soul,” but it is “spiritual” precisely in that it is, paradoxically, “epitomized into what happens to the other’s body” (PDT 150).

Again, the recognition of “men similar to myself,” to cite Descartes’s phrase, is not based upon some analogical appresentation of *alter egos* but upon the “idea of another body as having a unique relation to its mind in that special-substantial way that [Descartes] asserts is not like the way a ship is related to its pilot” (p. 482). And yet Descartes “must be far surer that other human bodies go with minds than any sureness he can extract by inferring from another body’s behavior alone. After all, the body has essentially nothing to do with the soul!” (p. 482). To escape this predicament of being merely a “ghost in the machine”—as Gilbert Ryle famously quibbed in *The Concept of Mind*—and hence of reducing the soul to a mirroring or “spectral machine,” Descartes must rely on “his sense of himself as composed of his contrary natures (of what he means by mind and body, the one characterized in opposition to the other, each essentially what the other is not” (p. 482). This conception of a “double nature” is the very idea of “incarnation, the mysterious meeting of heaven and earth,” which is now seen not only as occurring—again, as a *hapax legomenon*—in the “figure of Christ” but, in a parallel way, “in each individual human being” (p. 483). From this, Cavell says, we “may conclude that the human problem in recognizing other human beings is the problem of recognizing another to be Christ to oneself” (an insight, he adds, that casts new light on the strange “charge,” made first by Pascal—and, incidentally, repudiated by Levinas—that Descartes “proves the existence at best of a philosopher’s God”; p. 483).

Here, however, Cavell begins to hesitate. His third reason for engaging Levinas is to mark a certain limit—or should we say finitude?—in the passivity thus evoked. In the Amsterdam lecture Cavell professes an “uncertainty” as to whether there is not just as much (or more) reason to speak of “infinite responsibility for myself, together, let us say, with finite responsibility for the claims of the existence of the other upon me, claims perhaps of gratitude or sympathy or protection or duty or debt or love” (PDT 144). True enough, he continues: “In an extreme situation I may put the other’s life (not just her or his wishes or needs) ahead of mine, answerable to or for them without limit. But why is the existence of a finite other not sufficient to create the reality of such claims upon me?” (PDT 144). Levinas’s answer would, of course, have been not only that these claims are restricted and hence betrayed when we attempt to govern and respond to them according to given criteria, rules, principles, maxims, or norms but, further, that no standard whatsoever could measure them or their fulfillment.

Cavell recasts the Levinasian asymmetry between self and other. Responding to Levinas’s evocation of the “face” and “face-to-face” as at once the “temptation to murder” and its absolute prohibition, Cavell writes:

If I sought a solution to the skeptical problem of the acknowledgment of the other, in the form, say, of an answer to the question “How can I trust the basis upon which I grant the existence of the other?” I feel I could not do better than to respond “You shall not kill.” But in the everyday ways in which denial occurs in my life with the other—in a momentary irritation, or a recurrent grudge, in an unexpected rush of resentment, in a hard glance, in a dishonest attestation, in the telling of a tale, in the believing of a tale, in a false silence, in a fear of engulfment, in a fantasy of solitude or of self-destruction—the problem is to *recognize* myself as denying another, to understand that I carry chaos in myself. Here is the scandal of skepticism with respect to the existence of others; I am the scandal. (PDT 151)

We are reminded of a crucial passage in *The Claim of Reason* where Cavell claims that an inescapable conclusion imposes itself in the final analysis of the problem of criteria—of calling a thing by its name, and attributing humanity and soul to sentient beings who, for all we know, might be organic machines, “hats and coats which could conceal automatons,” as Descartes muses at the end of the Second Meditation. Descartes continues, “I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind” (Descartes, 1996, p. 21). In a different tonality, Cavell likewise claims that, ultimately, “I am the philosophical problem. I am. It is in me that the circuit of communication is cut; I am the stone on which the wheel breaks” (p. 83). The skeptics’ philosophical “erasure” of our “access to context,” Cavell observes, “may be seen as part of philosophy’s denial of my powerlessness (over the world, over others, over myself, over language) by demanding that all power seem to originate with me, in isolation. And contrariwise, it may be seen as philosophy’s denial of my power (such as it may be) by sublimizing the power of the world, or say nature” (Cavell, 1994, p. 113). My suspicion concerning belief in the world might well be a refusal to accept its mighty and inescapable presence, a flight for lack of a place *in*—and hence *for*—the world.

Of course, Cavell acknowledges, regardless of the prevalence of the “I,” of my call, my judgment, one could still describe the very “miracle of moving out of oneself” as requiring—or revealing—the idea of God, as Levinas, following Descartes, suggests.

In other words, the very “investment of a certain kind in a particular finite other, one in which you suffer the other’s separation, perhaps by allowing that the other knows who you are, perhaps by forgiving her or him for not knowing,” might thus still be called “equivalent to the idea of God” (PDT 151). But to say so, Cavell confesses, would “require philosophical and religious responsibilities I do not know are mine” (PDT 151).

It thus remains remarkable that philosophical and religious orientations “so apparently different” as Cavell’s own and those of Descartes and Levinas have nonetheless “led to phenomenological coincidences so precise” (PDT 152). This, I think, is another way of saying that they testify to a philosophical meditation—indeed, a spiritual exercise—that cuts across historical schools of thought and demonstrates that the problem of human finitude (the problem of other minds and other bodies “as God” and as “incarnated” as, so to speak, spiritual machines, spiritual automates) eludes the “descriptive fallacies” that enclose us within the skeptical circle, just as it yields the need for an in principle infinite, indeed infinitizing, response, which reiterated confession and conversion alone can offer the other—which is also to say, the self. In this precise sense—and not just with reference to the world, in his reception of Emerson and Thoreau—Cavell’s thinking is “a philosophy of... the human as stranger, and so take[s] on an interest in strangeness, beginning no doubt with the strangeness of oneself”⁴.

But then Cavell is, as he says, merely “experimenting, in responding to a sense of investment in, or by, another, with the idea of replacing God by a human other” (PDT 146). While he shares Levinas’s view that Descartes’s attempted theoretical proof of God’s existence “does not now (for me? in our age?) appear to be a credible intellectual option” (ibid.), in *The Claim of Reason* he nonetheless takes what Descartes calls the “whole force” (p. 483) of such ontological proof in what seems, at least at first glance, a different direction. In retrospect, enriched by his confrontation with Levinas’s alternative reading, Cavell extrapolates from Descartes’s claim “that I recognize that it would not be possible for my nature to be what it is, possessing the idea of God, unless God really existed” to think “comparably” of “Othello in relation to his idea of his bride, of Macbeth in relation to his idea of his wife, of Hamlet in relation to his idea of his mother, of Leontes in relation to his idea of his newborn daughter” (PDT 146). At stake in the “proof” of the other’s existence (whether that of God or another human being)—especially in the Shakespearean cases, where an “extravagant intimacy” is at issue—is “a problem not of establishing connection with the other, but of achieving, or suffering, separation from the other, individuation with respect to the one upon whom my nature is staked” (PDT 146). What Levinas calls passivity—more precisely, says Cavell, “passiveness beyond passiveness”—is thus a “mourning for the loss of a fantasied union,” which, paradoxically (“Perhaps,” Cavell says, unwittingly echoing the *peut-être* that punctuates Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being*), marks “the moment of being known, exposed” (PDT 146). Shakespeare’s tragic heroes thus constitute what, in the epistemological idiom of Parts I and II of *The Claim of Reason*, whose model Cavell follows in his inquiry into other minds in Part IV, is called a “best case” of knowledge, here a “best case of acknowledgment” (PDT 146): “This case is the finite figure who for me represents otherness as such, the existence of mind or spirit altogether, shattering as it were what appears as a prior, say original, narcissism”

⁴ Cavell (1994) on the motif of “the stranger,” see p. 427.

(PDT 146). This immediately raises a further question: Could God, being the Infinite, the infinite Other, ever represent such a “case”? Cavell seems to think this is not so:

(God, the infinite as other, distinctly does not function as representative. What is more, it is not clear that God so much as constitutes company for the finite, namely proving to it that it is not alone in the world, which Descartes declares as the stake of his proof. In *Genesis*, God creates an helpmeet for Adam because “it is not good that the man should be alone,” evidently not thinking of the Godhead as a candidate for this role. (PDT 147)

But was God not invoked to figure the other—“another’s mind”—as infinite? And does thinking “the infinite as other” not come down to the same?

The force of Descartes’s argument, in Cavell’s earlier reading, is not that “I could not have produced the idea I have of God, for it can have come from nothing less than God himself” (p. 483). Its “necessity” lies elsewhere, namely, in the insight that “without the presence of this idea in myself, and (hence) the presence of the fact of which it is the imprint, my own nature would necessarily not be what it is” (p. 483). Descartes’s meditations are thus “about the finding of self-knowledge after all; of the knowledge of a human self by a human self” (p. 483). They circle around the fact that “the integrity of my (human, finite) existence may depend on the fact and on the idea of another being’s existence, and on the possibility of *proving* that existence; an existence conceived from my very dependence and incompleteness, hence conceived as perfect, and conceived as producing me “in some sense, in [its] own image” (p. 483). The shift from actively producing a theoretical argument for our knowledge of the other’s (or Other’s) existence to the more passive sense of being produced—or known—by the other adds an important element to the analysis. Again, the parallelism with the finite and infinite o/Other is not farfetched. Indeed, Cavell asks:

Where is the logical gain in moving from the question whether I know another to the question whether I am known by or to another?—If there is no logical loss, then the gain of the question would lie in its posing more accurately what it is we really want to know of others. And it would account for the intermittent emptiness in attempts to prove, or disprove, our knowledge of the existence of others. Proofs for God’s existence, and criticisms of these proofs, are apt to be empty intermittently for people whose conviction is that they are known by God, or to God, or not. (p. 443).

But the same must hold for “proofs” of the existence of human others—or other minds. We are just as apt to take such proofs to be “empty” when we are acknowledged by others—or acknowledge them—or not. The mode of theoretical inquiry and the appeal to its criteria (or, perhaps, to criteria *tout court*) is of no avail where others—human or divine—are concerned. That calls for an altogether different style, one that is prophetic, confessional, meditative, and, indeed, spiritual. This is not an irrational operation but, if anything, the very claim—and repeated reclaiming—of reason: “acknowledgment ‘goes beyond’ knowledge, not in order, or as a feat, of cognition, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in the light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, hence perhaps without possession” (p. 428). Such expressions of knowledge retain the affirmation of something negative—some constitutive lack—as well: “acknowledgment of another calls for recognition of the other’s specific

relation to oneself, and... this entails the revelation of oneself as having denied or distorted that relation” (ibid.). One can—one must—always have taken the other for a possible other, whether human or not, *principally*, if not *practically*, ignoring the difference—“*the difference*”—between the two. Indeed, Cavell writes, the other “can present me with no mark or feature on the basis of which I can *settle* my attitude. I have to acknowledge humanity in the other, and the basis of it seems to lie in me” (p. 433)⁵. By the same token, “no one can settle a moral conflict in the way umpires settle conflicts”: this, Cavell writes, “is essential to the form of life we call morality” (p. 296).

In consequence, there is a parallel between Descartes’s conception of the “will” and Cavell’s understanding of judgment and proclamation, both of which effectively make the world and things “my call,” just as acknowledgment expresses my responsiveness to the call placed upon me by (all?) others. Furthermore, though it is hard to ignore the resemblance between Descartes’s concern with “indifference” and Cavell’s notion of “avoidance,” there is no doubt that, for the latter, it is no longer in every respect “clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will” (Descartes, 1996, p. 40). My response to my being the scandal cannot be one of argument—or even reason—alone.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, three reservations might seem to counter my sketch of Cavell’s—and perhaps Wittgenstein’s—adoption of the meditative model and its intrinsic relation to the legacy of confession, conversion, prophecy, spiritual exercise, and, indeed, kinship.

First, is *skepticism*, in all its historical, philosophical, and literary variety, the most adequate expression, indication, name, or term for identifying the standing threat of doubt concerning the world of external objects and separate others, whose “truth” and “moral” Cavell brings out so forcefully in his reading of Wittgenstein, Descartes, and Levinas? Are we dealing here with a tragic possibility or even fatality inherent in human existence (but not in any other)? Do we touch here upon the central feature of finitude or, rather, upon a possibility (if we insist on using this ontological, somewhat Heideggerian term) that testifies to the ongoing, renewed, or, perhaps, under modern conditions, increased relevance of some “infinity,” a “possibility” that is no longer exclusively mine or ours? Is there any difference between these two interpretations?

Such related questions would force us to tackle what I suspect is a certain *residual humanism* in Cavell and Wittgenstein, as in Heidegger and so many others who follow in their footsteps (on “the Human,” see pp. 206–207). It is “residual” because it is unnecessary and, indeed, inconsistent, given that Cavell himself declares, “animals are also our others” (p. 412). Philosophically and, perhaps, phenomenologically speaking, non-living sentient beings somehow must be, as well. In a more general sense, Cavell insists throughout that I cannot—and should not—too quickly shrug off my responsibility to distinguish the living from the non-living (including the not yet or no longer living, i.e., the unborn and the dead). Given that he writes, “the issue of other minds is not settled by whether or not we take the human body as a machine” (p. 414), we

⁵ Here we find reiterated a disagreement, begun in Cavell (1991) with Saul Kripke, who, in his alternative interpretation of Wittgenstein’s conception of rules, takes the opposite view. As Hammer puts it: “Kripke leaves out the ‘I’” (Hammer, 2002, p. 27).

may surmise that this indeterminacy—perhaps undecidability—might extend to other aspects and categories of our being and our world, and, for all we know, to other beings and to other (possible) worlds. How could this uncertainty—this lack and irrelevance of *theoretical* certainty—not include the question whether or not our minds are mere computational functions of our brains, whether hooked up to a mainframe or in a “vat,” fed with input by a “matrix,” and so on, or whether or not the unborn and the dead might already or still count as persons, whether or not the ontological status of angels, golems, zombies, mutants, androids, automata, or machines should worry us beyond “the thought of movies” and the literary fictions they inform? When we “see a humanish something of a certain height and age and gender and color and physiognomy, emitting vocables in a certain style” (p. 443), we have no empirical, epistemic, or moral certainty that our senses and intuitions do not fool us and that another mind is really “there,” “inside,” “on the face of it.” As Hammer nicely comments, “for all I know, the human-like others could appear to my senses as they now do and I could be the only human in existence” (Hammer, 2002, p. 60).

Indeed, taking this argument one step further, even this certainty might prove an illusion. For all I know, even I myself could turn out to be “a humanish something,” nothing more. As in the chilling parable Cavell narrates, I might—while having these musings about others being automata (or not), being appalled at the prospect of seeing them opened up to confirm or disprove my worst fears (but what possibility would be more frightening?)—find myself, in turn, snapped open only to discover. . . In all we hope and try, this might be our greatest horror. But then, Cavell asks:

What is the nature of the worry, if it is a real one, that there may at any human place [i.e., at the place of other bodies, other minds, including my own] be things that one cannot tell from human beings? Is it a blow to one’s intellectual pride, as in the case of skepticism about the existence of material objects? Or is it an embarrassment of one’s humanity?

What would this embarrassment be?” (p. 416)

One wonders, therefore, how the emphasis on the human, on human forms of life—or even on life as such—squares with Cavell’s musings, especially in Part IV of *The Claim of Reason*, about the historical name of “God,” whose place may have come to be occupied by the other, by the problem of other minds. There he writes concurrently (and, perhaps not accidentally) about the many insufficient interpretations of the Cartesian “ghost in the machine” (p. 364), as well as about the automaton, whose meaning we have not even begun to fathom. Indeed, Cavell’s idea of a non-epistemic attribution, based on acknowledgment, of sentience or life and humanity to beings (rather than things)—an attribution and, indeed, attestation always exposed to the threat of skepticism—offers an alternative to, for example, the Bergsonian dualism between the “free activity” of a profound I in its very duration, on the one hand, and the “conscient automatism [*automatisme conscient*]” of all its further determinations and objectivations, on the other.

Cavell likewise provides a distinct answer to the problematic that Gilles Deleuze distills from the confrontation between Spinoza and Leibniz, namely, that of the “spiritual automaton.” Deleuze cites the *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding*, in which Spinoza identifies his view with “what the ancients said, i.e., that true knowledge proceeds from cause to effect—except that so far as I know they never conceived the soul (as we do here) as acting to certain laws, like a spiritual automaton.” Deleuze then adds: “‘Spiritual automaton’ means first of all that an idea, being

of a mode of thought, has its (efficient and formal) cause nowhere but in the attribute of Thought” (Deleuze, 1992, p. 115).

With this terminology we could, perhaps, also capture Cavell’s hesitation between two possible perspectives on the human: the distinction yet interchangeability of the human and the non-human, that is to say, the non-living or mechanical (suggesting that the “I” is also a being and a thing, just as it is finite and somehow infinite, a self as well as an other, as other as “another’s mind” and hence as other as “God”).

Furthermore, the expression “spiritual automaton” allows us to surmise that acceptance of things in the world and acknowledgment of other minds—my call and calling—hinge on thoughtfulness, seriousness, judgment. Indeed, any claim is an attribute of “Thought” alone, as Spinoza says. Yet this “Thought” is no longer conceived as standing in opposition to “passiveness” (which, as we have seen, any call and calling must presuppose—with an decidedly anti-Spinozian twist, i.e., inverting any *conatus*), though with the exclusion of thoughtlessness, lack of seriousness, avoidance, annihilation.

Speaking, with and beyond Spinoza, of a “spiritual automaton” finally connotes a certain spontaneity, indeed, naturalness. Not only can “I” often not *not* respond, most often, Cavell assumes, the “I” responds in tune (“attuned,” in *Übereinstimmung*) with its world and with others (and itself?). This sense of automaticity implies that the proclamation of a claim follows (by) its own account, does “what comes naturally,” if not matter of factly then at least as a fact—the very substance and, as it were, the singular *mattering*—of life.

Such automaticity may open different ways. Still in the Cartesian register, Cavell writes: “suppose my identity with my body is something that exists only in my affirmation of my body. (As friendship may exist only in loyalty to it.) Then the question is: What would the body *become* under affirmation? What would become of *me*? Perhaps I would know myself as, take myself for, a kind of machine; perhaps as a universe” (p. 494). There is a risk—and a chance, even a promise—involved in both attributions, in both projections.

But then Cavell seems to hesitate between two historical and systematic possibilities, two extremes that, perhaps, constitute not alternatives—as if one ought (and could) opt for just one—but rather mutually exclusive *and* inclusive polarities of existence, as we humans know it *so far*. On the one hand, Cavell redescribes the problem of other minds in terms of acknowledging the idea of God, of the Infinite, in part as Descartes—and, in his footsteps, Levinas—had suggested: “human separation,” Cavell writes, “can be accepted, and granted, or not. Like the separation from God; everything we are not” (p. 496). On the other hand, he expresses concern that to invest the new referent (the other or other mind) with all the traditional and (theo)logical weight of the old risks overloading finite beings with infinite, inhuman, and ultimately monstrous expectations:

As long as God exists, I am not alone. And couldn’t the other suffer the fate of God? . . . I wish to understand how the other now bears the weight of God, shows me that I am not alone in the universe. This requires understanding the philosophical problem of the other as the trace or scar of the departure of God. This descent, or ascent, of the problem of the other is the key way I can grasp the alternative process of secularization called romanticism. And it may explain why the process of humanization can become a monstrous undertaking, placing infinite demand upon finite resources. (p. 470)

This leads me to the second reservation that could be levelled against my interpretation. It is true that powerful commentators on Cavell's work—I am thinking of Stephen Mulhall and, more recently, Espen Hammer—have pointed to the many passages in which Cavell's philosophical and aesthetic "modernity" takes critical issue with Christianity, allowing at best for a "Romantic" and fundamentally "secular" view of all the concepts mentioned above (prophecy, confession, conversion, meditation). They single out ways in which Cavell has been increasingly receptive to the intellectual heritage of the American transcendentalism of Thoreau and Emerson, as it inflects the longer tradition of moral perfectionism with quasi-religious motifs and motivations of its own. Not only does Cavell's *The Senses of Walden* antedate the publication of *The Claim of Reason*, and hence the philosophical meditation that interests us here, but it is in the later book that we find the surmise that the problem of other minds comes to substitute for—and, I would suggest, modify, deepen, and radicalize—the problem for which the name (or names) of God and hence the Cartesian idea of the infinite stands. This link between the two expressions or articulations of otherness as now infinite then finite—as infinitely signifying and significant for finiteness, but also as a finiteness that yields an in principle infinite response—may not be obvious in all respects. One wonders why both Levinas and Cavell insist on keeping the reference to this Cartesian motif and interpret it in alternative, parallel yet complementary, ways. The reason for this attachment may not be theoretical, after all, but expressive of a mode of philosophical thinking whose qualities and style are first of all meditative, to be conveyed in the genre of prophecy, confession, or conversion—and their *spiritual and near automatic exercise*—alone. In Cavell's own words: "the greater the attachment to a concept (as to a person, or to a god), the harder it may be to explain either the attachment or the concept; or perhaps it should be said that everything one does is, or could be, the only explanation of it" (p. 6).

This brings me to my final point. Does this—freely Cavellian and, admittedly, unorthodox Levinasian—reading help us to think questions of kinship and community in plausible novel ways? If the scandal of skepticism revolves around the "I," can anything other than some non-idealist subjectivism—if not solipsism and egotism, then at least individualism and narcissism—result? Would "we" be any the worse off for that? For Levinas and Cavell, kinship would be my call; it is in the reiterated, neither given nor merely arbitrary—non-naturalist yet strangely "natural"—acknowledgment of conversation, community, commerce, and so on that "my" (indeed, "our") society is established, maintained, renewed, or refused. Likewise, my individual identity—whether private, spiritual, or sexual—within or with respect to this society is "my call," as well. Heidegger would agree: it is from afar, in the distance from which the call of my conscience comes to me, that the I—*Dasein*, in its triple *Umwelt* and *In-der-Weltsein*, its *Mitwelt* and *Mitsein*, and its *Selbstwelt* and *Selbstsein*—calls itself (up to and out from itself). I

Yet it is important also to remember that Cavell writes: "the problem of other minds is a problem of human history (the problem of modern human history; the modern problem of human history); that the problem is lived, and that this life has an origin and a progress. The idea is that the problem of the other is discovered through telling its history" (p. 468). This means what Wittgenstein would have called its "*Naturgeschichte* [natural history]," its genealogies, filiations, family resemblances, and, indeed, kinships.

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