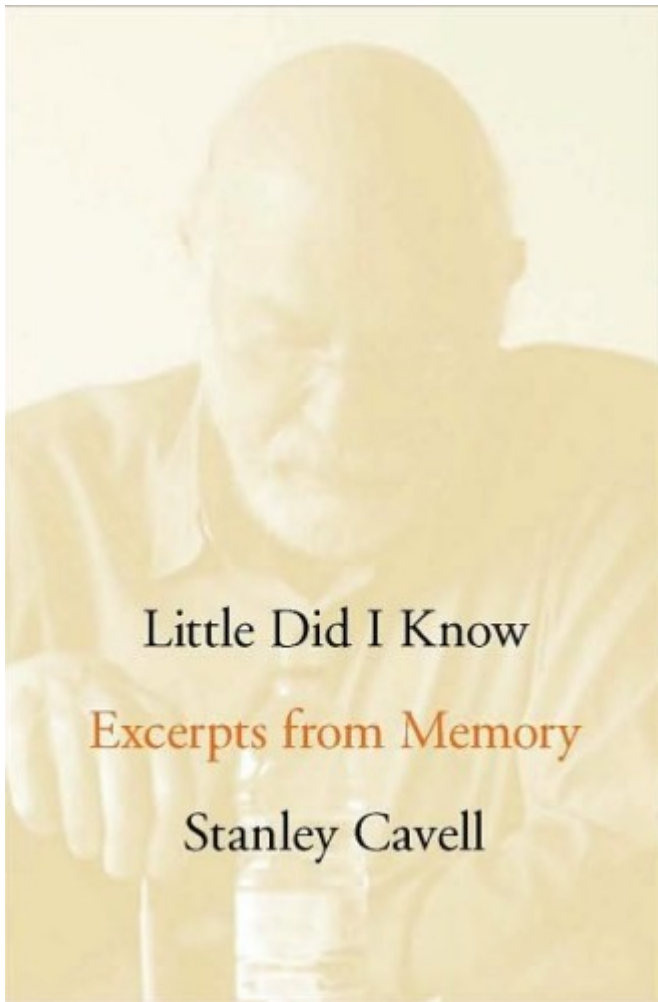Language games

by [George Dennis O'Brien](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue

In Review

Little Did I Know

By Stanley Cavell
Stanford University Press

More books have been published about Stanley Cavell than he has written himself. Cavell notes wryly in this memoir that many of these commentaries aim to introduce him to the philosophical world and that he remains an "outsider" in the philosophy

establishment—as much an outsider as a Harvard professor can be.

So who is Stanley Cavell—and why is one review of his work titled "The avoidance of Stanley Cavell"?

To understand why Cavell is constantly being introduced or avoided requires a brief history of modern philosophy. But we might begin with a more preliminary question: why should anybody be interested in philosophy? Most people don't seem to be. Philosophers tend to ask profoundly puzzling questions which, on second thought, appear to be profoundly *un*interesting.

A prime example: how do I know that the external world exists? That question has been philosophy's obsession since René Descartes, the undisputed father of modern philosophy. Descartes was certain that he was thinking ("I think, therefore I am"), but was most uncertain that his thoughts related to any external reality. Modern philosophy has puzzled ever since about how to get out of the mind and into the world.

Is the existence of the external world an interesting problem? In the 18th century David Hume was intrigued by the question but, finding no answer, went off to play backgammon at his club. The answer to skepticism was practical life. Hume did not solve Descartes's problem, he bypassed it.

Philosophers are not so easily put off their game. In the 1920s a small group of European philosophers picked up the demand to justify the claims that humans make about the world and created a movement called logical positivism. Their aim was to model philosophy on science. A retreat to practical life, in their view, was as unacceptable as letting people believe that the sun rotates around the earth. Science, they said, succeeds by constructing a language based on precise definition, empirical verification and deductive logic. So be it with philosophy.

Many of the positivists fled Europe with the rise of Nazism and found academic positions at American universities, where they were deeply influential in setting a "scientific" agenda for mainstream American philosophy in the 1950s. This was the era when Stanley Cavell enrolled as a philosophy graduate student.

Cavell developed a paradoxical attitude toward philosophy's skepticism about the external world and other matters. He found philosophical skepticism both profoundly uninteresting and profoundly interesting. He went on to fashion a philosophic voice

that challenges the assumed task of professional philosophy. It is voice that even a theologian might hear.

While working on a conventional Ph.D. thesis at Harvard, Cavell sat in on a seminar with the Oxford philosopher John Austin. The experience led to a philosophic "rebirth," in Cavell's words. Austin was a practitioner of "ordinary language philosophy" and is most famous for his discussion of "performative utterances." "I promise" is the standard example of such an utterance. Austin pointed out that the statement "I promise" makes a promise; it is misleading to think that promising describes some inner mental state. Even if I have some mental reservations when I utter the words, another person can hold me to them: "But you made a promise."

Cartesian skepticism can be addressed by noting that "I know" is also a sort of performance. That is, "I know" is not a report about an inner state of mind (as in "I am having this sense impression"); "I know" makes a public claim, a "promise" that I can, if challenged, produce reasons to justify my claim. Cavell's early major work was titled *The Claim of Reason.*

Challenging someone's claim to know something is a move made in ordinary language. I say, "I know that is a goldfinch." You challenge my expertise or my evidence. "You couldn't tell a hawk from a handsaw! Look at the head, it's a goldcrest!" We check the Audubon guide and the bird at hand (or in the bush) and see that it is a goldcrest. I withdraw my claim to know. Knowing is an ordinary public claim that involves producing evidence and credentials, not looking inside your head. If the philosophic skeptic challenges the ordinary language use of "I know," he does not mean what he apparently says. Cavell's first published work was *Must We Mean What We Say?*

Advocacy for ordinary language as a solution of philosophical problems has been strenuously challenged. Some regard it as the trivializing of philosophy. Bertrand Russell scorned ordinary language philosophy, regarding it as silly people attending to silly people saying silly things. Another problem: who is to say what is "ordinary"? Oxford dons and Harvard professors seem the last persons to use "ordinary" language. If you are interested in ordinary language, get a sociological survey. But then what would that prove?

For Cavell, these challenges rest on a fundamental misunderstanding of what is ordinary about ordinary language. His view of ordinary derives from the other major

influence on his thought, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations.* The governing theme of that study of language is the injunction, "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use!"

That sounds like an appeal to common pragmatism or common speech, but Wittgenstein's sense of ordinary differs markedly from Austin's. As Cavell notes, "Austin concentrates on examples whose meaning can be brought out by appealing to widely shared . . . circumstances. . . . But Wittgenstein is also concerned with forms of words whose meaning . . . is not secured by the way they are ordinarily (commonly) used, because there is no ordinary use of them in that sense." He cites Wittgenstein's example of Luther's remark, "Faith resides under the left nipple," a statement that is hardly ordinary but may well have a use to express an intense religious conviction.

Wittgenstein offers a long list of games we play with language: "giving orders, reporting an event, testing an hypothesis, making up a story, playacting, making a joke, translating a language, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying." When the priest consecrates the bread and says, "This is the body of the Lord," we may ask whether he is playing a scientific, comedic or religious game. Some people never get a joke, others can't pray. Too bad on both counts.

The scientific positivist wants to constrict the use of words to those that have a single clear meaning. In a brilliant commentary on Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame,* Cavell argues that the absurdist character of that play's dialogue is a spoof on the positivist's ideal language. In that ideal language, the form of a statement aligns with what it means. By that logic, "Mommy makes bread" and "Mommy makes friends" should not look alike. To achieve absurdist dialogue, imagine Mommy in the kitchen whipping up some friends in the Mixmaster.

If Austinian ordinary language may appear to trivialize philosophy by resorting to common speech, the question arises: does Wittgenstein make speech only a "game"? No. Language games are not arbitrary, like the game of chess. You can avoid playing chess without damaging the good life, but if you do not play what Wittgenstein calls language games, you will be unable to claim knowledge, make promises, tell jokes or participate in a wide array of distinctly human behaviors. Joking, promising and claiming knowledge are not just ways of using words; they are, as Wittgenstein says, "forms of life." Knowing the general rules of a game does not guarantee that you will play the game well. Some people just can't tell a joke.

The ideal speaker is someone who plays the language game like a chess master plays chess, with skill and subtlety.

It is no accident, then, that Cavell has written extensively about Shakespeare, who is for him the grand master of ordinary language and as such can depict in his plays the manifold forms of life. Not only is Shakespeare the grand master of English and life, he is an acute observer of a special failure of language and the form (or formless) life that follows. That linguistic failure is, Cavell says, the real problem of skepticism.

How does real skepticism arise? Consider the language game of promising. A fatal gap exists between the criteria for making a promise and promising seriously. You ask me whether I have made a promise. I expostulate: "I *said* I promise." The problem with regarding language as performance is that my words may be only a performance. Shakespeare, that master of theater, was well aware that in our actual speech we are often only performing or theatricalizing speech.

I began by wondering whether philosophy is interesting. Philosophers' skepticism about external reality is profoundly uninteresting because there seems to be no way outside a philosophy class to make it significant. But knowing other people's minds is a consuming human interest.

Can I know another's mind? Yes and no. Take a simple case: knowing whether another person is in pain. Simple. Someone cuts her thumb and screeches. The criteria for pain are on display. But an actor can display the same behavior. Cavell makes a sharp distinction between *knowing* her pain and *acknowledging* her pain. Because we are in Row C at the Roxy, we do not *acknowledge* that she is in pain; we do not rush to the stage with a Band-Aid.

While I can know what it is like for her to cut her thumb, she alone is the owner of her pain. What Cavell calls "the passion of skepticism" is my lurking desire to know her pain "from the inside," to know it as if I were its owner. This desire is profoundly human, but it is also a mad passion.

Cavell reads *King Lear* as a tragedy rooted in the mad passion of skepticism. Lear foolishly wants to own the love of his three daughters. He tries to purchase it by offering land and goods. Goneril and Regan are happy to play along in this economic charade of love. Cordelia, recognizing the shameful character of purchased love and the shame of Lear in demanding it, refuses to play. Having asked for what cannot be

owned, mistaking flattery for affection, Lear fails to acknowledge Cordelia's love, and the tragedy follows its course.

Complicated as acknowledging another person may be, acknowledging myself may present even more of a conundrum. I may fail to acknowledge my own deep cares and commitments. The ancient Delphic injunction that so impressed Socrates, "Know thyself," is not a simple task. I undertake the task of self-discovery.

If this sounds like psychoanalytic probing, that is not misleading. Cavell reworks Freud to offer not "the psychoanalysis of everyday life" but the philosophical analysis of everyday life. Just as Freud finds psychological roots for everyday behaviors, Cavell reveals the philosophical extraordinariness of the ordinary.

How do the psychoanalyst and the ordinary language philosopher proceed? Contrast ordinary medical cure with psychiatric care. The cardiologist tells me I have a defective heart and prescribes a cure; he diagnoses and cures "from the outside." I am passive, the patient. But this is not the case with therapy for the soul. As the old joke goes: "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a lightbulb?" Answer: "The lightbulb has to change itself." The "patient" must discover himself.

Psychoanalysis has been called "the talking cure," for it begins with what the patient says. The analyst challenges the patient to expand and clarify in order to discover what should really be said.

Ordinary language philosophy also depends on what the other says. Wittgenstein's persistent question is "What would *we* say?" In asking that question, he is not proposing a survey of Russell's silly people. The philosopher is not a passive surveyor any more than a psychoanalyst is a passive listener. In asking "What would we say?" the philosopher confronts the other. "This is what *I* would say. Is that what *you* would say? What would *we* say?"

The temptation is for the philosopher to play the positivist expert and dictate a linguistic cure. But as in psychoanalysis, the self will not be discovered by having someone dictate a cure. For Cavell the voice of the philosophic expert is arrogant.

The proper voice of philosophy is not one of arrogance but of "arrogation," which the dictionary defines as the act of "claiming on behalf of the other." Arrogation casts philosophy as interpersonal dialogue and places the philosopher in a difficult position. The philosopher puts himself on the line. "This is what I, Stanley Cavell,

would say. What would we say?"

Philosophy offered with such a personal signature looks less like science and more like art and literature. Science has no personal voice; art and literature always express the personal voice. Keats's poetry is Keats's, not Shelley's. Cavell insists that philosophy should speak in a human voice; it is, he says, a form of confession. Shades of St. Augustine. No wonder critics have complained that Cavell's way with philosophy is deleterious to the discipline's task—or pretensions.

Cavell's human voice for philosophy explains his view of ethics. He rejects moral skepticism, but he would be uneasy with the notion of objective moral law. The clearest use of objective law is in the natural sciences. The notable (and notorious) difference between science and morality is that scientists come to agreement, whereas the moral life is rife with disagreement. It is this lack of agreement that lends plausibility to the notion that morality is subjective.

Cavell rejects moral subjectivism because he regards moral argument as fully rational. Reason is, however, deployed differently in morality than in science. In scientific arguments, the participants agree up front on rules that preclude personal involvement. In moral arguments, personal involvement—putting myself on the line—is the whole point.

Putting myself on the line is not accomplished, however, by reporting my subjective state: "I want it . . . I like it." Statements of wants and tastes are not moves in a *moral* language game. Reason in morality refer to cares and commitments that justify action. "Because I care for my brother . . . Because I promised." Antigone's care for and commitment to her brother outweigh her care and commitment to the state. I may not agree with her, but I recognize that she is offering reasons to justify her action.

Moral argument is complex and emotionally difficult because we so often do not fully understand the scope of our cares and commitments. That is why moral dialogue is important. I try to justify myself, to excuse myself, to repent before the other. Moral argument is confessional in the general mode of Cavellian philosophy.

The danger of advocating the objective model is that it reduces morality to moralism. Moralism imitates science's resort to abstractions and deductive procedures so that agreement can be assured. Like science, it precludes the personal and ends in "stilted maxims, from which it is no longer possible to look

down and see life as it really is with all its turmoil." If we do not always reach agreement, it is because we are dealing with "life as it really is with all its turmoil."

For Cavell, philosophy is a personal journey, not the QED of some theory. The recollections of *Little Did I Know* underlie, spur, echo and are transmuted into philosophical concerns and then back again in a continuing internal meditation. He organizes this memoir starting with July 2, 2003, when he was 76. Facing cardiac catheterization, he takes the occasion to make a heartfelt confession.

> What interests me is to see how what Freud calls the detours on the human path to death—accidents avoided or embraced, strangers taken to heart or neglected, talents imposed or transfigured, malice insufficiently rebuked, love inadequately acknowledged—mark out for me recognizable efforts to achieve my own death.

The character of Cavell's way of philosophy and life can be illustrated by returning to the initial question: who is Stanley Cavell? First off, he is not Stanley Cavell; he was born Stanley Goldstein and changed his name when he was 16. Goldstein was also not Goldstein; that was a name imposed on his father when he immigrated from Russia. The family name was Kavelieruskii or Kavelieriskii (his father wasn't sure). *Kavelieruskii* was transmuted into *Cavell*. The specific occasion for the name change was that *Cavell* seemed better suited for his role as a bandleader in Sacramento.

If I take a stage name, will my life then become a stage performance? Later, as a Harvard philosopher, Stanley Cavell worries about mere performance of language and self, and so he seeks the voice of confession.

In his teens he worked in his father's pawn shop. Later, he wrote a convoluted study of Austin, Wittgenstein, Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida and Lacan in a chapter titled "Counter-Philosophy and the Pawn of Voice." Counter-philosophy? Against philosophy—well, Cavell is counter its scientific temptation. But maybe the term refers to an over-the-pawnshop-counter exchange, in which one takes over the other's possession. In philosophy I offer my words in pawn to the other and the other gives his word that he will return them, but it is up to me to redeem them. I must buy back the words *over the counter* of the philosopher who challenges (makes me pay for) what I have given him. (Cavell's favorite quotation from Emerson: "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.")

As an adolescent Cavell went through bar mitzvah at the insistence of his father, who was himself no believer. (The elder Goldstein said it was to honor his father.) The mature Cavell mentions in passing having Seder at his home, but that too seems to be more familial piety than religious practice. In his philosophic work, religion is frequently mentioned, but as a sort of foreign country that it is best not to visit for the moment.

Perhaps his most telling theological comment is in his essay on *Endgame*: "Positivism said that statements about God are meaningless; Beckett shows that they mean too damned much." Since God is, after all, "too damned much," any sensible theologian might want to echo Cavell: "Little did I know."