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Must Skepticism Remain Refuted? Inheriting Skepticism with Cavell and Levinas

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Abstract
This article defends Cavell and Levinas' view that anti-skeptical arguments cannot attain universal assent. In the first half of the article, I argue that Conant's reading of Cavell is mistaken in two respects: he ignores Cavell's inheritance of Kant as well as the differences Cavell emphasizes between external world and other minds skepticism. In the second half of the paper, I examine affinities between Cavell and Levinas' thought, viz., acknowledging the facticity of the other and their remarks on skepticism. I close the paper by noting three metaphysical and ethical truths that arise from Cavell's way with skepticism.

Keywords Stanley Cavell · Ludwig Wittgenstein · Emmanuel Levinas · Skepticism · Responsibility

1 The Truth of Skepticism

The nature of skepticism, its philosophical implications, if any, and whether a refutation of it can attain universal assent have long been matters of dispute.[1] While there are a variety of approaches to refuting skepticism, two thinkers who reject the idea that refutations of skepticism can achieve universal agreement are Cavell and Levinas (Cavell 1969b, 1969d, 1979, 2005, 2010; Levinas 1998).[2] In this paper, I argue that they offer a compelling response to refutations of skepticism by demonstrating that the insights of skepticism, especially, other minds skepticism, are not restricted to epistemological matters but have import for metaphysics and ethics too. In order to develop their response to anti-skeptical arguments, I begin (§ 2) by rehearsing Conant's distinction between Cartesian and Kantian varieties of skepticism and his claim that these two forms of skepticism are helpful in thinking through different phenomena (e.g., language, aesthetic, other minds, etc.). From here I turn to a worry with Conant's reading of Cavell in that the latter is not merely concerned with Cartesian skepticism, as Conant claims, but Kantian skepticism as well. To substantiate this claim, I first point to passages in which Cavell is explicitly taking up the Kantian skeptic's concern with the transcendental conditions for the possibility of phenomena. Secondly, I argue that Conant presumes a fundamental similarity in the formal structure between external world and other minds skepticism *and* that Cavell spends a great deal of time challenging precisely this assumption. Subsequently, I discuss three differences between Kant and Wittgenstein (§ 3). In particular, I focus on their different visions of psychological phenomena and the possibilities afforded phenomena. I argue that these differences entail that psychological phenomena have an indefinite or inconclusive grammatical structure precisely because the other is a separate source of significance. Developing Cavell's concern with acknowledging the facticity of a separate other, I turn to Levinas' critique of Heidegger in which the latter absorbs the facticity of the other into the structures of existence (§ 4). Although

[1] For discussions of, particularly, though not exclusively, modern skepticism see Descartes (1984), Hume (1960), Kant (1929), Peirce (1934), Moore (1993a, 1993b), Heidegger (1962), Austin (1962b), Clarke (1972), Rorty (1979), Burnyeat (1983), Stroud (1984), McGinn (1989), and Williams (1999).

[2] For discussions of skepticism in Levinas and Cavell see Critchley (1992, 2002), Putnam (2002), Hammer (2002), de Vries (2006), Morgan (2007), Overgaard (2007), and Stricker (2012). For discussions of Cavell and skepticism see Stone (2000, 2003), Witherspoon (2002), Minar (2004), Shieh (2006), Franks (2006), Moran (2011/2), Conant (2012), Macarthur (2014), and Bax (2013, 2015). For discussions of Levinas and skepticism see Bernasconi (1991), de Boer (1997), and Davies (2005).

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Levinas highlights the separate facticity of the other, there are a number of worries with his thought. I discuss Derrida's articulation of these worries (§ 5) before moving to Cavell's relationship to Derrida and the voice (§ 6). Finally (§ 7), I argue that Cavell transforms skepticism beyond its epistemologically confines to include three metaphysical and ethical truths: (1) there is no general form of X (2) such that historicity and finitude shape the transmission of and allow for the transformation of expressions and institutions. (3) Consequently, sharing meaning entails acknowledging each other as a separate source of significance.

2 Conant's Cavell

In "Varieties of Skepticism," Conant outlines two ways of taking up modern skepticism. The Cartesian skeptic presumes a certain faculty (e.g., perception) and asks whether such a human capacity is sufficient to attain access to what is really happening outside of one's mind. This is a picture of skepticism in which the question is raised whether human capacities are sufficient to know the world or whether some non-human supplement is required. Distinct from Cartesian is Kantian skepticism, which questions the capacity presumed by the Cartesian. The Kantian skeptic asks how a perception could so much as purport to be about the world such that the problem deepens to the transcendental level concerning the conditions for possibility of phenomena (e.g., perception, knowledge, art, etc.). Conant sets out to use this distinction as a topography of skepticism in order to adjudicate philosophical disputes (Conant 2012).

One dispute is between Cavell and Kripke's skeptical readings of Wittgenstein. While Cavell sought to distance his take from Kripke's, Conant argues that both Cavell and Kripke are "exclusively" oriented by a Cartesian problematic (Conant 2012).[3] However, this is false to Cavell for two reasons. To argue, as Conant does, that Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein misses the Kantian concern with the transcendental conditions for the possibility of phenomena requires ignoring what Cavell says at a number of points. Conant is right that Wittgenstein is concerned with the possibilities of phenomena, but wrong to argue that Cavell overlooks this aspect of Wittgenstein. Any number of passages could be cited, for instance:

> … the knowledge of what would count as various "matters of fact." Is this empirical knowledge? Is it a priori? It is a knowledge of what Wittgenstein means by grammar—the knowledge Kant calls "transcendental." (Cavell 1969b, p. 64)
>
> Starting out in philosophical life a quarter of a century ago, I claim in "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" that what Wittgenstein means by grammar in his grammatical investigations—as revealed by our system of ordinary language—is an inheritor of what Kant means by Transcendental Logic; that more particularly when Wittgenstein says, "Our investigation … is directed not towards phenomena but, as one might say, towards the 'possibilities' of phenomena" (§ 90) he is to be understood as citing the concept of possibility as Kant does in saying, "the term 'transcendental' … signifies [only] such knowledge as concerns the a prior possibility of knowledge, or its a priori employment" (A56, B80–1). Here I am, still at it. (Cavell 1988, p. 38; cf. p. 162)[4]

Cavell is explicitly considering how the Kantian skeptic's concern with the possibilities of phenomena is internal to Wittgenstein's thinking. Moreover, these passages—the first coming from "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" originally published in 1962 and the second given as The Mrs. William Beckman Lectures at Berkeley in 1983—demonstrate that over this twenty-one year period Cavell self-consciously understood this to be a distinctive aspect of *his* reading of Wittgenstein. But according to Conant, this Kantian dimension is precisely what is missing in Cavell's treatment of Wittgenstein.

The second reason why Conant's characterization of Cavell as exclusively oriented by Cartesian skepticism is problematic is that such a reading presumes an analogy between external world and other minds skepticism. This is false to Cavell's thought, because he goes to great lengths to bring out how the rubric that modern epistemology developed in thinking about the external world is non-applicable to other minds. Central to external world skepticism is the idea that it operates with what Cavell calls best-case scenarios: i.e., it concerns cases of seeing everyday objects under good lighting, without anything obstructing one's view, etc. Descartes' piece of wax right in front of him is a paradigmatic example of such a scenario. Such an object is supposed to be a "generic object" in the sense that there is nothing specific or particular about *this* wax or any other object. In this, Cavell introduces the idea of "generic objects" by noting they concern "whether we can know *that* they exist, are real, are actually there" rather than *what* something is (Cavell 1979, p. 52, emphasis added; Stone 2003). What is

[3] The cardinal difference between Cavell and Kripke's respective skeptical readings of Wittgenstein is that whereas the latter's view concerns conforming to rules, the former is worried with making one's self intelligible to others and working to make sense of others see Kripke (1982) and Cavell (1990, 2005).

[4] For other passages where Cavell discusses Kant see Cavell (1969a, 1969b, 1969c, 1979). For discussions of Kant and Cavell see Franks (2006), Friedlander (2011), and Baz (2015).

distinctive about generic objects is precisely that they are devoid of anything distinctive about them, i.e., no familiarity, experience, or training are required to know them. What makes external world skepticism so troublesome is that, since the object in question is generic and it is understood that this is a best-case scenario of encountering the object, then it seems that if we cannot know in this instance, then we never could. Consequently, failing to know in this particular case seems to throw all claims of knowledge into question. In this, skepticism is not about whether we know some particular scrap of the world, but rather raises the question as to whether our human capacities can know the world at all.

However, when turning to skepticism about other minds, Cavell notes that this rubric (i.e., the best case and general object) is not applicable. In Part II of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell constructs a dialogue on an imagined occasion between someone engaged in responding to external world skepticism as a genuine problem ("the skeptic") and someone dismissive of skepticism ("the anti-skeptic"). After tracing the dialectic of their conversation, Cavell notes that what is at issue is not in principle whether skepticism is "true" or not, but rather that two people fail to acknowledge each other's sensibility and understanding of each other in a situation. Where the skeptic has done a kind of intellectual violence to themselves in that the question of skepticism does and cannot help but to arise, the anti-skeptic is dismissive of skepticism, thereby, failing to allow the problem of skepticism to be real for them. In this, "the epistemologist [i.e., the skeptic] feels that his question has been begged; because for him the question *has already arisen*" (Cavell 1979, p. 134). Consequently, it seems that we are left with two undesirable options: either force the anti-skeptic to go along with a problem they feel is unreal or dismiss the skeptic from considering a problem they feel is all too real. Here we are at the threshold of viewing the phenomena that motivates Cavell. Since the problem has arisen for the skeptic but not for the anti-skeptic, the skeptic feels not only that the question is begged but that they have not been heard or listened to at all. Cavell's dialogue brings into focus the opacity one can have to another. Speaking to such opacity in the epistemological dispute between the skeptic and the anti-skeptic, Cavell remarks:

> What I am asking, then, is that we take the philosopher's original – and originating – question with the same seriousness that the ordinary language philosopher wishes us to take any statement a human being utters. (*This* wish, and the faithfulness of its expression, represents one permanent value of that motive and 'method' of philosophizing.) Unless we make that question real for ourselves, the philosopher's answers to it will seem as slovenly and unreal – as academic – as the ordinary language philosopher supposes. And once it seems a real problem, the answers to it may not seem so clearly, or wrongly, forced. (Cavell 1979, p. 138)

This discussion of skepticism as a misalignment of sensibilities between the skeptic and anti-skeptic leads Cavell to outline three differences between knowing another person and the world. First, we take failing to know someone to be a perfectly everyday experience. Hence, it is not clear that "failing to know someone" tracks any paradox about the human condition. Second, the other person is not a "generic person" but is a particular person with their unique history, personal idiosyncrasies, and facticity. Therefore, the framework of "generic objects" is non-applicable to other minds skepticism. Thirdly, that I am in the best position to understand another person is not a taken-for-granted, foregone conclusion as in the external world case (Cavell 1979). I must do the work to bring the other into view, to make them intelligible. Mulhall makes this point nicely when he writes:

> to the question whether there is such a thing as a best case of acknowledging others, Cavell's answer is 'I don't know; and neither does anyone else'. The question cannot simply be dismissed as nonsensical, and neither can it be given a general answer; it is rather a question which every individual faces (or refuses to face) in her relationships with others *in each case*, and nothing about the features of each relationship can settle the answer. In short, the possibility which the question invokes haunts our everyday lives with others: if it is impossible simply to dismiss it, it is also impossible simply to embrace it. In this sense, the doubt and ignorance which the sceptic is prone to express in purely cognitive terms is seen by Cavell as integral to the texture of ordinary life when it is understood in terms of acknowledgment, in contrast to scepticism about the external world, in the case of other minds we live our scepticism. (Mulhall 1994, p. 137)

In *The Claim of Reason*, and in contrast to philosophical conceptions of "empathic projection," Cavell elaborates "the essence of acknowledgment as being that one conceive the other from the other's point of view" (Cavell 1979, pp. 440–1). While empathic projection entails using one's experience or psychology as a model for the other, internal to acknowledgment, as a response to other minds skepticism, is the idea that the other is a unique, separate source of significance (Cavell 1969a, 1969d, 1969e, 1979). Acknowledging another as a unique, separate source of significance will return as the central theme below in discussing Levinas' critique of Heidegger, viz., how the latter subsumes the

personal facticity of the other to the impersonal, anonymous structures of existence (§ 4).

For now it is worth returning to Conant's claim about the formal or homological structure of Cartesian and Kantian skepticism (Conant 2012). His argument is that these two varieties of skepticism are *forms* of skepticism, which can arise in thinking about different phenomena (e.g., language, other minds, etc.). In considering Cavell, we see that the rubric of thinking about our knowledge, or lack thereof, of the external world is non-applicable to thinking about other minds. This is not merely a matter of fidelity to Cavell's thought but through a greater understanding of the latter, thereby, gaining clarity about the nature of different phenomena (e.g., the differences between the external world and other minds). In this, the relationship between the Cartesian and Kantian varieties of skepticism *and* the different variants that these formal varieties of skepticism can be applied to (e.g., a Cartesian about aesthetics; a Kantian about other minds; etc.) is not the only important difference to attend to—one must also note how these various forms of skepticism arise, or fail to, in relation to different phenomena.[5]

3 Three Differences Between Kant and Wittgenstein

While I have argued that Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein is sensitive to the Kantian skeptic's concern for the transcendental conditions for the possibility of phenomena, it is important to note key differences between Kant and Wittgenstein. The first difference is that Wittgenstein's mode of philosophizing is linguistically oriented in a manner unavailable to Kant. While Kant clarifies the structures of reason by outlining the transcendental conditions for the possibility of phenomena becoming intelligible to a subject (Kant 1929, pp. A1/B1–A16–B30), Wittgenstein's inheritance of this project takes on a linguistic valence through his critical engagements with Frege (Diamond 1991). Frege argued that one should only look for the meaning of a word in the context of a proposition (Frege 1950, p. xxii). In Wittgenstein's hands, the context principle exceeds the limits of a proposition to include, what Austin called the "total speech act" (Austin 1962a, p. 148) in which a proposition is uttered. "One may say: with the mere naming of a thing, nothing has yet been done. Nor *has* it a name except in a game. This was what Frege meant too when he said that a word has a meaning only in the context of a sentence" (Wittgenstein 2009 § 49). To name an object, understand a sentence, follow a rule, or projecting an expression into a future context (Cavell 1979, pp. 171–3) entails the mastery of a technique within a custom or institution (Wittgenstein 2009 § 198–9). The intelligibility of an expression depends upon coming into a tradition (i.e., becoming attuned to existing practices) such that one knows how to go on with the phenomena in question (Wittgenstein 2009 § 241–2). However, there is no guarantee that such projections will be felicitous nor is there any substantive metaphysical structure to suture our judgments back together when they come apart. In this Cavell tracks how one cannot demand that the other follow one's expressions, for instance, by appealing to some metaphysical fact or social convention (Cavell 1979, pp. 122; Laugier 2013, pp. 75–84).

As a result of this linguistic-cultural transformation of Kant's transcendental philosophy, Cavell reads Wittgenstein as drastically expanding Kant's twelve categories (Kant 1929, pp. A77/B102–A83/B109):

> … Kant's pride in what he called his Copernican Revolution for philosophy, understanding the behavior of the world by understanding the behavior of our concepts of the world, is to be radicalized, so that not just twelve categories of the understanding are to be deduced, but every word in the language—not as a matter of psychological fact, but as a matter of, say, psychological necessity. Where Kant speaks of rules or laws brought to knowledge of the world by Reason, a philosopher like Wittgenstein speaks of bringing to light our criteria, our agreements. (Cavell 1988, p. 38)
>
> I [Cavell] would accordingly like to say that grammar is Wittgenstein's version of what Kant proposes his twelve categories of the understanding to accomplish, namely to assure us *a priori*, as it were from our human beginnings, before all assertion, that there is a comprehensible, communicable world. For Wittgenstein, however, it would make no sense to limit the number of our fundamental concepts, partly because there must be as many concepts as there are words and their combinations, and partly because in any case of puzzlement we will have work to do to articulate what these are. (Cavell 2022d, pp. 170–1)

[5] For Conant's remarks on the difference between "varieties" and "variants" of skepticism see Conant (2012), pp. 6–7 footnote 9 and p. 18 footnote 14. One might point out that if one restricts, the variety of skepticism (e.g., Descartes, Kant, etc.) to a certain variant (e.g., perception, language, etc.), then there is nothing paradoxical about the skeptical thesis "it is true that we cannot know". The problem with this is that restricting claims to know from a question about whether we can know in general to "can we know in this domain" is still a general claim about knowing in that domain. What is paradoxical about the skeptic's claim that "we cannot know" is that they are making the epistemic claim ("it is true …") of denying knowledge in general or some domain ("we cannot know …"). This is paradoxical because they are both claiming to know and not know. See Cavell's remarks on the drive to speak outside of language games (Cavell 1979, pp. 189, 207, 224, 226, 471, 477). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this question and stimulating my subsequent response.

In order for words and their combinations to be intelligible, there must be as many concepts as there are words and their combinations. Since words, their combinations, and our subsequent concepts are indefinite, it follows that there can be no limit to the number of our fundamental concepts. (What is the difference between a fundamental and a non-fundamental concept? [cf. Wittgenstein 2009 § 71, 76–7, 88]). Therefore, the first difference between Kant and Wittgenstein is that the former restricts thought to *the* twelve categories, whereas the latter expands the demand for a deduction to every expression in a culture.

The second difference concerns their views of reference, especially, in relation to psychological phenomena. Kant begins by asking how our experience of objects is possible to which he argues that there are two necessary conditions: (1) objects must be sensible in space and time (Kant 1929, pp. A19/B33–A49/B73) and (2) intelligible according the categories of the understanding (Kant 1929, pp. A77/B102–A83/B109). In this, his thought hinges on the relation of a subject to an object. Conversely, Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is a dismantling of the idea that there is some general form to how language functions (Wittgenstein 2009 § 65).

> The closest thing to a doctrine I discern in the *Investigations* seems to occur in three short sentences that end its opening paragraph, in which Wittgenstein announces that he calls the roots of the idea of language that he sees in the picture conveyed by the paragraph from Augustine's *Confessions* referred to earlier. The idea Wittgenstein formulates as is follows: "Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands." The 693 ensuing sections of the *Investigations* can be said to discover relics transmitting this doctrine, or precursors preparing the doctrine, ones that show the doctrine—which seems so obvious as to be undeniable, if even noticeable—to come not merely to very little, but to come to nothing, to be empty. (Cavell 2022a, p. 127)

The central target of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is an aspect of Kant's thought: how a representation (e.g., a word) relates to an object. In this, language is understood as functioning only one way, viz., the naming of objects. One place Wittgenstein acutely shows the emptiness of this intellectual temptation is in his so-called "private language argument" precisely because psychological phenomena are not a "objects" (Wittgenstein 2009 § 293; Cavell 1979, pp. 91, 343). While Wittgenstein develops this point in his claim that "a Nothing would render the same service as a Something about which nothing could be said" (Wittgenstein 2009 § 304), Cavell interprets these passages to mean that "if the other *cannot* offer his thoughts or open his feelings then he *cannot* be hiding or keeping them either" (Cavell 1979, p. 367). Consequently, the supposed subjectivism of psychological phenomena is turned on its head by arguing that we are condemned to expression. Cavell extends this point by noting that the grammar of psychological phenomena is inconclusive.

> that no set of facts about another (any more than about yourself) is exhaustive of subjectivity, and that the way they are not "exhaustive" is not the way facts about an object are not exhaustive. The more you know about an object the less likely that what you know will be *completely overthrown*, that what you have grounds to claim is a hawk will turn out on further examination to be a handsaw; but about a subject, likely or not, perhaps never more unlikely than not, *overthrow* remains in question, redescription may at any time be called for, the duck turns out as in a dawning to be a swan. (Cavell 2022c, pp. 142–3 emphasis added)[6]

This brings together two points from Wittgenstein's rejection of a general theory of reference based on the correlation of a subject and object. First, psychological phenomena are inconclusive precisely because they demand indefinite redescription. We will return to this below in discussing Levinas' concern to attend to the facticity of the other. Secondly, given that psychological phenomena are not "exhaustive" and given that "a natural language is what native speakers of that language speaker" (Cavell 1969a, p. 5; cf. Mulhall 1994, pp. 1–20) such that each speaker of a language is a source of that language, it follows that one's understanding of a subject may be "overthrown" or in need of re-description (cf. Cavell 1979, p. 439). Such overthrowing might occur between two minds as in other mind skepticism or within one's own experience such that one is another to oneself. Further, this claim that subjectivity may call for re-description and re-evaluation motivates turning to the third difference between Kant and Wittgenstein, viz., on the indefinite possibility of human expression. Coupled with the first difference (i.e., there is no general form of X), this entails that forms of life take on a diachronic structure in that they can be re-written in being taken up (see § 6–7).

Reviewing Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, Cavell highlights certain affinities between Benjamin and Wittgenstein, especially, in relation to Kant and the possibility of phenomena:

> … Benjamin's redemptive reading invokes the idea of rescuing phenomena. This is a way of indicating how

[6] Cavell makes similar remarks in relation to moral disagreement (Cavell 1979, Part III) and aesthetic judgments (Cavell 1969c).

> I put together Wittgenstein's remarking "What we do is to lead words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" with his observing "We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena: our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the '*possibilities*' of phenomena." This lasts observation, as I argued a lifetime ago, virtually quotes Kant's idea of critique, but unlike Kant, for whom our possibilities of phenomena are fixed, Wittgenstein's vision is rather of human existence as perpetually missing its possibilities; put otherwise, as captivated by false necessities. (Cavell 2022b, pp. 135–6; cf. Benjamin 1996)

Rather than being held captive by false necessities (e.g., How a subject relates to an object? Do I have the latest gadget?), Wittgenstein turns the inquiry around "the pivot of our real need" (Wittgenstein 2009 § 108). As a result, Wittgenstein does not avail himself of static, ahistorical structures of rationality as Kant does. Rather, by attending to our facticity, Wittgenstein's thought is sensitive to the possibilities of phenomena afforded to the historical transformation of forms of life (Wittgenstein 2009 § 66; Part II§ 111–3, 116, 129–30, 143, 162; Cavell 1979, pp. 86–125). As a way of bringing out this concern with responding to the facticity of phenomena, let's turn to Levinas' critique of Heidegger.

4 The Scandal of Skepticism

In his prisoner of war notebooks, Levinas sets out to critique Heidegger's thought (Levinas 1978, p. 4). Through his interrogation of the meaning of Being, Heidegger outlines existential structures for the intelligibility of Being. One of these structures is being-with (*Mitsein*) or being-with-other-Dasein (*Mitdasein*) in which *Dasein* is anonymously absorbed in what one does (*das Man*) (Heidegger 1962). At issue, for Levinas, is Heidegger's subsumption of all dimensions of life into the anonymous structures of Being. Challenging the fundamental status that Heidegger grants ontology, Levinas asks whether *all* beings are such that our relation to them is one in which the being's possibility is within our finite horizon of understanding: "can the *relation* with *being* be, from the outset, anything other than its *comprehension* as being (*étant*)" (Levinas 1996a, p. 6, cf. 1987, p. 50). Might there be a phenomenon that I cannot anticipate, but which disrupts and fractures my thought and existence? Levinas argues that there is such a phenomenon and this is another source of significance, i.e., another person or the other. In this, prior to being a being of comprehension, one relates to the other as one's interlocutor such that it is one's relation to the other (qua a separate source of significance) that is prior to ontology; hence, ontology is not fundamental (Levinas 1996a, pp. 5–8). While we seek to understand the other, "this relation overflows comprehension … because in our relation with the other (*autrui*), he does not affect us in terms of a concept" (Levinas 1996a, p. 6). Levinas argues that prior to imagining how to go on with the other, one experiences the "invocation" of the other as an "interlocutor," which Heidegger subsumes into the anonymous, impersonal structures of Being (Levinas 1996a, pp. 5–6). For Heidegger, one is just like the other and the other is just like oneself (Heidegger 1962, p. 154) such that his description of others concerns those we identify with and what one does (Heidegger 1962 § 25–7). Levinas' point is that if this exhausts our relation to the other, then the uniqueness of the other's facticity and our personal relationship to them becomes obscured, because the other is reduced to the impersonal, anonymous structures of existence (*Mitsein, Mitdasein*, and *Das Man*).

In his subsequently writings (Levinas 1969, 1987, 1998), Levinas describes this personal, "original relation" (Levinas 1996a, p. 6) as non-adequate or infinite. By "adequate," he means when philosophers seek an account of some phenomena as the being that it is, i.e., *what* it is. Consequently, an adequate account of phenomena entails knowing how to go on with the latter—whatever it may be. Alternatively, a non-adequate, infinite relation is one in which the phenomena exceeds one's intentional understanding of how to continue. "[T]he idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea" (Levinas 1969, p. 49). While philosophers have traditionally sought an idea adequate to what is thought, Levinas describes a relation to that which exceeds one's finite thought and existence. In this, the other is an infinite horizon of meaning precisely because one's responsibility is increased to the degree to which it is fulfilled (Levinas 1969, p. 244).

Developing his project, Levinas deploys an idiosyncratic way of reading, viz., to lay out Hebraic insights in Greek texts and vice versa.[7] One instance is Descartes' mediation on God as an infinite substance (Descartes 1984, pp. 24–36; Levinas 1987, pp. 52–4). Moreover, in his most sustained discussion of Levinas, Cavell focuses on these passages noting that what has mostly interested him in his own work on skepticism is the sense of "running us up against the incredible, as interfering with the life of my intellectual conscience" (Cavell 2005, p. 133; see de Vries 2006; Stricker 2012). This sense of skepticism as signaling something "incredible" "from unseeable quarters" (Cavell 2005, p. 139), which disrupts one's life motivates three points of comparison with Levinas. First, Cavell reiterates how his own interest in knowing another is not accounted for on

[7] See Levinas (1990), Putnam (2002), Charlier (2002), and Morgan (2007), pp. 336–414.

the epistemological rubric of generic objects and best-case scenarios (Cavell 2005). In this, each thinker has their own way of describing the unique, separate facticity of the other. Cavell does so through his critique of extending the rubric of external world skepticism (i.e., "best case" encounters with a "generic object") to the phenomena of other minds (Cavell 1979, Part II). Levinas' version of this story is one in which one's relation to the other is not a matter of anticipating possibilities (e.g., Heidegger) or an analogical apperception adequately corresponding to another's experience (e.g., Husserl), but rather a non-adequate relation that exceeds one's thought and existence (Levinas 1996a). For both, responsibility entails acknowledging the concrete facticity of this other, which is occluded by modern epistemology.

Secondly, both draw on Descartes' proof of God as a means of illustrating human finitude (Cavell 1979; Levinas 1987).[8] Descartes' mediation on God's existence brings into view the idea that there is something beyond finite human reason (Descartes 1984). For Descartes, this is a matter of acknowledging a cause that is sufficient to generate the idea of the infinite in a finite mind. For Levinas and Cavell, what is of interest is how Descartes' "proof" is an illustration of what it means for something external to oneself to orient one's attention. Only by the grace of God would there be sufficient reason to "put the Infinite in me" (Cavell 2005, pp. 144–5).[9] Hence, the analogy with God is meant to indicate that there is something "incredible" or external to our finite powers, which institutes a non-adequate, asymmetrical, vertical, and passive relation. In § 7, finitude will return as one of the truths of skepticism. However, there the lesson concerns acknowledging another in the historical transmission and transformation of expressions and institutions. Coincidentally, the theme of acknowledging another moves us to the third point between Cavell and Levinas.

If we take these first two points together—about the facticity of the other and my asymmetrical relation to the other—then Levinas and Cavell share a concern to describe one's relation to the other in terms other than as "a generalized *intellectual* lack" (Cavell 2005, p. 150). Cavell cites Levinas: "The Other is the only being that one can be tempted to kill. This temptation to murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. To see a face is already to hear 'You shall not kill'" (Levinas 1990, p. 8; Cavell 2005, p. 151). Cavell comments on this passage that he could not give a better response than "You shall not kill" to the skeptical problem of acknowledging the other:

> 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. (Cavell 2005, p. 151)

While both turn to Descartes' proof of God, they have different interpretations as to how one responds to the facticity of the other (see footnote 8). Cavell is concerned with acknowledging the moves we make (or refuse to make) in our ordinary lives, whereas Levinas focuses on phenomenologically describing the formal structure of the ethical experience of the other. While these are not insignificant differences, they stem from a common vision of responsibility, namely, to see oneself as capable and, in particular instances, as actually denying the other, as imposing on them when one thinks of oneself as acting virtuously and altruistically. That one can anticipate a possibility of going on with the other does not entail that one is ethically responding to the other. Instead, Cavellian acknowledgment and Levinasian responsibility institute a distinctive dimension of passivity in which in conceiving the other from the other's point of view one comes to realize that, at times, one's judgment "ought to be overthrown" (Cavell 1979, p. 439; Cavell 2022c, pp. 142–3). One's judgment ought to be overthrown because the other is themselves a source of significance on the world such that to acknowledge the other, one must put oneself aside long enough to see the other as a *separate* source of significance. In this, the primacy of the other entails that one's self and sense of reasonableness may be undermined and overthrown.

5 Three Worries with Levinas

In this section, I turn to three questions that Derrida put to Levinas in order to (1) motivate discussing Cavell's relation to deconstruction and (2) bringing out the diachronic structure of skepticism common to Cavell and Levinas. Derrida's first concern is that by describing the other as infinite, it is unclear how the other is intelligible. As a result, Derrida argues that Levinas must presuppose a phenomenology of the other in his description of the other as infinite (Derrida 1978, p. 118). The second worry is similar to the first in that it concerns intelligibility. However, what is distinctive with this problem is that it is about language, in particular, how

[8] For discussions of the differences between Levinas and Cavell's interpretations of Descartes see Cavell (2005), de Vries (2006), and Stricker (2012).

[9] Cavell is quoting Levinas (1996b), pp. 136–8.

one cultural insight (e.g., the non-propositional revelations of Hebraism) could be translated into another culture (e.g., the rational propositions of Hellenism) (Derrida 1978, p. 109). In particular, this issue centers around how non-propositional truths could, if at all, be expressed propositionally (as in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*). This is a particularly acute quandary for Levinas, because the two halves of his thought are to read Hellenic insights in Hebraic texts and vice versa. Consequently, Derrida's first two worries come together in the concern that Levinas makes the phenomena (the other qua infinite) unintelligible as a phenomenon. The third problem for Levinas is his misogyny, for instance, in his remarks on the son (Levinas 1969, pp. 267–9) and the feminine (Levinas 1969, pp. 256–66).[10] This is a worry that despite his concern to attend to the facticity of the other, he reinstitutes a patriarchal view of gender.

Levinas responds to Derrida's first two questions in *Otherwise than Being*. In doing so, he explicitly addresses the theme of this special issue: can skepticism be universally refuted by reason? Levinas' answer is that it cannot and his point is that this teaches us something about reason, skepticism, and responsibility. Reason, for Levinas, is a relationship between terms in which each term and the differences between them cohere in a system (Levinas 1998). Each term has its proper place and stands to the others such that each is in its proper place. Everything is right where it should be. Levinas elaborates this picture of reason in which the relations between terms are presented to a subject in a synchronic fashion (Levinas 1998, p. 165). In this, rationality is an activity of a subject thinking truths about the world (Levinas 1969). This presumes that language represents the world such that language (and the world) can be presented in a synchronic laying out of the propositions that are said.

In contrast to reason as a totality of synchronically ordered terms that are said in propositions, Levinas distinguishes *the saying* or articulating of language; for instance, expressing a thesis about skepticism or articulating a premise in a logical syllogism (Levinas 1998, pp. 5–7, 37–8, 45–51). His point is that it is one thing for a proposition to be said (e.g., "skepticism is true," etc.), but what is phenomenologically and conceptually distinct is the speaker actually saying *this* skeptical thesis in *this* context. Phenomenologically, this is the difference between understanding knowing how to continue in contrast to not knowing one's way with the other (Wittgenstein 2009 § 123, 156–83; Cavell 1979, pp. 115, 122). An example of this would be someone thinking that they have refuted the skeptic only to be astonished that the skeptic accepts their "refutations" and rearticulates their skeptical thesis (Cavell 2010, p. 362).[11] Conceptually, the saying is distinct from the said, because the latter is reducible to propositions, whereas the former is the existential act of expressing those propositions by a phenomenological subject as a source of significance.

Without discussing whether Levinas adequately responds to Derrida, it is worth highlighting three points of these remarks on Levinas. First, Levinas' concern to attend to the facticity of the other mirrors Cavell's rejection of the possibility of a "generic other" (§ 2). In this, they share a common vision of responsibility, viz., to attend to the facticity of a separate other. Secondly, Levinas emphasizes the diachronic structure of skepticism, which we implicitly discussed in § 3 through the Wittgensteinian insights that there is no general form of X such that the possibilities of phenomena are indefinite. In § 6, Mulhall will explicitly elaborate such a reading of Cavell's Wittgenstein. Thirdly, the three questions that Derrida put to Levinas offer an occasion to discuss Cavell relation to deconstruction.[12]

6 Cavell and Deconstruction

The central difference between Cavell and Derrida is over ordinary experience, for instance, someone experiencing the world as meaningless, socially unjust, etc. This is particularly prominent in each thinkers' discussions of Austin (Derrida 1988; cf. Cavell 1994, 1995; Moi 2017). Responding to Derrida's critique of the voice (Derrida 2011), Cavell notes how the voice may take on two guises: the ordinary human voice (associated with femininity) and the metaphysical inhuman voice (associated with masculinity) (Cavell 1995, pp. 42, 69). He argues that, while Derrida acknowledges the role of the human voice in Austin (Cavell 1995, pp. 45, 75,

[10] See Derrida (1991), Irigaray (1986, 1991), and Guenther (2006).

[11] One might object that if a particular form of skepticism is refuted then what sense does it make to say it reappears? One might think that it is better to say the form of skepticism has never been refuted. Or perhaps that it has been refuted and the person expressing the skeptical thesis is confused or wrong. If one takes the first path—arguing that it is better to say no one has refuted the skeptical thesis—then there are one of two problems. First, if it was never been refuted, then skepticism is a genuine intellectual possibility such that it is a live option that we do not know the world. However, this would concede that there is an insight or truth in skepticism and motivate Cavell and Levinas respective projects to articulate that truth. Another problem with taking the first path is that it occludes the possibility that someone is simply wrong or confused (i.e., skepticism has been refuted and someone just does not get it or is stubborn, etc.) Maybe someone is wrong or confused, but maybe not. It is this last possibility, viz., the possibility that the person expressing the skeptical thesis is genuinely experiencing the skeptical as a live problem that motivates Cavell and Levinas' distinctive concern with the "truth" of (other mind) skepticism, viz., to attend and respond to a unique, separate perspective (i.e., the person experiencing the world as meaningless). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this question and stimulating my subsequent response.

[12] I would like to thank an anonymous reader for encouraging me in this direction.

77), he neglects Austin's critique of positivism. Specifically, Cavell argues that Derrida fails to appreciate how Austin's examples are meant to counter the positivist claim that any expression that does not satisfy their criteria is "inferior" (Cavell 1995, p. 50). This is significant because, for Cavell, the moral is to acknowledge responsibility for our ordinary intelligibility—to be responsive to what we undergo and acknowledge ourselves as undergoing (or fail to acknowledge ourselves as undergoing), what experiences we express to others (or withhold from them), what they acknowledge in us (or avoid), what they are open to accepting as their experience and share in turn (or not), and what one is prepared to acknowledge in them (or not). Consequently, what separates Cavell and Derrida is the former's concern for being responsible for the transmission of ordinary experience and intelligibility, whereas the latter hears any claim to the "human" "voice" as a re-throning of metaphysical self-sufficiency (Derrida 2011).[13] Alternatively, Cavell transforms the voice from a fantasy of self-referentiality to the expressing of experience, for instance, of historical social injustices (Cavell 1981; Bauer 2015; Russell 2018, 2020).

Cavell is able to argue this, because as we saw in § 3 there is no general form that all phenomena must conform to such that Wittgenstein's grammatical remarks display the structure of different possibilities of living (cf. Diamond 1991, 2008). Consequently, skepticism, understood as the absence of metaphysical support, entails that expressions and institutions can be re-written or transformed such that they take on a diachronic structure. Mulhall spells this out in relation to naming and Wittgenstein's image of language as a city:

> There is, in short, no practice of giving names to things that is independent of the kinds of things being named; there is no single, context-invariant use to which 'names' are put. It follows that learning to give names to things involves not only learning how to go on with a given practice but also how to transform it—how to project it into contexts which call for its creative adaptation. (Mulhall 2001, p. 68)
>
> The final image of the ancient city shifts our focus to a more continuous or diachronic reading of Wittgenstein's sequence. It says that language is something we inhabit, a fundamental mode of human dwelling the world; its structures pre-exist us and will survive our departure, but they are nevertheless a human edifice and subject to a variety of unpredictable but retrospectively comprehensible modes of alteration, extension, and expansion in response to human needs and purposes (what else might the builders be building, with their pillars and slabs and beams, if not a village or a town?). Most fundamentally of all, therefore, language is essentially historical; it grows and develops through time, and its present state always carries traces of its past. From which it follows that the peculiarities of its synchronic structures—the differences between modern suburbs and ancient quarters, the grafting of modern additions onto ancient structures—can best be understood through diachronic spectacles, as fundamentally historical phenomena. (Mulhall 2001, p. 70)

These remarks succinctly summarize the central claim of this essay: that there is no general form to secure the intelligibility of phenomena such that the conditions of the possibility of phenomena and our intelligibility of them are indefinite. Therefore, internal to the structure of phenomena is that they may be transformed or re-written in being taken up. One way in which Cavell transforms skepticism is to reflect on it and gender as an occasion to re-conceiving both. In this, Cavell understands skepticism as embodying the "masculine" side of human nature's quest for unconditional certainty in contrast the "feminine" side of human nature manifests in unconditional love (Cavell 1969e, 1979, 1981, 1987; see Mulhall 1994; Bauer 2015; Russell 2018). However, while modern epistemological skepticism may embody these traditional gender roles, it need not. In this, one of the truths of skepticism is that there is no general form of X (e.g., skepticism or gender). To round out the essay, I will now argue that Cavell's thought entails three truths of skepticism.

7 Three Truths of Skepticism

The first truth of skepticism is that there is no general form of X to guarantee that our expressions about phenomena will be secured in future contexts (Wittgenstein 2009 § 65; Cavell 1979, pp. 122, 171–3). Notice this rejection of a general form is not only an anti-metaphysical position but also prohibits an appeal to social convention as inaugurating *the* form of phenomena (see footnote 3 on the difference between Cavell and Kripke). As a result, the possibilities of phenomena and our conceptualization of them are indefinite. But if there is no substantive metaphysics or social conventions supporting our practices and institutions, have we not migrated from "the truths of skepticism" to the wasteland of outright skepticism? (cf. Cavell 1988, p. 154) Cavell argues that it is in "*language* that human beings agree" (Wittgenstein 2009 § 241) such that for "a group of human being *stimmen* in their language *überein* says … that they

[13] One could tell a more complicated story about Derrida and experience through his critical inheritance of phenomenology, but that would be a different essay. Here I have simply followed Cavell's presentation of Derrida.

are mutually voiced with respect to it, mutually *attuned*" (Cavell 1979, p. 32). He continues that it is astonishing how far our mutual attunement in judgment take us, but that such attunement has its limits (Cavell 1979, p. 115). These limits indicate the second truth of skepticism—human finitude. Since there are neither metaphysical universals nor stable social conventions to assure the transmission of our practices and institutions, one must acknowledge one's finite ability to do so. This does not mean that we are metaphysically prevented from doing something (e.g., expressing pain, following a rule, etc.), but it does mean that we are not all-powerful Gods. Our word is our bond such that the meaningfulness of our expressions is found in our mutual attunement of judgment (Austin 1962a, p. 10). When our judgments come apart so too does the meaningfulness of our expressions.

While the first two truths of skepticism describe metaphysical insights, the third truth entails an ethical valence (Cavell 1969d, 1969e, 1979). Central to Cavell's claim that there is a truth in skepticism is to acknowledge the other as a separate source of significance. This stems from his rejection of the idea that there is a "generic" other mind or a mind devoid of its facticity.

> the question of "knowing all, the whole, the entirety, of the other" seems to require knowing essentially *more than the whole* of that other human body, namely, knowing of something "else," something invisible, something related to "who" this is, oscillating between something endlessly private or else something endlessly public (this particular other is the mother of three, she is a twin, high strung, graceful, a substitute teacher, a truant officer, a trusted friend, divorced, the recording secretary of her high school class, a mystic, a home owner, a bowler, a high jumper, a bicyclist, a vegetarian, thin, tall, a college dropout, her mother converted to Judaism, … in short, she has a history, hence conditions that any time *may* surface.) (Cavell 2010, p. 365)

Acknowledging the separateness of the other entails that the other's psychology demands indefinite re-description and re-evaluation. Indefinite, in the sense, that one's understanding of any particularly situation may be in need of re-evaluation. Therefore, Cavell transforms skepticism beyond its epistemologically confines to include three metaphysical and ethical truths: (1) there is no general form of X such that (2) historicity and finitude shape the transmission of and allow for the transformation of expressions and institutions. (3) Consequently, sharing meaning entails acknowledging the other as a separate source of significance.

8 Conclusion

To close, I have argued that refutations of skepticism cannot attain universal assent, which in turn brings out three metaphysical and ethical truths. The first metaphysical insight is that there is no general form to guarantee the future intelligibility of phenomena. The intelligibility of phenomena is founded on our mutual attunement of judgment. However, such attunement has its limits, which mark the second metaphysical truth of skepticism: human finitude. Acknowledging such limits entails accepting that neither an appeal to metaphysical universals nor to social convention will ensure such historical transmission of the intelligibility of our expressions. As a result, the third truth of skepticism is the ethical insight to respond to the facticity of the other as a unique, separate source of significance. In this, Cavell's inheritance of skepticism transforms the latter beyond its epistemic confines to include metaphysical and ethical truths.

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