

Dear Stanley

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Abstract Part personal reminiscence and part scholarly disquisition, this article discusses some ways in which Stanley Cavell's work has shaped my own thinking and composing. I begin by suggesting that Cavell's overarching goal is to "redeem" traditional philosophy (and secondarily, avant-garde art) from its more stringent critics. I then explain how my early work, while sharing Cavell's general aims, diverges from his specific claims. This involves considering some ways in which false beliefs can contribute to human flourishing. I then explore general objections to redemptive narratives of this sort. The essay ends with a brief discussion of Cavell's response to skepticism, in which I propose that philosophy and art might be farther apart than Cavell believes.

A FEW MONTHS AFTER I GOT TO COLLEGE, I began to worry that the world had gone crazy. My teachers, it turned out, knew literally nothing about the music I listened to, whether it was Allan Holdsworth, *Koyaanisqatsi*, or *The Grand Wazoo*. Nobody taught classes about the *Rite of Spring*, John Coltrane, the *gamelan*, or for that matter even György Ligeti. Instead, the faculty was almost uniformly devoted to a kind of music that—as I put it to myself—*sounded bad*. I can well remember sitting in the music library, listening again and again to Arnold Schoenberg's string trio, straining to hear what might have led my freshman composition teacher to call it a masterpiece.

That first year, I had wangled my way into a graduate seminar taught by a visiting faculty member named Milton Babbitt. Babbitt's lectures were brilliant, charming, seductive, erudite, and seemingly completely spontaneous.¹ They convinced me that there were interesting structures to be found in the music of Schoenberg and Webern, and that these structures could still be used to write intellectually rigorous music. (Babbitt was also very generous to me personally, taking time to look at my music and encouraging me to think seriously about composition; this was so important to my self-confidence that I now think of him as "giving me permission" to be a composer.) And yet there was still the problem of the music's sound. I recall coming home from seminar late in the semester, intellectually exhilarated but puzzled by the

¹ Disappointingly, a near-verbatim transcript eventually appeared as *Words about Music* (Babbitt 1987), based on apparently identical talks given the year before at the University of Wisconsin.

fact that nobody ever asked whether these beautiful intellectual structures made the music *sound* any better.

In these turbulent intellectual waters, Stanley Cavell appeared as a beacon of hope. Over the summer between my freshman and sophomore years, my father lent me his copy of *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell's first book of essays. I was overwhelmed. Cavell wrote like a philosophical Bob Dylan, in brilliant verbal torrents whose obscurity sent my own thoughts racing. Two essays in particular, "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning It," approached the musical avant-garde with a remarkable blend of skepticism and sympathy. Here was a critic trying to thread his way between outright dismissal and pure boosterism—a writer who acknowledged that there was something deeply weird about (say) Babbitt's music but who also felt that Babbitt was a person worth taking seriously. Modern composers, Cavell wrote, "have all but lost their audience." And yet at the same time he made it clear that composers were not fools, and that it was important that they felt *compelled* to write in this audience-alienating way. There was an aporia here, and Cavell wrote with the subtlety and passion of someone who had experienced it personally.

That book precipitated a number of changes in my life. I left the music department and petitioned to construct an independent major combining music and philosophy. (Part of this, it must be said, was the desire to avoid the tedium of four semesters of music history surveys.) Quoting Cavell, I argued that the challenge of modern music was in part a philosophical challenge and that a coherent *musical* response to modernism would at the same time be a *philosophical* response. I also applied to take Cavell's graduate seminar on the connections between literary Romanticism and philosophical skepticism. As a sophomore nonphilosopher, I was of course a poor candidate for admission to the course, but I wrote in my application that I was a budding composer whose father was a philosopher and whose mother was a literature professor. Cavell, as it turned out, had studied composition at Juilliard and had just written a book describing literature and philosophy as his "mother and father tongues."

For the rest of my college career I took as many of Cavell's graduate seminars as I could—about Heidegger, opera, film, and psychoanalysis. This was in some ways a poor decision, as there were any number of classes that would have provided me with information and skills more directly relevant to my later life. But in other ways it was an unparalleled opportunity, a chance to watch a great contemporary philosopher at the height of his powers. Cavell was also extremely generous with his time, letting me attend whatever classes I wanted, taking me out for lunch, and acting as if my ideas were worth listening to. For my part, I gradually learned the contours of his thinking, finding it easier and easier to follow paragraphs that might begin with Wordsworth and end with *Bringing Up Baby* or J. L. Austin. My writing began

to take on a distinctly Cavellian twist, replete with personal asides, parenthetical confessions, and willful digressions of dubious relevance to the larger argument.²

Unfortunately, this philosophical apprenticeship had a less-than-happy conclusion. By the end of college, I realized that I was musically lost. I had decided that it would be better to write no music at all than to write in the atonal style of my teachers but had received next to no useful information about contemporary tonal composition: Debussy, jazz, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich were closed books to me, impervious to the analytical methods of my teachers. Nor did music theory seem particularly promising: though David Lewin had tried to convince me that various mathematical gadgets could enrich my musical understanding, I never managed to see the connection; furthermore, I was somewhat put off by an analytical approach that seemed (at least to me, at least at the time) more like cryptography than a straightforward attempt to describe the ways in which actual human beings made clear artistic statements. Philosophy, by contrast, seemed full of promise. As a writer, Cavell provided a model of thinking that was broad ranging, humane, personal, interesting, and deep. And as a person, Cavell was one of the most passionate men I had ever encountered, with each seminar an almost-desperate struggle to understand something about our place in the world. So I trundled off to Oxford University, determined to practice philosophy as he had shown it to me.

I soon learned that I had made a terrible mistake. Cavell's ideas, I discovered, were not generally accepted as currency within Anglo-American philosophy departments. I had been equipped with a kind of intellectual scrip, useful perhaps at Chicago or Berkeley but nearly worthless at the university I happened to be attending. Two frustrating years later, I was kicked out of Oxford's graduate program, informed that the head of the philosophy faculty could find "no discernable philosophical content" in my work. Exiled from academia for the first time in my life, I went back to the United States to try to figure out what to do next.

The Cavellian drive toward redemptive redescription

Cavell encourages us to tell a redemptive story about the hidden significance of modern art—a genre that occasionally seems to challenge the basic presupposition that art should somehow be good to look at (or listen to). The challenge might result from a work's being minimal (a black square, an empty white canvas, four and a half minutes of silence) or shocking (a pickled animal

² In the fall of my junior year, I encountered a scruffy, befuddled first-year graduate student who had just sat through his first Cavell class: shaking his head, he collapsed on a couch in the philosophy department lounge, wondering whether he would ever manage to understand what Cavell was talking about. Taking pity on a lost soul, I

deigned to translate a few of Cavell's sentences into ordinary English. ("It's just a language," I said; "you get used to it eventually.") The student, I am embarrassed to say, was David Foster Wallace, perhaps the most brilliant writer of his generation and certainly one of Cavell's most original and interesting descendents.

cut in half, a dress made of rotting meat) or puerile in some way (examples too many to list). Cavell's goal is to try to say something that is not completely dismissive, to avoid simply rejecting modernism as an instance of the madness of crowds or the hunger for novelty gone metastatic. But neither does he want to disregard the literally noxious quality of some of these works. ("Despite appearances, the rotting meat-dress is great art in exactly the same way as Michelangelo's sculptures. . . .") The goal, in other words, is to acknowledge the depth of the modernist challenge while also explaining its importance.

Telling attractive stories about potentially unattractive-seeming activities is a characteristic Cavellian activity. Cavell writes in the tradition of philosophy-as-therapy, in which the goal is to show *the fly* (a metaphor for the traditional philosopher) how to get out of *the fly bottle* (presumably a metaphor for philosophical confusion, rather than highly remunerative nonterminable university employment). But while therapist-philosophers like Austin sometimes suggested that philosophical problems arose from correctible errors about the nature of language, Cavell argues that philosophy is much more basic—an urge, like aggression, that can be ameliorated but not altogether eliminated. Thus, for Cavell the struggle against philosophical confusion requires continual vigilance rather than simply explaining how words connect to the world.³

This leads to a perspective in which philosophical arguments are something like windows onto the self. Cavell is particularly concerned with "philosophical skepticism," the view that we cannot know whether the external world exists or whether others have thoughts and feelings in the way we do. Is it possible, for example, that we are "brains in a vat" who think we are living in a three-dimensional world but whose experience is in fact produced by computer stimulation of our brains? Philosophers disagree about whether these sorts of questions are worth answering or whether they should instead be dismissed, as both Rorty and Heidegger advocated. Cavell's later writing steers between these alternatives, suggesting that skepticism's significance lies in the way it reveals a fundamental human tendency. ("Nothing is more human than the wish to deny one's humanity, or to assert it at the expense of others. But if that is what skepticism entails, it cannot be combated through simple 'refutations.'")⁴ Thus, even if skeptical questions might lack satisfying

3 Cavell expresses the redemptive attitude nicely in the following passage: "Anything would be pleasanter than the continuing rehearsals—performable on cue by any graduate student in good standing—of how Descartes was mistaken about dreams, or Locke about truth, or . . . [long list follows]. Such 'explanations' are no doubt essential, and they may account for everything we need to know, except why any man of intelligence has ever been attracted to the subject of philosophy" (2002, 11). The implication seems to be that there is something deep and important about philosophy *even if* its positive theses are flawed. Another implication seems to be that we need to explain

why "intelligent men" would have false beliefs, an implication I reject altogether. Confusion and false belief are the default human condition.

4 Cavell 1979, 109. A little earlier, Cavell writes: "In Wittgenstein's view the gap between mind and the world is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the appreciation and acceptance of particular human forms of life, human 'convention.' This implies that the *sense* of gap originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a 'stranger' to, 'alienated' from) those shared forms of life, to give up the responsibility of their maintenance" (108).

or conclusive *answers*, they can still teach us something important about our existential condition.⁵

Though the topic is not particularly central to Cavell's work, writers often pursue a similar strategy with respect to religious belief. Here again, the goal is to strike a compromise between outright dismissal ("religion is just primitive superstition") and uncritical acceptance ("everything in the bible is literally true"). This may involve distancing religious practice from literal belief—say, by portraying religion as an activity of community construction rather than a doctrine—or reinterpreting seemingly literal language as metaphorical or symbolic. I mention this because religion is perhaps the primary place where readers will have encountered the Cavellian strategy of redemptive redescription: though skepticism and avant-garde art are minority tastes, many people struggle to reconcile their attraction to a particular faith with the seemingly contradictory teachings of contemporary science.

It is interesting that these three cases—modern art, philosophical skepticism, and religion—all involve an essentially homologous structure. We begin with an activity that is problematic from a certain point of view: creating unappealing art, asking whether we know that the world exists, or preserving the superstitions of our primitive past.⁶ What philosophy can do, at least on a broadly Cavellian understanding, is help us reinterpret these activities more sympathetically. So it might show us that modernism is not simply a kind of corrupt mania for novelty and thus lead us to a more empathetic understanding of this one part of contemporary culture. Twenty years after encountering Cavell, I remain attracted to this vision of philosophy, where the ultimate goal is mutual understanding and social cohesion. Here the metaphor of philosophy-as-therapy seems entirely apt, though perhaps the relevant kind of therapy is not the one-on-one encounter between doctor and patient, but rather group or couples therapy, in which the goal is to reconcile a diverse culture with itself.

Cavell and modernism: A swerve

The perspective that I take from Cavell's early essays—and it is distilled from hints and suggestions rather than overt statements—is that modern art is in a sense the inverse of philosophical skepticism. In both cases, we confront a kind of *ungroundedness*. What the traditional philosopher wants (says Cavell) is an assurance that the world is as we think it is, a grounding of our beliefs in some unshakable, nonhuman foundation. What the successful modern artist demonstrates is that we have to live with ungroundedness—that “what

⁵ Rorty (1981) aptly notes that while many philosophers have tried to find rigorous arguments in European existentialism, Cavell is one of the few philosophers to diagnose existential angst at the heart of Anglo-American philosophy.

⁶ Cavell mentions *en passant* the interesting analogies among these three domains, though he merely notes that each involves a similar oscillation between conviction and doubt.

art is” is, importantly, *up to us*. The artistic conservative might wish to ground the practice of art in tradition, mathematics, or biological universals. To this, the modernist replies that “anything is beautiful if you say it is.” If modernism is a quasi-philosophical search for the *essence* of a particular genre, be it painting or music or theater, then what it discovers is that there is no essence (representation, say, or expression, or tonality, or the posited “fourth wall”) but simply our bare willingness to treat certain objects as art.⁷ Transmuting philosophical crisis into aesthetic opportunity, the modernists show that rotting meat and silent music can fit the bill.

This way of putting things might suggest that modernism’s importance lies in the sheer transgressing of boundaries rather than in the specific qualities of particular artworks. But as I understand him, Cavell would want to avoid the implication that in considering a particular work we are confronted with a completely voluntary or arbitrary *choice* about whether to accept it as art. Instead, I suspect he would say that we are involuntarily *drawn* by certain objects, so that we find them to be natural extensions of our existing artistic categories. (Cavell mentions that he is drawn in this way by Anthony Caro’s sculpture but not by pop art or Karlheinz Stockhausen; I am similarly drawn by Steve Reich’s *Piano Phase* but not by Pierre Boulez’s *Structures Ia*, even though both valorize “process” over intuition.) Cavell’s thinking here reflects a Wittgensteinian preoccupation with the way human cognition depends upon agreement in inclinations—for example, a shared tendency to continue the series “997, 998, 999” with “1000, 1001, 1002” rather than “1000, 1002, 1004.” This agreement, for Cavell, is not a matter of voluntary *choice*, but rather a shared sense of what *naturally* comes next.

The poet John Ashbery once said that “most reckless things are beautiful in some way and recklessness is what makes experimental art beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility they are founded on nothing”.⁸ As Cavellians, we should read Ashbery’s “founded on nothing” as registering not emptiness or arbitrariness, but rather metaphysical self-reliance: the practice of counting “999, 1000, 1001” is justified by nothing other than alignment among human inclinations and reactions. In just the same way, modernism demonstrates that *what music is* cannot be defined other than as *what we are prepared to countenance as such*. From this point of view, modern art is interesting precisely because it dramatizes the fragility of our mutual attunement: in ordinary life we do not encounter people who count “999, 1000, 1002,” but we *do* encounter people who disagree about whether a particular pickled shark is or is not art. Modernism thus

⁷ Cavell’s thinking here is influenced by Clement Greenberg (1971) and bears a certain resemblance to the work of Arthur Danto (1964).

⁸ Ashbery 1989, 391. Similarly, in “Music Discomposed” Cavell writes, “For religious experience is subject to distrust on the same grounds as aesthetic experience is: by those to whom it is foreign, on the grounds that its claims must be false; by those to whom it is familiar, on the ground that its claims must be tested” (2002, 191).

forces us toward realizations that we might otherwise be able to evade, were we to think only about simple philosophical examples.

As a student I was dissatisfied by some of the particulars of Cavell's approach even while being attracted to its general contours. Partly this is because I am inclined toward a relatively traditional scientific realism, which sits uncomfortably with Cavell's Wittgensteinian outlook. (More on this below.) But it is also because I worried that Cavell was downplaying two fundamental features of twentieth-century art. The first was its connection to philosophy. Cavell writes as if a preoccupation with philosophy was unique to postwar composers such as Babbitt and John Cage, whereas from my perspective it is endemic to modernism more generally. Figures such as Malevich, Mondrian, or Schoenberg did not simply produce unusual or challenging works of art; they also *theorized* about what they were doing, typically in a way that justified their own productions. I thought Cavell sometimes seemed to give short shrift to this theorizing—suggesting that we should enjoy an unmediated perceptual encounter with the art of Malevich or Schoenberg but not that of Stockhausen or Cage. Furthermore, Cavell occasionally seemed to vacillate about philosophy's permissible role in helping us to appreciate particular pieces of art; in one deliciously indecisive passage, for example, he suggests that philosophy *cannot* be used to justify musical works, *except* in the case of Cage, whose theorizing was “charming” and whose music should *not* be presented as music, though it still might be presented as “ritual” or “paratheater,” whatever this means (perhaps the performers are to set out a placard reading “paratheater, not music”?), but that none of these points applied to those Cage pieces performed in the presence of dancers.⁹

My second source of dissatisfaction was that Cavell sometimes seemed to ignore the way these artistic/philosophical views satisfied distinct emotional *needs*. As an undergraduate, I was nervous about my own musical abilities, intimidated by those perfect-pitch virtuosos who could sight-read Chopin and write huge orchestral pieces. Modernist ideology provided me with a defense against self-doubt, reassuring me that if I wrote music in a particular way then I would be pushing culture forward, creating music that was categorically different from (and perhaps superior to) the music that intimidated me. Reading Schoenberg or Malevich or Boulez, I could not help but notice a similar sort of self-assurance. These were not modest artisans who conceived of their work as high-class entertainment. Instead, they presented themselves as messianic figures making fundamental contributions to the development of the human spirit. It was clear to me that it would be quite satisfying to think of oneself in these terms, and I began to suspect that this satisfaction might help explain why the modernists were so totally committed to their

⁹ See Cavell 2002, 196. It might be interesting to consider this indecision in light of Cavell's attitudes toward the critic and the artist. Perhaps Cavell objects to those artists who

try to play the role of critic as well? Conversely, perhaps my claim is that the intertwining of creation and criticism is central to modernism? (Thanks to Brian Kane here.)

ideologies—even at the cost of alienating audiences. Moreover, it was easy to find nonmusical cases in which improbable beliefs (e.g., an afterlife where good deeds were rewarded and bad deeds punished) delivered clear emotional benefits.

As a graduate student, these two reservations led me to try to formulate an alternative to the redemptive narrative I had gleaned from Cavell's writings. My basic thought was that there are fundamental truths which are inevitably somewhat disappointing: that we are mortal, that our desires may go unsatisfied, that our artistic creations may not be as good as we hoped, that we are required to make fundamental compromises, and so on. (In general, our imaginations exceed our abilities, and it is easy to picture a world better than the one we live in.) Maturity, for most of us, involves learning to live with these disappointments and getting on with our lives. Yet some people manage to acquire beliefs that allow them to escape these disappointments—beliefs that, whether right or wrong, nevertheless provide an important source of satisfaction.

My fundamental (and somewhat anti-Cavellian) conclusion was: *this is all OK*. We are not forced to suppose that false-but-satisfying beliefs are fundamentally defective, and we can even decide that the most admirable lives involve a certain degree of self-deception. Indeed, there is very good reason to expect that true beliefs will not *always* maximize human well-being: if the universe were created by a benevolent God who was deeply concerned with human beings, then this might be the case; if, on the other hand, the universe were not created with our satisfaction in mind, then it might not. (And in fact, psychologists have discovered a number of circumstances in which emotional health correlates with a tendency toward self-deception.) This view is related to the pragmatism of philosophers such as Nietzsche, James, or Wittgenstein, but I came at the matter from a rather different perspective. Where a pragmatist like James was willing to define "true" as "beliefs which maximize human satisfaction," I was more inclined to separate the question of *whether a belief is true* from *whether it produces good effects*. True beliefs represent the world as it actually is, but that does not necessarily make them desirable.

This in turn led me to the following idiosyncratic syllogism: Suppose we assume that modernist art often needs to be appreciated in the context of the ideas that gave rise to it—as if the black square or silent composition were a kind of placeholder or flag or symbol, whose aesthetic significance derived not from its intrinsic qualities but from the artist's motivations. (Again, Cavell seems to endorse this perspective with regard to Cage but not Stockhausen or, one presumes, Babbitt or Malevich.) Suppose we also feel that these ideas are themselves philosophically suspect, so that we cannot directly endorse the metaphysics of a Malevich, Schoenberg, or Cage. Then developing a deep and rich appreciation for modernist art would seem to involve developing a deep and rich appreciation for false beliefs, comparable to the appreciation that a sympathetic atheist might feel for the religious believer.

What results is a pluralistic view in which society is a kind of collaboration between somewhat-disappointed realists and happily deceived idealists. Seen from this perspective, the problem of religious toleration is fundamentally a cognitive one, a matter of a society deciding how much falsity it should permit. (As individuals, we may not be able to choose our own beliefs, but we can certainly make the collective choice to tolerate others' self-deceptions.) Furthermore, it seemed to me that I could tell a plausible story about why these pleasing falsehoods might have come to play an increasingly important role in twentieth-century art. For the accumulation of knowledge will gradually threaten the viability of public illusions, making it increasingly difficult for prophets and metaphysicians to ply their trades. In art, however, there is no premium on truth, and the prophetic impulse is comparatively sheltered: we can tolerate in an artist beliefs that would be frightening in a politician or scientist. This, I thought, might help explain why contemporary art had come to shoulder some of the ancient burdens of philosophy. Diogenes the Cynic lit his lantern at midday and wandered through the square saying "I seek an honest man"—precisely the sort of behavior we now expect from conceptual artists rather than from the tweedy professors staffing our philosophy departments.

Anyway, all of this was supposed to be part of my Ph.D. dissertation, which aspired to rework Cavell's redemptive narrative while tying together the problems of modernist art and religious toleration. (And in the process, explaining my own composerly ambivalence toward the avant-garde.) My goal was to articulate a realist alternative to pragmatism, which acknowledged that truth and falsity were a matter of correspondence to external reality, but which argued that false beliefs were in some cases worthy of respect and could even be intrinsic to certain kinds of admirable lives. As I saw it, modernist art was just one of many practices that forced us to consider whether we could learn to appreciate others' beneficial-but-false beliefs.

It didn't work out. The Oxford philosophy department was not particularly interested in redemptive narratives, Cavell, atonal music, or religion. Doctoral students were not encouraged to develop large and original world-views, nor to support them with vaguely journalistic, quasi-autobiographical prose. And I was not particularly willing to compromise my youthful ambitions by choosing a suitably boring academic topic. (My thesis adviser helpfully suggested "The Sublime and the Beautiful in Kant's Critique of Judgment.") So having managed to get kicked out of graduate school, I found myself looking for a new career.

Meta-clinamen

As I work my way through these neglected ideas, the experience evokes some of the anxiety of becoming reacquainted with old friends. (Will we still laugh at each others' jokes? Have we changed beyond recognition?) And to my

surprise, I have discovered doubts about the entire redemptive strategy I have been sketching.

Part of this is cultural. When Cavell was writing his early essays, modernist art was at its apex, both culturally central and genuinely provocative. Classical music was still the music of the educated classes, and composers were important cultural figures who might find their way into publications like *Time* or the *New York Review of Books*. In the twenty-first century, this music's cultural status has changed dramatically. Every niche now finds its audience, with concert music being just one genre among many—and arguably not the most prestigious. Meanwhile, avant-garde visual art is a known commodity whose provocations have become all too predictable: after the urinal, the Brillo boxes can only be so shocking; ditto for the shot in the arm, the pickled shark, or the urine-soaked crucifix. Today, transgressive art threatens to become just another pastime like quilting or competitive eating. In this context, it seems somewhat quaint to bother with the “philosophical significance of modernism.” Contemporary art is a subculture with its own audience and market, not obviously different from the market for baseball cards or pornography about hobbits.

Another part is personal. Twenty years ago, I had a serious stake in rejecting deflationary accounts of modernist music. As a college student I wanted my education to mean something, and it was important that my composition teachers not be deeply misguided. (Particularly given the astronomical tuition costs at my alma mater.) I also had more practical motivations, since I felt that my future prospects depended on my taking a nonantagonistic stand toward my professors. (To reject them was to decide to make my own way in the musical world, and I had gone to college precisely because I was not ready to take that step.) Now, though, I am no longer so concerned with Milton Babbitt or Leon Kirchner or Don Martino or David Lewin's approval, nor so bothered by the thought that my undergraduate composition lessons were a waste of time.

Yet a third issue is that I am more squarely a scientific realist than either Wittgenstein or Cavell. For Wittgenstein, it is fundamental and seemingly inexplicable that we find it natural to count “998, 999, 1000, 1001. . . .” But I have always suspected that these inclinations can themselves be explained by some combination of physics, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and cognitive science. (Indeed, from an evolutionary standpoint, agreement-in-inclinations is both utterly unremarkable and easily explicable.) If there is an idealist streak in Wittgenstein's thinking, it lies precisely in his insistence that inclinations cannot themselves be grounded in anything more basic.¹⁰ I find this particularly dissatisfying when it comes to music. In my forthcoming book

¹⁰ Where realists might try to use science to explain our agreement-in-inclinations, Wittgenstein inverts the order of explanation, arguing that agreement-in-inclinations

should be used to explain the possibility of science itself. This resembles a traditional idealist move: realists use science to explain how the world causes sensations, whereas idealists use sensations to construct the world.

(*A Geometry of Music*), I argue that tonality in the broad sense can be understood as the product of five basic musical features, four of which are found in virtually every human culture.¹¹ What is interesting about atonality is that it systematically abjures these five features, leading to music that in its global statistical properties is quite similar to random music. From this point of view, there is absolutely no mystery about why this music should be unpopular, nor about how to proceed if one wants to write music that is more broadly enjoyable.

Rereading Cavell's essays, I am now struck by some of the ways in which they retail familiar modernist ideology. Cavell writes as if Schoenbergian atonality were the singular and inevitable response to late-nineteenth-century chromaticism, whereas I believe that Schoenberg's strategy was just one of several: other composers tempered Wagnerian chromaticism by exploring new scales and modes, leading to an indigenous twentieth-century tonal language spoken by Debussy, Ravel, Janacek, the early Stravinsky, Shostakovich, jazz musicians, Reich, John Adams, and many others. Similarly, Cavell alludes at several points to the apparent "irreversibility" of artistic change, yet in recent decades the musical world has seen what can only be described as extraordinary reversals: in jazz, Wynton Marsalis spearheaded the rejection of both free jazz and jazz-rock in favor of neo-bop; in concert music, countless composers returned to tonality, whether postminimalist or neoromantic. One expects, of course, that forty-year-old essays will show their age. But these particular limitations suggest that Cavell was not quite prepared to grapple with the thought that *atonality itself* (as opposed to just its most extreme manifestations) might be perceptually or aesthetically or philosophically problematic. Yet this is exactly what his musical contemporaries were contemplating.

So I now find myself wondering whether we might be better off trying to dispense with redemptive narratives altogether. Perhaps it *is* somewhat silly to worry about whether the external world exists, or about whether other people have thoughts and feelings. Maybe instead of reflecting on the needs that produce philosophical skepticism, we should try to *ask ourselves substantively interesting philosophical questions*. Perhaps twelve-tone music really was a kind of blind alley, a musical fad that will eventually seem dated and irrelevant (if it doesn't already). Maybe we should learn to *write music that people really enjoy*, rather than reflecting on the satisfactions engendered by modernist ideology. And perhaps religious beliefs really are intrinsically connected to primitive superstitions that we are better off discarding. If these are truths,

¹¹ The five features are (1) melodies move by short distances in log-frequency space; (2) harmonies are structurally similar, related by transposition or nearly so; (3) harmonies tend to be consonant; (4) pieces limit themselves to five to eight pitch classes over small stretches of musical time; and (5) one note is typically felt as being

more stable or central than the others. It is possible, though not certain, that these features reflect fundamental facts about our biology; if so, however, this does not necessarily underwrite any particular set of *value judgments* about music.

then they are hard truths, implying that a certain amount of human effort has been wasted. But it is not immediately clear that they are altogether incompatible with human happiness. To be sure, they may require us to develop a stoic toughness, a willingness to look disappointments right in the eye—or in other words, to engage in something like philosophy as it was once understood.

This thought is unsettling enough that I am not prepared to make a final decision about it. True, I do sometimes worry that my earlier interest in redemptive narratives might have reflected youthful insecurity about whether I could learn to write straightforwardly interesting music or whether I would be lucky enough to discover straightforwardly interesting truths. And it is true that I do think that there is a certain virtue in simplicity: liking music that sounds good (to you), and admiring those whose beliefs are true (by your own lights). At the same time, however, it seems clear to me that living in our culture requires developing a certain kind of toleration for those who are different. Many readers of this essay, I know, love the music of Schoenberg, Babbitt, or Cage. Others are sympathetic to Wittgenstein or to religious beliefs that I find superstitious. I need to learn to live with these people, just as they need to learn to live with me. What I admire about the redemptive strategy is its promise that we might build something stronger than bare coexistence—that I, at least, might come to understand these different belief systems as representing alternative compromises between the conflicting values of truth and human satisfaction.

Closing thoughts on Cavell, philosophy, and education

To me, philosophy is most interesting when it manages to combine *is* and *ought*, telling us how the world is in a way that has implications for how we should live our lives. This combination can be found in almost all of the classic works of pre-twentieth-century philosophy: Berkeley's idealism underwrote his proof for the existence of God, while Hume drew antireligious consequences from his materialist worldview; closer to our time, Nietzsche used his metaphysics of will-to-power to articulate an alternative to cooperative or Christian morality, while James used his conception of truth to argue that religion was worth taking seriously. Each offered a distinctive conception of the world that implied important moral consequences.

Nowadays, it is relatively rare to find philosophers willing to take up both sides of this project. To some extent, this reflects a growing consensus about the nature of things: there are, after all, only so many books to be written saying "scientists are generally right," and only so many moral consequences to be drawn from the same basic conception of the world. There is also the fact that philosophers have lost some of the authority that allowed them to make pronouncements about the world: these days, if physicists decide the universe is made up of fields or strings or information, the

philosophers more or less have to take their word for it. On top of that, philosophy seems to have developed an allergy toward moralizing: even revolutionaries such as Wittgenstein largely focus their energy on logic and language, preferring to make only sporadic remarks about religion, culture, or value.¹²

It is precisely here that I find Cavell most interesting. What he did, essentially, was add an explicitly moral dimension to Wittgenstein's picture of the world—taking Wittgenstein's obsessions with counting and criteria and using them to ask pressing questions about great literature, the nature of democracy, and the structure of our repressed desires. Furthermore, he did this in essays that combine personal charisma with high moral seriousness, conveying the sense of a life-or-death struggle to say something about “what it is to be a fucking human being.” (The quotation is from David Foster Wallace, whose writing combines Pynchonian postmodernism with Cavell's intimate, confessional style.)¹³ If the tone of Cavell's writing conveys a mind struggling to understand its own humanity, then the subject matter, moving seamlessly between philosophy, film, music, and literature, implies that the beloved artifacts of Western culture, whether Gulliver's travels or Sullivan's, can help us get there.

Cavell, in short, writes about topics that might conceivably interest those who are not themselves professional philosophers. In this respect, he carries on the tradition of philosophy as practiced by Nietzsche or James, whose writings can be genuinely useful to ordinary people struggling to understand their place in the world. Here he stands in opposition to mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, which—for better and for worse—has become more specialized, more professionalized, and more like science. In seminars, Cavell used to describe himself as “someone who *stayed*,” meaning someone who entered philosophy because he was interested in its traditional, wide-ranging questions, and who managed to thrive despite the pressure to focus on more narrowly tractable matters. The implication was that many others did *not* stay, abandoning philosophy because they could not tolerate the gulf between Kierkegaard or Nietzsche and the *Journal of Philosophy*.

12 A notable exception is Peter Singer, who uses relatively conventional utilitarianism to argue that we should radically change our behavior toward animals. Singer's work has had an enormous impact on contemporary society, perhaps more than any living philosopher. He may well be instrumental in convincing our descendants to look on our current treatment of animals with something of the horror that we look back on earlier generations' treatment of their slaves.

13 For the quotation, see Max 2009. Rereading Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) recently, I noticed a series of distinctly Cavellian themes:

worries about “whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do” (136), about the “impossibility of sharing or articulating” a pain (31), about our ability to deny the humanity of others (98ff., a passage that seems to be in dialogue with the discussion of “soul-blindness” in Cavell 1979, 378), not to mention the occasional philosophical in-joke (e.g., “chicken-sexing,” 85). Here I am gratified that *Publisher's Weekly* noticed “how thoroughly Wallace has internalized the writing-and-thinking-habits of Stanley Cavell, the plain-language philosopher [s/c] at . . . Wallace's alma mater” (Stuttaford, Simon, and Zaleski 1996, 47).

It is just this, I think, that made Cavell a dangerous mentor for me. Though brilliant, Cavell was nevertheless lucky to get as far as he did: a tenured professor at a prestigious university, employed by a philosophy department but writing about subjects that are not philosophically mainstream. As someone who built a substantial following outside of philosophy, he was relatively immune to his colleagues' disapproval—though I have no doubts that he was occasionally frustrated by it. His students, however, were not so well protected. While I take ultimate responsibility for my own failure as a philosopher, I cannot help but think that I made the relatively natural mistake of underestimating the gulf between Cavell's interests and those of the profession at large. To be sure, Stanley always said that he was an outsider, and he never offered any assurances that others would find my ideas interesting. But I never managed to grasp that his achievement was impressive in part because most of the people who followed his path—people like me—were going to fail.

Not that I have much to complain about: I have landed on my feet, and my philosophical background has served me well. There have been several occasions where philosophy has helped me work my way through specific musical problems, whether it be odd moments in the first movement of Beethoven's *Tempest* sonata or Babbitt's unusual conception of musical hearing. Cavell's philosophy also inspired me to write my earliest mature compositions, in which atonality and tonality collide in a kind of symbolic representation of the conflict between intersubjective truth (tonality) and pleasing illusions (atonality).¹⁴ Perhaps more importantly, Cavell gave me the courage to think big. Having watched him struggle with genuinely enormous questions—for example, “how do we know whether the world exists?”—it became easier to contemplate large questions in the domain of music. For nothing I said about that subject would ever approach the grandiosity of traditional philosophy.

This brings me to my final point. It seems to me that there are at least two sorts of things teachers can do for us. Some provide us with useful information, while others provide us with intellectual role models, showing us what high achievement looks like at close range. To me, Cavell has been a teacher of this second kind. Substantively, I have ended up rather far away from him: a philosophical musician rather than musical philosopher, more

¹⁴ When I was in high school I discovered that I could deal with anxiety by dramatizing it, bringing it out into the open and making it the subject of jokes. What I learned from Cavell was that one could employ a similar strategy in the intellectual domain; that is, that one could make one's difficulties with writing into the subject of the writing—a maneuver that Foster Wallace calls “Carsoning” (1999, 135). (Cavell, meanwhile, says that he learned Carsoning from Austin [2002, xxxvii].) So in college I wrote a series of

Cavellian papers about my inability to write that very paper (e.g., an “analysis” of a piece that was actually about the failure of all the standard analytical techniques, or a discussion of the way in which a particular essay question, in a large and not very subtle history class, presupposed its own answer so clearly and obviously as to forestall the very possibility of independent thought). Inevitably, this led me to try to write music that dramatized my own conflicted musical personality, torn between my modernist training and the tonal music that I actually liked.

interested in science and math than in Wittgenstein and psychoanalysis. But I am acutely conscious that, were it not for Cavell's influence, I could never have become the person that I am. Of all the mentors I have ever had, it was Cavell who had the greatest impact on me, and whose basic values remain closest to my own. In his ambition, passion, and honesty, not to mention his ruthless self-criticism, Cavell set standards that I am proud to try to uphold, even though I may never manage to satisfy them as fully as he has.

Coda on skepticism

Since Cavell's thinking about art is so intimately connected to his lifelong engagement with skepticism, I feel I should add a word or two about this important topic. In so doing, I am conscious that I risk substituting sins of commission for those of omission, rushing too quickly over complicated philosophical ground. I cannot here provide anything like a conclusive argument, nor even a thorough discussion of this enormous topic. Instead, I want to make a few remarks about why I think art and philosophy are farther apart than Cavell suggests. Nonphilosophers, or those who feel they have already had a satisfactory essayistic experience, are permitted to stop reading here.

It seems to me that what Cavell calls "the problem of skepticism" is in reality a trio of separate questions.¹⁵ The first is substantive and has no specific connection to any particular form of words: is it possible that we are radically mistaken about how things are? As far as I know, virtually every contemporary philosopher, scientist, and thoughtful layperson agrees that the answer is "yes". (This is sometimes called the doctrine of "fallibilism.") The novels of Philip K. Dick and movies such as *The Matrix* illustrate this possibility in a particularly vivid way. So, for that matter, does the actual history of twentieth-century science: relativity and quantum mechanics together describe a world inconceivably distant from the simple Newtonian picture that was thought to be established beyond all reasonable doubt. (In fact, the connection is more than metaphorical: standard quantum mechanics assigns *nonzero probabilities* to outlandish events, such as the spontaneous appearance of dragons in your driveway.) Given this, it seems foolish to think that it is *absolutely certain* that the universe is roughly as we think it is. Could we discover that our experiences have been produced by computers directly stimulating the brain? Could it be that your very own spouse is a machine without emotions or feelings? Very unlikely, but in principle yes.

The second issue is slightly more technical: given that we *could* be in the Matrix, what justifies the belief that we aren't? (And to what extent is that belief in fact justified?) Here, I tend to agree with those philosophers

¹⁵ Like many philosophers, Cavell sharply distinguishes skepticism about the external world from skepticism about other minds. I will be deemphasizing this distinction in favor of the tripartite distinction articulated in the next few paragraphs.

who take this question to be, broadly speaking, scientific: the same canons of rationality that help us choose between empirically indistinguishable theories, such as Ptolemaic and heliocentric astronomy in the early Copernican era, can help us evaluate skeptical scenarios against the realist alternative. Surely one reason to think that we are not currently being deceived by an evil demon, as Descartes feared, is that *no hypothesis presupposing the existence of demons has ever proved correct*. And surely the assumption that consciousness is a physical process, coupled with a broadly Darwinian outlook, gives us legitimate reason to expect that others' brains work in the same basic way as ours do, and hence that they have thoughts and experiences roughly like our own.¹⁶

So should we say that we do or do not *know* that the external world exists, or that other people have thoughts and feelings the way we do? Here we reach the third question, which is a linguistic matter interesting mainly to specialists. Suffice it to say that I understand what someone might mean by saying "we don't know whether there is an external world." (Translation: we cannot rule out, with absolute certainty, *Matrix*-style possibilities.) But I also understand what someone might mean by asserting that we *do* know that there is an external world. (Translation: given the canons of practical and scientific reasoning, whose virtues are amply attested by such modern marvels as amoxicillin and Apple laptops, we are justified in disregarding extremely remote possibilities.) Philosophers have spilled a great deal of ink either trying to cast suspicion on one or another of these uses of "know" or analyzing the semantics of the word so as to leave room for both.¹⁷

Now I have two basic worries about Cavell's broadly Wittgensteinian approach to these issues. The first is that Wittgenstein himself often seemed to denigrate our ability to state or imagine skeptical scenarios, declaring that seemingly unobjectionable statements (e.g., "I know that a sick man is lying here") are in fact nonsensical, and insinuating that apparently conceivable scenarios (e.g., "your sensation of 'green' is my sensation of 'red'") are in fact inconceivable.¹⁸ This suggests a potential tension between Cavell's role as a

16 My brief discussion here should not be taken to imply that it is easy to tell a convincing scientific story about why we are justified in disbelieving skeptical scenarios. Instead, I will be arguing that the story's (possibly complex) details are irrelevant to the concerns of artists and musicians.

17 Some contemporary philosophers argue that the meaning of "know" varies with context—a variation that is evident not just when we are doing philosophy, but also in more mundane situations, as when we say "I know that the lottery ticket I just purchased will not be a winner" (Hawthorne 2006).

18 For example, "I know that a sick man is lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, I am looking attentively into his face.—So I don't know, then, that there is a sick man lying here? Neither the question nor the assertion makes sense" (Wittgenstein 1969, §10); "But can't it be

imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don't know. And yet 'There are physical objects' is nonsense. Is it supposed to be an empirical proposition?" (§35); "Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.—In one way this is wrong, and in another nonsense" (1953, §246); "Could one imagine a stone's having consciousness? And if anyone can do so—why should that not merely prove that such image-mongery is of no interest to us?" (§390); "Only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious" (§281); "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense" (§464); "The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether other people also have

critic and his role as an inheritor of Wittgenstein: a movie like *Being John Malkovich*, which purports to imagine a situation in which one person could experience the world through another's eyes, and hence perhaps discover evidence that Malkovich's "green" was my "red," would seem to be incoherent from an orthodox Wittgensteinian point of view. (One might think similarly about a movie like *The Matrix*, which presents a world in which there are no physical chickens and in which the statement "I doubt there are chickens" might be perfectly justified.) Philosophical comfort is thus procured by an attack on our expressive or imaginative capacities, a strategy that has always seemed like a vaguely Orwellian attempt to stop us from thinking or talking in unapproved ways.

(Note: It may be relevant here that Cavell's literary tastes tend to run toward classics like Shakespeare and Wordsworth and drawing-room comedies such as *Adam's Rib*, rather than to Philip K. Dick, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, or the Wachowski brothers.¹⁹ I also sense a connection to Cavell's idea that philosophy should reconcile us to our own "ordinariness"—a suggestion that has always struck me as being somewhat sinister. After all, for many of us, "ordinary life" can involve a demeaning job, mediocre achievements, romantic dissatisfaction, uncertain health care, or four hours of daily television, against which we are confronted by the periodic but indisputable irruptions of extraordinariness into human culture—whether those of Bach or Nietzsche or Einstein or Coltrane or Michael Jordan or Cavell himself. Given this, one wonders: what exactly is wrong with the desire to be extraordinary, or with literature that tries to imagine extraordinary possibilities?)

The second worry is that, if we reject this attempt to hamstring the domain of the imagination, then we may be left with a response to skepticism that *doesn't really speak to the primary concerns of artists, writers, or filmmakers*. For remarks about the grammar of the word *know* are not going to tell us anything fundamental about how the world actually is: suppose some philosopher could convince us that statements like "I know that my wife has feelings" (or "I know I have a hand") are nonsensical; it would nevertheless remain possible that you might *in fact* discover that your wife was constructed of insensate plastic or that your apparent hands were illusions produced by the computers running the Matrix.²⁰ But of course, this is precisely the sort of possibility that typically interests creators of imaginative fiction: insofar as

this or something else. The assumption would thus be possible—though unverifiable—that one section of mankind had one sensation of red and another section another" (§272). Like many other readers (e.g., Kripke 1982; Block 2007), I take the context of the last quotation to imply that the assumption is "disguised nonsense."

¹⁹ See Cavell 1979, 457, which seems to belittle science fiction and, by implication, fantastic literature more generally.

²⁰ A passage from *On Certainty* captures this nicely: "But what about such a proposition as 'I know I have a brain'? Can I doubt it? Grounds for doubt are lacking! Everything speaks in its favour, nothing against it. Nevertheless it is imaginable that my skull should turn out empty when it was operated on" (1969, §4). Intuitively, one might think that the imagined possibility is *precisely what provides grounds for doubt*.

artists care *at all* about skepticism, they presumably care about the fact that *we can be very wrong about how things are*—and not about the proper use of the word *know* or even the detailed mechanisms of justification.²¹

These two worries lead me to conclude that Cavell has overlooked some fundamental differences between the concerns of artists and philosophers—even if he is right that both groups can be motivated by similar anxieties or fears. From an artistic point of view, fallibilism is the important issue, and the pertinent fact is that *Othello could be making a really big mistake about Desdemona*. But among philosophers, the ongoing discussion concerns the nature of justification and the proper use of the term *know*. Thus, when Cavell talks about “the truth of skepticism,” he is walking a delicate line, for the phrase can refer either to the uncontroversial fact that we could always be wrong or to the more controversial claim that *we are not justified in thinking the way we do*.²² Like many others, I am much more prepared to countenance the first “truth” than the second.

Pursuing this thought, we may even find ourselves with more basic worries about the very attempt to fuse philosophy and literature. For it may be that certain topics (e.g., epistemic justification, the geometrical structure of music, quantum field theory) are so inherently complex as to demand a high degree of writerly clarity. Discussing them in a poetic or elusive fashion may complicate matters by interposing unnecessary barriers between reader and subject matter. (Implicit in this suggestion is a rejection of the mystical view that these subjects can *only* be grasped through literary language.) With Cavell, as with Wittgenstein, I worry that an elusive literary style may cast an illusory veil of profundity over the discussion of skepticism (whereas the literary mode seems more clearly appropriate when talking about art or music, or even the emotional impulses that might ultimately motivate a Cartesian skeptic). In my view, skepticism itself remains a broadly scientific issue, a matter of understanding why we are justified in our basic scientific and commonsense beliefs. More than twenty years after I first encountered Cavell, I continue to wonder whether *this* issue is truly central to the concerns of writers or musicians and, more generally, whether philosophy and literature are quite so close as he seems to believe.

²¹ Cavell might actually agree with this charge: in various places, he describes an important change in his thinking whereby he abandoned his earlier, more orthodox-Wittgensteinian attempt to demonstrate skepticism’s incoherence (e.g., Cavell 1979, 217–21, which offers a “schema for a potential overthrowing or undercutting of skepticism”) and decided instead to embrace its “truth.” See Cavell (2002, xiv–xv, 258ff.; 1979, 241).

²² Cavell sometimes seems to propose that skepticism can be overcome only by an existential act in which we accept or “acknowledge” human conventions (2002, 324). It would seem to follow that we are not simply *justified in believing* that others have feelings, at least not in the same way that we are justified in believing that energy is conserved, or that George the cat is white (Cavell 1979, 241, 109). Or perhaps the implication is that *all* our ordinary beliefs depend, in some sense, upon acts of acknowledgment, rather than simply being well-justified inferences about how things are. In either case, the thesis strikes me as an unnecessary departure from the commonsense or scientific worldview.

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