Sképsis: Revista de Filosofia
ISSN 1981-4534
Vol. XI, N. 23, 2021, p. 103-121

RESPONDING TO SKEPTICISM: THE LEGACIES OF AUSTIN, CLARKE, AND CAVELL

Jônadas Techio
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul / CNPq
Email: jonadas.techio@ufrgs.br

Enough is enough ...
J. L. Austin (1979, p. 84)

Skepticism frees us from antiquated problems, including itself, offering us a new, challenging problem.
Thompson Clarke (1972, p. 769)

A formidable criticism of skepticism — as of any serious philosophy— will have to discover and alter its understanding of itself.
Stanley Cavell (1979, p. 37-8)

Abstract: A main goal of epistemology since modernity has been to answer skeptical challenges raised against our ordinary claims to know. In opposition to that tradition, J. L. Austin, Thompson Clarke, and Stanley Cavell all tried to respond to skepticism by questioning the very intelligibility of those challenges. This paper offers a comparative assessment of those responses.

Keywords: J. L. Austin; Thompson Clarke; Stanley Cavell; skepticism; ordinary.

Introduction

One of the main goals of epistemology, at least since the time of Descartes, has been to answer skeptical challenges raised against our ordinary claims to know. Logically, such a goal presupposes that skeptical challenges *make sense* — one cannot *answer* questions unless they are well-formed, intelligible, *bonafide.* Although most contemporary analytic epistemologists share the latter assumption,

This essay is indebted to lectures and conversations with Jim Conant and to comments on a previous draft by Eric Ritter. The research leading to it was funded by CNPq's Research Productivity Grant (PQ n. 303905/2017–4).

there have been some attempts at questioning it. One influential such attempt was made by J. L. Austin[1]. In the wake of Austin, Thompson Clarke, and Stanley Cavell too engaged in the task of probing the intelligibility of skeptical challenges[2]; yet in sharp contrast to their predecessor, they both presented diagnoses which were more congenial to the skeptical disappointment with ordinary language, and consequently both ascribed a more positive role to skepticism in their investigation of what we may call the logic of ordinary language. Those similarities notwithstanding, their results differ in important respects, and it is my intent in this paper to reconstruct, compare and elucidate their distinctive responses to skepticism. To achieve that aim I start with a brief recapitulation of Austin's anti-skeptical stance (section 1) and then go on to articulate and compare Clarke's and Cavell's critical engagements with that Austinian legacy (respectively in sections 2 and 3). I conclude with a summary of the results obtained by means of this comparison.

1 The Austinian response to skepticism

Austin's characteristic move in assessing our ordinary epistemic claims, beliefs, and procedures is to deny that they require philosophical defense against skepticism; actually, in his view, the very impulse to offer such a defense would be already a symptom that a skeptical understanding of the relationship between the ordinary and the philosophical was assumed. Thus, against the grain of traditional epistemology, Austin does not set out to evaluate the legitimacy of skeptical *conclusions* but instead starts by investigating the very *questions* raised by the skeptic, to check whether they satisfy ordinary requirements of intelligibility. (This, as we will see, is an Austinian lesson that both Clarke and Cavell took to heart.) In Austin's estimation, that strategy has the potential of showing that all the skeptical questions traditionally investigated by epistemologists — having to do with, e.g., whether things we ordinarily assume to exist *really* exist (as opposed to being merely appearances, illusions, etc.), or whether we can know that we are not dreaming right now — are simply unjustified, unmotivated, unnatural, or some combination of the three, and hence should be dismissed as philosophical nonsense.

Here is a typical illustration of an ordinary exchange concerning a knowledge claim that Austin presents to mount his refutation of skepticism:

1. A *knowledge claim* is entered: "That is a goldfinch"
2. A *skeptical challenge* is presented: "How do you know that is a goldfinch?"
3. A *basis for knowledge* is offered in response, showing that criteria for the employment of the concept under analysis are satisfied: "By its redhead"
4. A r*eason to doubt* the sufficiency of that basis is put forward: "But goldcrests have read heads too!"
5. As a result, the original knowledge claim is *retracted*: "I do not know that is a goldfinch"

Austin's assessment of the situation illustrated above emphasizes that *legitimate* skeptical challenges, such as the one made in (2), cannot come for free: we

[1] Particularly in "Other Minds" (Austin 1979) and in *Sense and Sensibilia* (Austin 1962).

[2] Barry Stroud also engaged in that task (see esp. Stroud 1984). I compared Stroud's and Clavell's responses to skepticism, indicating their shared Clarkian inheritance, in Techio 2016.

need *particular* reasons for doubting (such as the one offered in step 4), and in the face of such reasons we have a *localized* skeptical conclusion (5) that does not generalize, as a *philosophical* skeptic would need for his argument to get off the ground. On the other hand, if we were to imagine a continuation of that exchange in which a better basis for the original knowledge claim were offered — say by an ornithologist checking a fuller list of marks and features of goldfinches in broad daylight, at an appropriate distance, etc. — then there would be no good reason for a skeptic to go on and press the issue further — say by claiming that such a basis is still "not enough" to support the original claim because "this could be a stuffed goldfinch" (or a hallucination of one, etc.). As Austin puts the point:

> If you say "That's not enough", then you must have in mind some more or less definite lack. [...] If there is no definite lack, which you are at least prepared to specify on being pressed, then it's silly (outrageous) just to go on saying "That's not enough". [...] Enough is enough: it doesn't mean everything. Enough means enough to show that (within reason, and for present intents and purposes) it "can't" be anything else, there is no room for an alternative, competing description of it. It does not mean, for example, enough to show it isn't a *stuffed* goldfinch. (Austin 1979, p. 84)

I hope these brief considerations are sufficient to indicate that Austin's appraisal of a kind of skepticism that asks for more than what is *ordinarily* considered enough to settle localized epistemic challenges is that it amounts (at best) to a philosophical game, not to a serious position deserving of serious engagement. In his view, therefore, our ordinary epistemic claims and procedures are completely insulated against philosophical skeptical challenges[3].

2 The Clarkian response to skepticism

We can think of Thompson Clarke's intent in "The Legacy of Skepticism"[4] as trying to be faithful to what he sees as commendable in Austin's strategy — particularly the latter's focus on skeptical *questions*, as opposed to the more widespread focus on skeptical *conclusions* — while at the same time avoiding Austin's quick dismissal of the possibility that those questions could be reasonably raised. To do that, Clarke takes one additional step back relative to Austin, and begins his investigation with a twofold question concerning the very status of the *target* of skeptical challenges, namely: "What is the skeptic examining: our most fundamental beliefs or the product of a large piece of philosophizing about empirical knowledge done before he comes on stage? And what do his reflections, properly construed, reveal?" (LS 754).

As we will see, the first half of that opening question presents a possibility that is rarely considered by philosophers interested in skepticism, namely that the

[3] I am here echoing Myles Burnyeat's well-known claim that contemporary philosophers tend to "*insulate* [their] ordinary first order judgements from the effects of [their] philosophizing" (Burnyeat 1984, p. 225). One question that will be in the background of this paper is whether that judgment applies to Thompson Clarke (as Burnyeat thinks it does, see op. cit, p. 226) and to Stanley Cavell. If the readings I present in the next two sections are on the right tracks, they would imply important qualifications to that judgment in the case of Clarke, and a denial of it in the case of Cavell.
[4] Clarke 1972, hereafter "LS".

Sképsis: Revista de Filosofia, vol. XI, n. 23, 2021, p. 103-121 - ISSN 1981-4534

skeptic (or, more generally, the traditional epistemologist[5]) might be reacting to a *philosophical picture* of our condition. In the course of exploring this possibility, Clarke eventually suggests that it is the philosopher who unknowingly sets out to *describe* or even to *defend* our ordinary beliefs, but ends up saying some things about our condition *as a whole* that the skeptic then correctly realizes raises problems. The problem with the skeptic, therefore, is not exactly that he is asking questions that are spurious given our ordinary requirements of intelligibility (as Austin would have it), but rather that he misconstrues the nature of his own questions and hence of his own accomplishments — he *thinks* he is targeting our most fundamental ordinary beliefs when *in truth* he is from the start reacting to the result of "a large piece of philosophizing". The skeptic will thus be *ultimately* shown to be working under an illusion but, as the second half of Clarke's opening question implies, this does not mean that there is nothing to be learned from his reflections (as again Austin, amongst many others, seems to believe); on the contrary, Clarke thinks a "proper construal" of those reflections has the potential of revealing something fundamental both about our condition and about the nature of philosophy, and opening up this path of investigation would be the main "legacy of skepticism" announced on the title of his paper. In the remainder of this section, I will try to clarify these claims.

One useful way to start is by noticing, as Austin himself never tired of doing, that the *examples* of questions and claims investigated by traditional epistemology are rather peculiar. A paradigmatic such example would be the question "Are there material objects?", which, Clarke contends, is certainly not the sort of question that would *normally* occur within what he calls "the plain", i.e., within "specific, elaborate, contexts of everyday life" (LS 754). Clarke also contends, apparently in agreement with Austin, that "plain" claims stand "in need of no argued defense" and are "immune (oversimplifying slightly) from skeptical assault" (LS 754). But the parenthetical qualification is here key, as it is designed to guard us against an assessment that does not take into consideration the specific contexts in which such claims and questions could be made, hence the specific ways in which they could be meant or intended. As Clarke later elucidates:

> The skeptic's doubts notoriously fare badly if "implained," that is, *if* raised *inside* these contexts [the "specific, elaborate, contexts of everyday life"], without "changing the subject," *directly* against the epistemic [...]. To remove the oversimplification it is skeptical doubts so raised, with this intention, from which the plain is immune, for these implained doubts are ignorable — either absurd, irrelevant, or out of place. (LS 755)

As this elucidation makes clear — and this is where the main disagreement with Austin will surface — Clarke does not want to preclude *a priori* the possibility that in some *extraordinary* contexts claims and questions formulated with the very

[5] Throughout this paper I will be working with what James Conant once called "an inclusive use" of the term "skepticism", according to which it "refers not just to one particular sort of philosophical *position*" (say one that *denies* the existence of the external world, of other minds, and so on) but rather to a "wider *dialectical space* within which philosophers occupying a range of apparently opposed philosophical positions [...] engage one another, while seeking a stable way to answer the skeptic's question in the affirmative rather than (as the skeptic himself does) in the negative" (Conant 2012, p. 3, fn. 5). This usage, as Conant acknowledges, goes back to Cavell, who claims that he does not want to confine the term "skepticism" only to "philosophers who wind up denying that we can ever know", but wants rather to extend it to "any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge" (Cavell 1979, p. 46). It is from this point of view that the whole tradition of epistemology initiated around the time of Descartes and still alive in contemporary analytical philosophy can be called "skeptical".

same words and concepts employed by the traditional epistemologist could be (sensibly, meaningfully) made, if for different, extraordinary purposes and intentions. Clarke argues that if such a possibility exists, then one cannot refute skepticism *as such* simply by showing that skeptical doubts do not arise within "the plain" — i.e., within those "specific, elaborate, contexts of everyday life". Clarke starts substantiating that view by suggesting that "the circle of the plain" may be wider than someone like Austin seems to assume, allowing for the formulation of *very general (meta-)questions* which are nonetheless "plain", as opposed to "philosophical". Clarke calls these sentences "verbal twins" (LS 756) and offers, as an illustration, the following observation made by an (imagined) physiologist lecturing on mental abnormalities:

> *Each of us who is normal knows that he is now awake, not dreaming or hallucinating, that there is a real public world outside his mind which he is now perceiving, that in this world there are three-dimentional animate and inanimate bodies of many shapes and sizes....* In contrast, individuals suffering from certain mental abnormalities each believes that what we know to be the real, public world is his imaginative creation. (LS 756)

In assessing this case, Clarke claims that "intuitively" the italicized propositions (which, N.B., are "verbal twins" of propositions that a traditional epistemologist could conceivably make during her investigations) are *plain*, in the sense that "each has the right kind of plain meaning; each is immune from implained skeptical assault" (LS 756). What cases like this indicate, in Clarke's view, is that the plain includes a kind of meta-perspective ("meta-CS", in his preferred jargon) from which we can step back and make *very general* claims or ask *very general* questions about what we know.[6] Made *inside the plain*, such (meta) claims and questions are *bonafide*; yet sometimes we try to go *beyond the circle of the plain*, asking questions and making claims which are *not* meant in that ("meta-CS") plain sense but in a different way, which Clarke will call "philosophical" or "pure". One example of the latter would be the question "Are there material objects?" when asked in the light of a "peculiarly philosophical worry about dreaming and hallucinating"[7] (LS 758). The inquiry that will occupy Clarke in the central portion of his paper has to do with what exactly is the nature of such a "peculiarly philosophical worry" and what is the source of its "intellectual grip" (LS 759).

In his reply, Clarke suggests that questions asked in this philosophical sense "satisfy a deep intellectual need, unfulfilled by their plain versions" (LS 759) and that studying skepticism will allow us to clarify that need (precisely because the skeptic is reacting to this kind of philosophical craving). "In the eyes of the skeptic", says Clarke, "plainness is restrictedness" (LS 760), in the following sense: our plain use of words is dictated by our (various) specific practical purposes, and each of those purposes requires a *delimitation* of what *we* mean by them in each particular context; but words also have a meaning *per se*, which is in itself *unrestricted*, *context-independent*, *pure*, and to philosophize is precisely to use words (to ask questions, make claims, and so on) in this "untrammeled fashion", disregarding specific practical purposes and simply moved by their intrinsic meaning. From this

[6] As an additional aid for imagining such a perspective Clarke proposes that we think of someone "drawing up a compendium of the basic kinds of things we know [...] compiling a record of human knowledge, because, alas, humans have to abandon earth, but wish to leave behind, in a time capsule, complete records of human knowledge, for who knows what strange eyes." (LS 757)

[7] A meta-CS (plain) verbal twin of this question could be asked, Clarke suggests, by "an immaterial being born and bred in a non-material portion of the universe" (LS 758).

perspective, then, asking philosophical questions simply is asking "how things *really* are" (LS 762) — as opposed to, say, asking how they are *given certain (restricted, practical) constraints and purposes*[8].

However — and this is where Clarke's critical assessment of skepticism begins — such a conception depends on a series of philosophical commitments about our "conceptual-human constitution" (LS 760) that he finds unwarranted. One such commitment is that our concepts (or conceptual schemes) "must be divorceable intact from our practices, from whatever constitutes the essential character of the plain, from elemental parts of our human nature" (LS 761); another is that "there are, fully separate from concepts, one or more domains of 'items'" to which our concepts are supposed to refer (LS 761); finally, that conception assumes that concept-users are "outsiders, standing back detached from concepts and items alike", only ascertaining "whether items fulfill the conditions legislated by concepts" (LS 761). As Arata Hamawaki clarifies, to have a "conceptual-human constitution" thus characterized is to be able

> to step back from one's practice with a certain concept and ask whether the concept truly applies to the object at hand, where what is to determine the answer to the question is *simply* the concept itself, not the concept plus features of what Clarke calls "our non-semantical practice," such as considerations of practical utility. It is to be able to ask whether an object is really an F, where the answer to that question is to be determined solely by the concept F itself, divorced "intact from our practices, from whatever constitutes the essential character of the plain, from elemental parts of our human nature." (Hamawaki 2014, p. 200)

Having thus characterized what he calls "the standard view" of our "conceptual-human constitution", Clarke goes on to argue that *if* that standard view were true of *our* use of concepts (as traditional philosophy assumes), *then* the skeptic would be right in assuming, for example, that *knowing* requires *invulnerability* (see LS 762); after all, no matter what restrictions our practical purposes may call forth to the use of the word "knowing" (and kindred ones) *inside the plain*, that word *per se* would have a meaning which requires that we rule out any logical counterpossibility — e.g., that we may be dreaming, or hallucinating, etc. Clarke formulates this point as follows:

> What is required for knowing is a function of two factors: the invariant meaning of "know", and the type of structure within which "know" is being used. "Know", its meaning, requires that to know ___ we be able to "rule out" any counterpossibility to ___, any possibility which, if it were realized, would falsify ___. But what "___" implies *per se* may be more extensive than what we imply by saying ___, and "know" will focus on whichever of the two dimensions of meaning and implication is relevant in the setup. (LS 762-763).

Importantly, for Clarke, the problem with the skeptic is *not* that he assumes standards for the use of a concept such as "knowing" that are stricter or higher than

[8] As Clarke would put later, from such (philosophical) perspective "the objectivity attainable within the plain is only skin-deep, *relative*. We want to know not how things are *inside* the world, but how things are, absolutely." (LS 762).

our ordinary ones[9]; the requirement "to 'rule out' any counterpossibility", again, simply follows from the "invariant meaning of 'know'", given a "standard view" of our "conceptual-human constitution", and the assumptions leading to such a view are made *long before* the skeptic comes into play (which is Clarke's answer to the first half of his opening question)[10]. Rather, the problem is that the skeptic is not fully consistent with those (tacit) assumptions — he tries "to mix unmixable types" (LS 764), having "one foot within the philosophical, the other within the plain" (L765-6). Thus, while the skeptic's argument is geared towards answering a *philosophical* question (such as "How do I know I am not dreaming right now?" meant in its pure, unrestricted sense), the possibilities that he puts to test are "drawn from the well of the plain" (LS 766):

> I can imagine, it seems, that I might be asleep now, dreaming, really in surroundings very different from these. But the moment I am conscious that there will be *real* surroundings, I realize I'm taking for granted that these environs could be observed, known to be real, by outsiders, if any, in appropriate positions. [...] Just as the experimenter[11] could be asleep, dreaming, even never to waken, so could I now, it seems to me: and part of what I'm imagining in so finding it is that, just as the experimenter's true environs could be known to be real, so could mine. (LS 766)

But one cannot have it both ways: either the skeptical possibility I am testing (that "I might be asleep right now") is meant as plain, or it is meant as philosophical. If the former, then it would be ascertainable by an outsider (perhaps myself, in a later moment), and hence the concept of "knowledge" used as an ingredient in that assessment would also be *plain*, i.e., not subject to the invulnerability requirement. But if that were the case, then the skeptical possibility in question could not be put forward as a ground for *philosophical* doubt (which would involve the pure, unrestricted meaning of "knowing"). On the other hand, if the possibility I am testing is meant as philosophical, then the concepts employed cannot be used in their plain, restricted senses; but can we really make sense of an alternative (pure, unrestricted) use of concepts such as being asleep, dreaming, etc? "I feel confident", says Clarke, "that it is inconceivable that I could now be asleep, dreaming, *if* no outsider could know my real environs because in the same boat, for the same reason, because he, too, could not know he was not asleep, dreaming" (LS 766). In other words, it is perfectly conceivable (or, at any rate, Clarke is not interested in denying the possibility) that "outsiders" such as Descartes's Evil Demon, or God, could know something *we* do not know about our current situation; but to the extent that we can imagine and make sense of that possibility, those "outsiders" would still be "in the same boat" with us, in the sense that analogous skeptical questions could well be raised regarding their own knowledge of their situation. What we apparently cannot conceive is the possibility of someone asking those skeptical questions without simultaneously imagining an outsider able to ascertain the situation.

The upshot of this analysis is that concepts such as dream, hallucination, etc., cannot be fitted into "the standard view" of our "conceptual-human constitution" assumed by the traditional philosopher (see LS 768). In other words, what this means is that such concepts are *not* "divorceable intact from our practices, from

[9] As a contextualist would argue — see Narboux 2014, p. 157.

[10] In this sense, Clarke emphasizes, "the skeptic is innocent, without an independent thought in his head concerning what knowing requires" (LS 762).

[11] See the case of the physiologist lecturing on mental abnormalities, quoted some pages above.

whatever constitutes the essential character of the plain, from elemental parts of our human nature" (LS 761); it also means that there are *no* domains of "items" fully separable from our concepts and to which are supposed to refer (LS 761); finally, it means that we, concept-users are *not* "outsiders, standing back detached from concepts and items alike", only ascertaining "whether items fulfill the conditions legislated by concepts" (LS 761).

These, of course, are merely negative results, and the task of providing a more positive elucidation of the nature of our "conceptual-human constitution" is one which Clarke himself will not take up in the paper under analysis. But these results are sufficient to indicate a crucial difference between Clarke's and Austin's respective assessments of the project of traditional epistemology. The following passage by Narboux clearly summarizes that difference:

> Although they both cast doubt on the very intelligibility of the concerns of traditional epistemology, an abyss separates Austin's contention that these concerns are from the start fully unintelligible and Clarke's contention that they are not fully intelligible in the end. The extent of that abyss is the extent of the legacy of traditional epistemology. Clarke's fundamental thesis is that we have not so much as begun to take the measure of that legacy. (Narboux 2014, p. 159)

Taking the measure of that legacy, as we will see in the next section, was one fundamental motivation of Stanley Cavell's engagement with traditional epistemology, and with skepticism in particular[12]. It is my hope that in comparing Clarke's response with Cavell's (and both against Austin's) we will be able to achieve a better-informed perspective from which to assess the true legacy of skepticism. As a further step toward setting the stage for that comparison, I would like to bring this analysis to a close by asking whether it would follow from Clarke's diagnosis that the plain and the philosophical are insulated from each other[13], and if so, in what sense exactly are they mutually insulated?

As some commentators have noticed, a crucial shift seems to occur in Clarke's presentation of the relation between "the plain" and "the philosophical" in the course of the paper under analysis, so that, in an important sense, the very opposition between those two "domains" or "circles" appears to collapse at the end. This point is clearly brought up by Narboux:

> The picture of the plain as restricted presumes that our human-conceptual constitution is of "the standard type" [...] And this presumption can be shown to fall apart in the hands of the skeptic, unbeknownst to him. The skeptical inquiry, Clarke argues, betrays its own invalidity and, in its downfall, drags down with itself the very project of traditional epistemology. There is nothing but the plain (and so no "circle" or "domain" of the plain). The "plain" from which philosophy flees is not the plain; it is philosophy's own creation [...] In the end, we are left with the plain and the philosophical, only too human, urge to transcend it. (Narboux 2014, p. 169)

---

[12] This was also a main motivation of Barry Stroud's (see especially Stroud 1984). See Narboux 2014, p. 173 for a clarifying suggestion about the relationship among Clarke, Cavell and Stroud. See also Techio 2016.

[13] As Burnyeat thinks they are (see fn. 3).

A similar point is made by Gorodeisky and Jolley, who propose that the distinction between “the plain” and “the pure” could be thought of as a *dialectical* distinction, in the following sense:

> The plain dialectically is treated as if it were the restricted, the pure as the unrestricted, as the philosophical. By the end of the paper, Clarke has tunneled under the pure, causing it to collapse, or, shifting vertical metaphors, has revealed the pure as a sterile promontory. But the fate of the pure is the fate of the plain (as restricted) too. And so the dialectical distinction is done in. The plain (no longer restricted, the term “plain” no longer employed dialectically—at least not as it had been dialectically employed) opens and does not close. True, “plain” now has no real contrastive force, and could be dropped. At this point, to be implained is just to be. (Gorodeisky and Jolley 2014, p. 253)

In other words, what these commentators propose is that we interpret Clarke as ultimately defending what they call “the Unboundedness of the Plain”[14]. Assuming that interpretation is correct (as I am compelled to do), what does it imply concerning specifically the status of skeptical challenges to the plain? As we saw, Clarke emphasizes from early on that, on his view, the skeptic is not *directly* assaulting the plain, but rather a *philosophical* construal of it; he also contends that even *if* the skeptic were successful in his atack, he would at most “indirectly and partially” undermine the plain — revealing plain knowing to be “‘knowing’ in a manner of speaking only” (LS 767). But since Clarke argued that the skeptic is *unsuccessful* in that attack, the conclusion is that “plain knowing [...] is secure against outside undermining” and “need to fear only [...] *plain* skeptical possibilities themselves” (LS 767). Strictly speaking, then, the plain (now used in its “*non*-dialectical” sense, with “no real contrastive force”, as Jolley and Gorodeisky put it) is not exactly *insulated*, because there is nothing *beyond* it — which does not mean, as Narboux indicates, that we will stop wanting to *transcend* it. And this finally means that we must rethink the force of Clarke’s claim that plain knowing is “secure against outside undermining”: the point is *not* (as we may initially be lead to think) that we have unbreachable defenses, but rather that there is no enemy (of that kind) for us to defend against. And if I am right in this assessment of Clarke’s stance, this will prove to be an important point of disagreement with Cavell, who does not think this kind of “wholesale”[15] response to skepticism is available. Or so I will argue in the next section.

3 The Cavellian response to skepticism

In the foreword to his masterpiece, *The Claim of Reason*[16], Cavell acknowledges a twofold, seminal debt to Austin and to Clarke[17]: the former is credited with having first instilled in Cavell an interest in the procedures of ordinary language philosophy, while the latter is credited with first having shown (against Austin

[14] Gorodeisky and Jolley, 2014, p. 253.
[15] To use an expression coined by Cora Diamond for slightly different purposes — see Diamond 2004, p. 202.
[16] Cavell 1979, hereafter “CR”.
[17] See CR i-ii.

Sképsis: Revista de Filosofia, vol. XI, n. 23, 2021, p. 103-121 - ISSN 1981-4534

himself) that those procedures could be accepted and absorbed "almost completely, within rather than against the procedures of traditional epistemology"[18].

One of the earliest and most enduring lessons Cavell learned from Austin is that when I say something there must be a point to my saying it, as well as specific ways of assessing whether I am right or wrong; Cavell agrees with Austin that the traditional epistemologist does not give us *that*. However, especially after his encounter with Clarke, it became a central question for Cavell to assess what exactly this Austinian criticism accomplishes[19]. Concerning this question, Cavell agrees with Clarke that, whatever its merits, the Austinian criticism is not sufficient to *refute* either skepticism or the project of traditional epistemology, in that the procedures employed by both the skeptic and the traditional epistemologist are more continuous with our ordinary epistemic investigations than Austin would like to think. Where Cavell starts to diverge from Clarke is in realizing that the latter's defense of traditional epistemology against (Austinian) ordinary language philosophy could equally well be used in favor of the ordinary language philosopher's procedures, leading to a renewed understanding of their force and reasonableness (see CR 131).

Cavell starts dealing with these issues in CR by making clear that the kinds of epistemic challenges that Austin investigates[20] are rather narrowly focused, having to do exclusively with claims about the *identity* of something (about the *kind* of thing it is or about what the thing is *called*). Such claims, I repeat, are supported by ascertaining a set of marks and features for the application of a given concept to the thing in question; Cavell refers to those marks and features with the expression "Austinian criteria" (CR 51). On assessing his achievement concerning the conditions for making knowledge claims supported by these criteria, Cavell wants to credit Austin with having masterfully elucidated this region of our grammar of the concept "knowledge"; but he also wants to show that this leaves out a whole other region which is also part of the grammar of that concept — namely the region having to do with distinguishing real/existent from unreal/non-existent objects. In Cavell's useful summary, Austinian criteria are criteria for something being *so*, not for something *being* so[21]. But it is questions involving the latter kind of criteria that are of primordial concern for traditional epistemologists, and what Cavell wants to show (partially in agreement with Clarke) is that these questions are not obviously or simply "silly" and "outrageous", as Austin assumes[22].

Putting the point once again in Clarkian terms[23], one could say that questions such as "Do you know this is a goldfinch" are cases of verbal-twins: if the question is meant in the (only) sense that Austin considers, having to do with *identity* concerns, then it can be settled by appealing to Austinian criteria, i.e., a set of marks and features for something to be a goldfinch; but one can well imagine contexts in which it would seem natural (or, at any rate, not fully *un*natural) to mean that question in a different way — e.g., a context in which my neighbor is a taxidermist or an inveterate prankster, or in which I am under the effect of hallucinatory drugs,

---

[18] CR xvi. In his autobiography Cavell would come back to this inheritance, and add that Clarke's demonstration of the shortcomings of Austin's criticisms of traditional epistemology were for him "life-changing" (Cavell 2010, p. 357).

[19] A question he pursues mainly in the first two parts of CR.

[20] See the example given in section 1.

[21] See CR 50-51.

[22] As Cavell clarifies: "Austin grants that 'not enough' can, in special cases, 'mean' not enough to prove it's real; but since he doesn't specify what must be special about these cases, how does he know, why does he insinuate, that the philosopher would enter this objection *in the context Austin imagines*? It seems very unplausible to suppose that the philosopher would enter it there, exactly because if he did he *would* be 'silly', 'outrageous'." (CR 52)

[23] See section 2.

etc. — so that what would be at stake is not the *identity* of the object perceived (whether it is a goldfinch or goldcrest, say) but rather its very *reality* or *existence.* In such a case, Cavell argues, nothing I can say about Austinian criteria can settle that dispute because "[t]he criteria (marks, features) are the same for something's being a goldfinch whether it is real, imagined, hallucinatory, stuffed, painted, or in any way phony" (CR 51). As Cavell hastens to add, "[o]f course that is hardly news to Austin", and the complaint he has against traditional philosophy is precisely that "it works with paltry, arbitrary examples which stultify investigations from the outset" (CR 52). What Austin fails to register, however, is that these examples may not be arbitrary at all and that perhaps "traditional epistemologists have had no choice in this matter" (CR 52); moreover, the traditional epistemologist does not need to deny that these questions are not exactly ordinary[24], and "that there must be some special reason for raising [them]" (CR 56). Cavell's question is, again, whether it is *obvious* that no such reason can be offered by the traditional epistemologist, in a suitable context.

As we saw, Clarke too was interested in that question, and in answering it he appealed to a particular theory of meaning or concept-usage that involves, in his own words, "two dimensions", namely "the invariant meaning" of a word plus "the type of structure within which [that word] is being used" (LS 762-763). Clarke applies this theory to provide a kind of map of what can be (meaningfully) said, pointing out to the skeptic that his *purported* use of words is not locatable on that map: being of a "non-standard" type, the structure of the plain does not allow for the kind of claims, questions, etc., formulated by the skeptic to get off the ground because he cannot simultaneously mean his words in their (purported) "pure" sense *and* offer considerations that depend on distinctions which are only possible inside the plain. In other words, the skeptic is portrayed as trying to play two games at the same time, the plain and the philosophical, surreptitiously and unknowingly *shifting* the use of his words from one (purported) domain of meaning to the other[25].

Cavell's assessment of the skeptic's predicament, although close in many respects to Clarke's and also informed by it, differs in important respects. In particular, Cavell does not think that an effective criticism of skepticism or, more generally, of traditional philosophy — one that can "discover and alter its understanding of itself"[26] — can have the form of presenting a map of what can (and cannot) be meaningfully said, or of the kinds of games that can (and cannot) be played. Actually, in Cavell's view, no such map can be provided, not only because the ordinary is "unbounded", as Clarke's plain is[27], but because it is not exactly a "place" (anyway not of the kind that could be mapped) to begin with. A full articulation of this difference would go a long way toward elucidating what I take to be Cavell's most original contribution to the debate concerning the nature of ordinary language, of skepticism, and of philosophy itself. What follows is intended as an initial summary of such an answer.

As a first step toward that aim, it may be useful to recall Cavell's complaint against philosophy's fixation with the notion of the meaning of words or sentences *in isolation.* Although Clarke himself emphasizes the importance of taking into

[24] "[...] the traditional philosopher is likely to offer this defense: 'It's just obvious that the question must be raised: it doesn't matter that it is not a question which would normally be asked. On the contrary, that shows the complacency of common sense, the inadequacy of ordinary language.'" (CR 57).

[25] If the dialectical reading presented at the end of the preceding section is correct, it turns out that ultimately there is no such a "philosophical game" (the "domain of the pure"), and that every attempt to play it will depend on unknowingly trying to play two games at once. (Thanks to Eric Ritter for pointing this out.)

[26] See CR 37-8 (the passage used as an epigraph to this paper).

[27] See the quote from Gorodeisky and Jolley 2014, presented at the end of section 2.

account what *we* mean by using our words, he still presents this as one of the *two* dimensions of meaning — the other being what they mean "*per se*", their "invariant meaning". Inspired in part by Austin, but also by later Wittgenstein, Cavell argues that this latter "dimension" of meaning is (at best) *derivative*, a mere *abstraction* from the *concrete and specific uses* of words and sentences made by particular human beings in particular contexts, or language games:

> What is left out of an expression if it is used "outside its ordinary language game" is not necessarily what the *words* mean (they may mean what they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost. And how great a loss is that? To show how great is a dominant motive of the *Investigations*. What we lose is not the meaning of our words — hence, definitions to secure or explain their meaning will not replace our loss. What we lose is a full realization of what we are saying; we no longer know what *we* mean. (CR 207)

The skeptic, on Cavell's view, is precisely in this situation, led to speaking "outside language games", unable to mean anything determinate with his words: "he imagines himself to be saying something when he is not, to have discovered something when he has not", so he may be better described as "hallucinating what he [...] means, or as having the illusion of meaning something." (CR 221). Although this diagnosis may at first sound very similar to Clarke's, it depends on a subtly different understanding of the relation between the ordinary and the philosophical that I will try to summarize as follows: for starters, Cavell thinks ordinary language philosophers have to make do without resorting to any theory of meaning[28], simply by appealing to their (our) ordinary mastery of words, their (our) sense of "what to say when". Moreover, he does not conceive (not even dialectically) the ordinary as some kind of fixed structure or domain, but rather as a kind of *moving target*, something toward which we are *continuously striving* in our attempts to find and nurture mutual attunement, which eventually becomes expressed by our shared judgments and (hence) by our shared concepts and criteria. Registering that attunement, whenever it is forthcoming, is the role Cavell ascribes to what he calls grammatical or Wittgensteinian criteria (as opposed to Austinian criteria)[29]. And since in this view the ordinary — this *moving target* — is conceived as a (dynamic) background against which our multiple language-games are developed and played, it is normally not thematized, hence it is not readily apparent even to masters of the language (hence the *difficulty* involved in appealing to our sense of "what to say when"); rather, for Cavell, the ordinary shows up precisely *under the pressure of philosophy*, understood as this temptation to "speak outside language games". And this is the reason why, finally, it is only the interplay between philosophical temptations (particularly skeptical ones) and attempts at bringing our words back to the ordinary (by *reminding* us of our grammatical criteria) that will enable the kind of elucidation sought for by Cavell (and, before him, by Wittgenstein[30]).

---

[28] In Cavell's words, the only kind of evidence available for an ordinary language philosopher to recognize the relevance of questions or assertions made by traditional epistemologists "must be evidence that any mature speaker of a language can provide or recognize as significant. That is the strength of his methods, the source of their convincingness; but also their weakness, his helplessness to prove their relevance as philosophical criticisms." (CR 57).

[29] I deal with this point in much more detail in Techio 2020.

[30] Hence Cavell's siding with Wittgenstein's way of appealing to "what we ordinarily say", and not with Austin's (see CR 206-7).

When applied to the sorts of skeptical challenges that concern traditional epistemology, the Cavellian view summarized above generates a distinctive response to skepticism — one that is simultaneously open to its true motivations, born out of disappointments with ordinary language and its criteria that are ultimately related to our finite condition, while also aware of what is problematic about the skeptic's own self-interpretation. In order to make the distinctiveness of Cavell's response more perspicuous, it will be useful to compare it with Austin's analysis of our ordinary epistemic procedures for evaluating a claim to know (see section 1). Here is an initial sketch of of that comparison, that I will try to clarify in what follows:

I. Ordinary epistemic procedures according to Austin	II. Traditional epistemology's procedures according to Cavell
1) a claim to knowledge concerning *the identity* of a *specific object* is entered: "That is a goldfinch"	1') a claim to knowledge concerning *the existence* of a *generic object* is entered: "That is a goldfinch" (meant in the sense of "That object exists", or "There is an object in front of me")
2) a ground for that *specific* claim to know is required: "But how do you know?"	2') a ground for *any* claim to know modeled by (1') is required "But how do you know?"
3) a *specific* basis for knowledge is offered in response, appealing to *marks and features* (Austinian criteria): "By its redhead"	3') a *general* basis for knowledge is offered in response, appealing to *conditions for perception*: "Because I see" or "Through the senses"
4) a *specific* reason to doubt that basis is offered, showing it is insufficient for the (*specific*) *claim* entered in (1) to obtain: "Goldcrests have read heads too!"	4') a *general* reason to doubt that basis is offered, showing it is insufficient for *any* claim to know modeled by (1'): "But you might be dreaming / hallucinating /etc."
5) conclusion: "I do not know this is a goldfinch"	5') conclusion: "I do not know *anything*"

Epistemologists interested in pointing out the failure of the skeptical argument presented in (II) have traditionally attacked (4'), and in fewer cases (2'). Indebted to Austin, Cavell is more interested in assessing (1') — the very notion of cognitive claims involving generic objects. The reason why the traditional epistemologist starts her argument presenting a *generic* object (e.g., a generic bird that can stand for *any* bird) is that, as Austin himself emphasizes, the failure to identify a *specific* object (e.g., *this* particular goldfinch I see in my garden) would only have implications for assessing someone's competence (her visual acuity, her

knowledge of birds, etc.), and the nature of her epistemic circumstances (lighting conditions, distance from the object, etc.), but would not illuminate *knowledge as a whole*, i.e., the very project of getting knowledge. As we saw in section 1, Austin simply assumes that such a project is spurious and that the only sort of epistemic investigation that can get off the ground is the kind presented in (I), everything else being "silly" or "outrageous". Clarke, on the other hand, argues that an investigation along the lines of (II) should not be discarded beforehand; since that investigation would depend on *pure*, *unrestricted* uses of our words, it would not do as a refutation simply to remind the traditional epistemologist of the conditions for making / questioning claims to knowledge "inside the circle of the plain"[31]. Hence, a better criticism should be pursued, and Clarke does that by dialectically assuming the perspective of the traditional epistemologist and showing how it collapses upon its own weight, by not satisfying its own requirements for (pure) meaning.

Cavell's assessment of the situation is again more nuanced, although close in some respects to both Austin and Clarke. In a Clarkian spirit, Cavell too emphasizes that *if* the kind of claim presented in (1') can be (meaningfully) entered at all, *then* skeptical doubts will seem both relevant and fatal, and no (Austinian) appeal to what we ordinarily say will be able to bar the radical skeptical conclusion (*5'*). That is the reason why, for Cavell as well as for Clarke, the critical move against skepticism has to be made at this initial stage, questioning the obtaining of that antecedent. But Cavell's proposal to deny it amounts to the presentation of a dilemma to the skeptic which differs in important respects from Clarke's, while also vindicating part of Austin's legacy. In Cavell's view, although only claims about generic objects can enable skepticism to be generalized (i.e., applied to the whole of our cognitive claims), no clear or full meaning can be provided for such claims. Even if they contain words which are perfectly meaningful ("in the dictionary sense") and grammatically well-ordered, if they cannot be shown to be well motivated and to have a clear point when used by the skeptic, then we are faced with a case of incoherent or imaginary meaning, an attempt to use words outside language games[32]. But showing this failure is not something that can be done in a "wholesale" fashion, as Clarke tries to do by indicating that the skeptic cannot mean what he intends to mean given the ("non-standard") structure of the plain. Rather, this has to be done piecemeal, with no support other than our sense of what to say when, which in turn can only be put to test by trying to imagine concrete situations in which words such as those employed by the skeptic would *seem* to be called for, and then investigating what someone using them could be *actually meaning* in those contexts.

The following passage, in which Cavell asks when exactly it would make sense to say of me that I am "knowing something", helpfully illustrates this general point:

[31] As Hamawaki clarifies: "The plain and the philosophical are in this sense mutually 'insulated' from one another. Each is invulnerable to direct attack or de-legitimization from the other. Plain knowing can't be cited against the skeptic. And the skeptic's possibilities can't be cited against the claims of plain knowing. To do either would be, as Clarke puts it, 'to mix unmixable types,' or 'to pay off a debt of a million dollars with a million lire.' (Hamawaki 2014, p. 193).

[32] Here it is worth noting the connection, indicated by Cavell himself, with the kind of terms of criticism with which we are constantly confronted in Wittgenstein's writings:

I have related the initiating experience of the philosopher, and his ensuing progress, to Wittgenstein's notion of "speaking outside language games" (or [...] that, in philosophizing, "language goes on holiday" ([PI] §38), that it is "like an engine idling" ([PI] §132) [...]), suggesting that what happens to the philosopher's concepts is that they are deprived of their ordinary criteria of employment (which does not mean that his words are deprived of meaning — one could say that such words have nothing *but* their meanings) and, collecting no new ones, leave his concepts without relation to the world (which does not mean that what he says is false), or in terms I used earlier, remove them from their position among our system of concepts. (CR 226)

> Do I know (now) (am I, as it were *knowing)* that there is a green jar of pencils on the desk (though I am not now looking at it)? If I do know now, did I not know before I asked the question? [...] If someone had asked me whether the jar was on the desk I could have said Yes without looking. So I did know. But what does it mean to say "I did know"? [...] [N]o one would have said of me, seeing me sitting at my desk with the green jar out of my range of vision, "He knows there is a green jar of pencils on the desk", nor would anyone say of me now, "He (you) knew there was a green jar . . .", *apart from some special reason which makes that description of my "knowledge" relevant* to something I did or said or am doing or saying (e.g., I told someone that I never keep pencils on my desk [...]). Perhaps one feels: "What difference does it make that no one would have *said*, without a special reason for saying it, that you knew the green jar was on the desk? You *did* know it; it's *true* to say that you knew it. Are you suggesting that one sometimes cannot say what is true?" What I am suggesting is that "Because it is true" is not a *reason* or basis for saying anything, it does not constitute the point of your saying something; and I am suggesting that there must, in grammar, be reasons for what you say, or be point in your saying of something, if what you say is to be comprehensible. We can understand what the *words* mean apart from understanding why you say them; but apart from understanding the point of your saying them we cannot understand what *you* mean. (CR 205-6)

Since the last part of this passage has been often misunderstood[33], let me start by emphasizing that Cavell is not there claiming that there are (determinate, specifiable) things we are not *allowed* to say, even while we know exactly what *the words* employed in the purported claim mean. On the contrary, the problem with the interlocutor's suggestion — namely, that Cavell "knows there is a green jar in front of him" — is precisely that we don't know *what is meant/said* there (in particular what the word "know" is supposed to mean there). To grasp the *meaning* of those words is precisely to grasp *the point of saying them there and then*, to grasp their role or contribution given the set of commitments and interests that constitute our shared language-games, and ultimately our forms of life. The problem with the interlocutor in the passage above is that he wants his words to have meaning independently of what *he* means by them in that particular context. His failure has less to do with breaking grammatical rules or deviating from the "dictionary meaning" of the words he employs; the problem is that those words, as uttered in that imaginary context, are completely severed from the practices and forms of life that could give them any purchase, and thus lack any clear purpose[34]. But apart from such determination, Cavell argues, we simply do not know what *we* mean and (therefore) we are *not saying anything*. As he clarifies:

> "Not saying anything" is one way philosophers do not know what they mean. In this case it is not that they mean something *other* than they say, but that they do not see that they mean *nothing* (that *they* mean nothing, not that their statements mean nothing, are nonsense). (CR 210).

---

[33] About the misunderstanding, see Conant 2005.

[34] Wittgenstein offers a similar case for consideration in *On Certainty*: "the words 'I am here' have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly, — and not because they are superfluous, but because their meaning is not *determined* by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination." (Wittgenstein 1969, §348). See also Wittgenstein 2009, §117.

I think the expression “meaning something other than they say” roughly corresponds to Clarke’s initial diagnosis of what happens when someone (e.g., the skeptic) tries to challenge our plain beliefs while using words in their pure or unrestricted sense[35]. Clarke’s final diagnosis, of course, is that the skeptic “means nothing”, but this is again a conclusion that seems to depend on a general theoretical view of “what can be said / meant” inside the plain. Cavell’s diagnosis, on the other hand, presupposes no such theoretical view: saying that something “makes sense” just means that “we can easily imagine circumstances in which it *would* make sense to say it. [...] It does not mean that *apart* from those circumstances it makes (clear) sense” (CR 215). But it is precisely this absence of *determination* — of a *clear* sense — that makes the skeptic’s words *appear* to be general in the first place; that is the reason why, to take a famous example, Descartes feels he can so easily transition from what *looks like* a reason to doubt a particular claim to know (“I am here seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands ...” — which, by the way, sounds a lot like the “I know there is a green jar on the table”) to his radical skeptical conclusions. What actually happens, according to Cavell, is that Descartes (followed by traditional epistemologists ever since) already begins with what merely *appears* to be a claim, but in fact amounts to something less than that — a non-claim, an illusion of something being claimed.

The question we are left with after this diagnosis is what exactly is the source of this illusion — what leads “the philosopher” (which may, of course, be any of us) to try to speak “outside language games”. Cavell thinks this has to do with a feature of our language that may, in specific moods and circumstances, feel (understandably) disappointing. In a well-known passage of his own “early philosophical self”[36], Cavell summarizes that point as follows:

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgivenness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation — all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. (Cavell 1976, p. 52)

Is there any doubt that it may be terrifying to discover that there is nothing beyond our sense of what is interesting, humorous, significant, outrageous, etc., grounding human speech and activity, sanity and community — in a word, grounding *meaning* itself? Reflecting upon the passage above in a later work, Cavell adds that “[w]e understandably do not like our concepts to be based on what matters to us” because

[35] Roughly: the skeptic wants to challenge our plain claims to know, and thus he *must* mean by “know” what that word plainly means; however, when he mounts his attack he surreptitiously *shifts* the meaning to its pure verbal-twin, hence meaning something other than he (thinks) he says.

[36] See Cavell 1990, p. 82.

this "makes our language seem unstable and the instability seems to mean what I have expressed as my being responsible for whatever stability our criteria may have, and I do not want this responsibility"[37]. From this perspective, wishing for our *words* to have meaning independently of what *we* mean by them in a particular context can be seen as a symptom of the desire to avoid that responsibility — an all-too-human response, no matter how illusory it may prove to be. More importantly, this vision of language also implies that privacy — in the sense of a failure to make ourselves and our words understood, finding attunement with others — is a standing human possibility. *Ditto* for skepticism, to the extent that it registers a disappointment with something that is true about our condition — namely, that our criteria, being grounded only on those aspects of "the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'", cannot provide the sort of certainty that the skeptic craves. As I read Cavell, no easy way out of *this* difficulty is forthcoming — in particular, no wholesale refutation of skepticism or proof of the impossibility of privacy is available for the ordinary language philosopher. The only way to measure the extent of our agreement in "forms of life" is to put it to test, staking one's claims in search of acknowledgment, and thus exposing oneself precisely to the kind of repudiation whose standing possibility so impresses the skeptic. As Cavell clarifies in another context:

> What Wittgenstein calls the ordinary or everyday use of words (to which [ordinary language] philosophy is to lead them back from their metaphysical disruption) is an ordinary that is anything but invulnerable to skepticism. [...] What this regime of a vulnerable ordinary means to me is that we are judges of what calls for, or tolerates, change in our ways of thinking and wording the world; whereas skepticism demands, in effect, that we forgo this judgment. The skeptic [...] *replaces* my ordinary, the very vulnerability and inarticulateness of it, its inhabitability. (Cavell 2005, p. 134)

As this passage emphasizes, the ordinary as understood by Cavell (and before him by Wittgenstein[38]) is indeed vulnerable and unstable, and our challenge is to accept that vulnerability and that instability, trying to make it *habitable* — as opposed to *despairing* of it, as the skeptic (to a great extent unknowingly) does, trying to replace it for a fantasy in which we can forgo our own responsibility in achieving shared judgments inside this changeable and dynamic horizon.

Conclusion

Having compared the different responses to skepticism offered by the three philosophers examined in the preceding sections, the results I hope to have achieved are the following: J. L. Austin pictures the domain of the ordinary as immune from philosophically motivated skeptical attacks, which are in turn seen as simply silly or outrageous. Differently from Austin, Thompson Clarke does not think the concerns of traditional epistemology and of skepticism, in particular, are *fully unintelligible from the start* — they might well prove to be *not fully intelligible in the*

[37] Cavell 1990, p. 92.

[38] As Cavell clarifies in a parenthetical sentence I left out from the last quote, "J. L. Austin's view of the ordinary, however close to Wittgenstein's in various respects, differs in this respect." (Cavell 2005, p. 134).

end[39], but studying them carefully opens up a whole field of investigation concerning the structure of the plain and its relationship to the philosophical; this, in his view, is the main legacy of skepticism. Stanley Cavell agrees that studying skepticism is the key to elucidate the logic of the ordinary, but for reasons that are subtly yet importantly different from Clarke's — the ordinary not being a fixed domain or structure, but rather a largely non-thematized and constantly evolving horizon of meaning, it is only under the pressure of philosophical attempts to speak outside our language games that we will become aware of their (dynamic) boundaries. In this respect, Cavell is closer to Austin than to Clarke in vindicating the procedures of the ordinary language philosopher, and her reliance on her own sense of "what to say when", as the only way of elucidating the meanings of our words and concepts; however, *contra* Austin (and possibly closer to Clarke), Cavell does not think it is "silly" or "outrageous" to try to go beyond our ordinary language games — on the contrary, nothing is more human than the wish to deny our finitude and its burdens.

References

AUSTIN, J. L. 1962. *Sense and Sensibilia, reconstructed from the manuscript notes by G.J. Warnock*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

AUSTIN, J. L. 1979 [1946]. *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed., Urmson, J. O. and Warnock, G. J. (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BURNYEAT, M. 1984. *The sceptic in his place and time.* In RORTY, R., SCHNEEWIND, J. & SKINNER, Q. (Eds.), *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy* (Ideas in Context), p. 225-254. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511625534.013.

CAVELL, S. 1976. *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CAVELL, S. 1979. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*, Oxford: Oxford U. P..

CAVELL, S. 1990. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism: The Carus Lectures, 1988.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

CAVELL, S. 2005. *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

CAVELL, S. 2012. *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

CLARKE, T. 1972. "The Legacy of Skepticism". In: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 69, No. 20, Sixty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division (Nov. 9, 1972), p. 754-769.

CONANT, J. 2005. "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein". In: *Harvard Review of Philosophy*, vol.XIII no.1.

CONANT, J. 2012. "Two Varieties of Skepticism". In: ABEL, G. and CONANT, J. (eds.), *Rethinking Epistemology, Vol. 2.* Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, p. 1–73.

[39] I am here echoing Narboux's useful formulation, quoted at the end of section 2 (see Narboux 2014, p. 159).

DIAMOND, C. 2004. "Criss-Cross Philosophy". In: AMMERELLER, E. and FISCHER, E. (eds.), *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 201–220.

HAMAWAKI, A. 2014. "In Search of the Plain and the Philosophical: Skepticism, Transcendence, and Self-Knowledge". In: *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 4, p.189–224.

GORODEISKY, K. and JOLLEY, K. D. 2014. "The Unboundedness of the Plain; or the Ubiquity of Lilliput? How to Do Things with Thompson Clarke?". In: *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 4, p. 225–262

NARBOUX, J-P 2014. "Introduction: Thompson Clarke's Tightrope Walk". In: *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 4, p.153-188.

STROUD, B. 1984. *The significance of philosophical scepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

TECHIO, J. 2016. "Taking skepticism seriously: Stroud and Cavell". In: *Sképsis* (Salvador. Online), v. 7, p. 100-125.

TECHIO, J. 2020. "The Threat of Privacy in Wittgenstein's *Investigations*: Kripke vs. Cavell". In: *Wittgenstein-Studien*, v. 11, p. 79-104.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. 1969. *On Certainty*. ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, Translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M.Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. 2009. *Philosophical Investigations* 4rd Ed., translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.