

**STANLEY CAVELL,
RELIGION,
AND
CONTINENTAL
PHILOSOPHY**

Espen Dahl

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CHU* Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990)
- CR* Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979)
- CT* Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)
- CW* Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004)
- DK* Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)
- HDTW* J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975)
- IQO* Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988)
- LK* Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010)
- LI* Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. S. Weber (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008)
- MWM* Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976)
- NYUA* Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989)
- OB* Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1998)
- PAL* Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)
- PDT* Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005)
- PH* Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980)
- PI* Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and J. Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)
- PP* Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell, 1995)
- PoP* Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994)
- SW* Stanley Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981)
- TI* Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969)
- TS* Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984)
- WV* Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979)

INTRODUCTION

“Why are the most unlikely people, including myself, suddenly talking about God?” Terry Eagleton asks, referring to the return of religion among intellectuals, in affirmation as well as criticism of it. Stanley Cavell also has quite a bit to say about God, as attested by the very existence of this book. But since religion is notably not one of the topics on which Cavell’s fame as a thinker rests, it seems reasonable to count Cavell among the “unlikely people” Eagleton has in mind. Nonetheless, such a characteristic would be misleading. Cavell has not “suddenly” or recently started “talking about God” beginning with his very first publication, religious themes have continued to find their way into his thinking and writing. Admittedly, Cavell often merely alludes to such themes rather than treats them explicitly; scattered observations and comments are frequently composed as parenthetical remarks offered as examples *en passant*, “as if,” one of Cavell’s finest commentators puts it, “being overlooked was the condition to which they aspired.”²

Given only a superficial impression of the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual breadth of his enterprise, it would in fact be more “unlikely” were Cavell among those who have nothing to say concerning religion. But since his approach to religion is far from straightforward, the question remains: Exactly why does Cavell continue to invoke religious tropes and topics? This book is my attempt not only to answer that question but also to show how the wider philosophical context of the ordinary, finitude, skepticism, acknowledgment, modernism, and other of Cavell’s principal occupations can shed light on the significance of the explicit religious tropes and topics. Moreover, the philosophical context, worked out in Cavell’s rich and profound analyses and readings, carries religious implications of their own, which will be equally significant here. Starting out as a proponent of a highly original extension of ordinary language philosophy in the aftermath of J. L. Austin and the late Wittgenstein, Cavell has carved out the implications of his thinking in numerous contexts and on numerous topics, including music, film, Shakespeare, American transcendentalism, and romantic poetry. Despite his uncontested interest in religious themes along with his occasionally expressed unwillingness to subscribe to religious faith, Cavell has not worked out his complicated relation to religion in any detail. Nevertheless, he refers frequently to the Bible, Augustine, Luther, Pascal, Milton, Kierkegaard, and, more recently, Benjamin and Levinas, suggesting that he has an affirmative relation to religious topics; in regard to Cavell’s critical or rival take on religion, Nietzsche and Emerson play prevalent roles. Apart from their particular usage by Cavell, one does not have to be a theologian to perceive that his key concepts, such as confession, return, conversation, transfiguration, redemption, and praise, indicate a profound affinity to Christianity.

One already understands from such lists of names and concepts that Cavell’s stance toward religion calls for a differentiated interpretation. Despite his own intimations, and even the high regard he can express for Christianity, Cavell at times levels harsh criticism at it, even contending that religion is beyond contemporary sensibility;³ for instance, he writes that “[r]espectable further theologizing of the world has, I gather, ceased” (*DK*, 36 n3). Yet, in other passages he can write the

the Christian outlook is something that he is “not in a position to share, but admire[s] and rejoice in” (*CHU*, 131). Leaving aside the question of how, or whether at all, such utterances can be reconciled, they at least bear witness to the inherent complexity and tension found at almost every juncture of Cavell’s treatment of religious ideas. Such complexity is by no means lessened when one takes into account that Cavell is not a Christian but a Jew, indeed a more or less secular Jew. When asked by an interviewer how he conceives of the relation between Christianity and Judaism, he replies

To choose between Judaism and Christianity is, I suppose, still a live issue for me. I don’t mean that I would convert to either. I grew up as a Jew and I believe in Martin Buber about these things. You don’t have to convert to being a Jew ... For me to say that the figure of Christ is an obsessive figure for a Jewish intellectual is hardly news.⁴

Perhaps the issue at stake is a matter of feeling drawn to both Christianity as well as to the Jewish tradition to which he already belongs, while simultaneously resisting them both.

In that interview, Cavell reflects on the relation between the American and the Jewish traditions, especially as he sometimes feels that Emerson and Thoreau have suggested ways to bring the two together for him. Referring to his book on Thoreau’s *Walden* and his essays on Emerson, Cavell says that “I made Thoreau write a scripture that is as much old testament, and I made Emerson into the philosopher of immigrancy.”⁵ Since he was the only son of an immigrant Jew, this latter theme strikes a significant chord in Cavell’s autobiography. And since biography and philosophy are for him inextricably connected, this bears on his efforts to think through the conditions of philosophy, not least of American philosophy. Immigrancy, Cavell suggests, has to do with the theme of abandonment in Emerson, which, in Cavell’s hands, draws both on the sense of Exodus and on the disciple’s readiness for departure when the Master calls. Moreover, immigrancy suggests another undercurrent in Cavell’s writing, namely the feeling of being a stranger—not only to others, but first and foremost to oneself (*PoP*, xv). Such inherent alienation entails a sense of diaspora, which also offers an intelligible backdrop to Cavell’s recurrent occupation with separation and partiality, with exile and longing for a homecoming of words.

This position of not being religious yet feeling indebted to religion, of moving between confessions and rejections, of being a secular Jew yet fascinated with Christianity is certainly composite, complex, and indeed ambivalent—but precisely therefore fascinating and open.⁶ Philosophy is supposed to awaken us to the perplexity of what we otherwise take for granted, such a position seems a highly promising starting point for an exploration of religion. The intriguing problem in regard to Cavell’s religious register is that it is in no way clear which way one shall proceed from Cavell, and it is therefore not at all surprising that the growing body of literature on this topic reaches in manifold directions.

Since the rest of this book discusses what I hold to be the most significant receptions of Cavell and religion, here I will sketch a threefold typology. In brief, there are, first, those who read Cavell as an emphatically secular and atheist philosopher and who also sympathetically affirm this stance. On the background of my constructive purpose, I will call this a negative reading. Such readers typically downplay the inherent weight in Cavell’s frequent use of religious vocabulary, figures, and ideas, and instead emphasize the way in which Cavell can be taken as working through a sense of finitude in the aftermath of the death of God.⁷ The second type of Cavell readers concurs on the whole with the negative reading that the overall orientation of his thought moves against Christianity, but they normatively hold this against Cavell since such readers are sympathetic to the Christian inheritance

Such critical reading tends to emphasize that Cavell's insistence on the autonomy of the self or the metaphysical independence of the finite world collides with its Christian alternative.⁸ Finally, the third, affirmative reading emphasizes the affinity between Cavell's philosophical concerns and theological concepts. This position contends that despite the ambiguities in Cavell's writing, it must be regarded as essentially open to theology or religion more generally. According to such readers, not only Cavell's religious vocabulary, but also the structure of thought entailed in such key notions as skepticism, sin, acknowledgment, and redemption overlap so significantly with theological concerns as to invite further elaboration along those lines.⁹

Although I maintain the conversation with the negative as well as the critical readings, this book as a whole will follow the outlines of the third, affirmative approach. That said, I strive not to neglect or be insensitive to Cavell's negative stance toward religion; indeed, paying heed to such a stance on one side of Cavell's (at least) two-sided relation to religion is the very issue of the first chapter. In accordance with the second, critical reading, I also endeavor not to deny that there are points where theology parts from Cavell's thought, as becomes clear in the final pages of this book. However, those concerns should not foreclose any inquiry into Cavell's possible contributions as if they were irreconcilable with religion or even Christian theology. I hope to cultivate a sense of patience: a patience to await whatever there is of religious insights contained in his writing, and a patience that willingly faces his moments of open reluctance. I attempt to identify, respond to, and expand on Cavell's rich writings with their overlaps, allusions, and employment of religious ideas that allow for further philosophical and theological thought along the suggested lines. Nonetheless, my aim is not primarily to provide an exegesis of Cavell's thinking on religion, but rather to expand on his valuable intuitions, in a way that is perhaps more Cavellian than Cavell, following him so to speak more according to his spirit than according to his words. In doing so, I elaborate his thoughts in two directions invited by the conversations with theology and continental philosophy.

Theology and Philosophy, Analytic and Continental

The question, then, is where this approach leaves this book: should it be shelved as theology or philosophy, or perhaps philosophy of religion? Cavell himself hesitates when it comes to the presupposition often required by philosophy of religion, namely that religion can be singled out and studied as a specialized discipline within philosophy. Cavell regards ethics and religion as integral to at least Wittgenstein's practice—they are constitutive parts of the practice's spiritual fervor, bound enigmatically up with Wittgenstein's attention to what seems almost too trivial to mention, sometimes thought of as prophecy (*NYUA*, 75). Hence, as far as I am guided by Cavell and as far as one grants that what he is doing counts as philosophy, then what I present in this book should also be thought of as philosophy (with its spiritual pretension kept intact). There is no way to steer clear of theology, however, if only for the reason that Cavell himself invokes it at key stages. Additionally, theology furnishes, at least to some degree, the perspective from which I read Cavell, and thus the theology—especially Protestant theology—will inform this work. That theology matters to Cavell and philosophy is partly because theological writings are among the most influential ways the Judeo-Christian tradition is handed down and has flown into the Western cultural conceptual repertoire. If philosophy's virtue, as Cavell understands it, is primarily responsiveness, it must respond to texts, myths, film, and art—whatever there is in the culture that demands attention and thought. He accordingly speaks of philosophy's principal task as that of “confront[ing] the culture with itself” (*CR*, 125). Because theology has unmistakably left its mark on our culture, to engage in philosophy

means also to confront the culture with its own, albeit potentially suppressed, theological inheritance. Hence philosophy should engage in a conversation with theology, despite its tendency to shun it.

Although they are at times contested, theology and philosophy are nonetheless academic disciplines. However critical Cavell is of the professionalization of philosophy, it remains an integral part of those disciplines' task—whether within or outside of academia—to discover and to test their own conditions, indebtedness, and autonomy with regard both to their own past and to bordering disciplines. Cavell has repeatedly drawn on film and literature and yet insisted that such preoccupations do not turn his work into film studies or literary theory; and likewise, to the extent that it opens itself toward religion, neither does his philosophy become theology. It is obvious that, for Cavell, the secular cultural state in which he unfolds his thought can no longer take God for granted at its given point of departure. Perhaps we can say that philosophy comprises human existence turning reflectively upon itself, restricted to the way that reflection unfolds within its finite resources. By contrast, theology presupposes that God has spoken first and that we are addressed from beyond ourselves, an address to which it replies with continual, questioning afterthought. Hence, even if philosophy and theology find mutual interest in the human world and in its origins and meaning, their sources and perspectives differ.

Even Paul Ricoeur, who is open about his willingness to listen to theology, insists that as a philosopher and a responsible thinker, he cannot start out with theological answers—he must instead remain a beginner, suspended between faith and atheism.¹⁰ As beginners, philosophers assume the position of the child who questions everything, a position that, moreover, is echoed in Cavell's statement that philosophy is education for grown-ups (*CR*, 125). This seems like a promising way to proceed, since it does not exclude the conversation between theology and philosophy while at the same time respecting their difference. For such reasons, and like Heidegger before him, Cavell does not want to undo the separation between theology and philosophy: “[Heidegger] is careful to deny that philosophy and religion are the same, presumably on the ground that philosophy cannot acknowledge religion as letting—the way religion works to let—truth happen, say by authority or by revelation” (*TNUA*, 3). As for Heidegger, philosophy's separation from theology does not preclude a fruitful interaction, but is rather taken as the presupposition of their mutual acknowledgment.¹¹

Perhaps the best way to think of this relation is to conceive Cavell's philosophy as in *competition* with religion. Cavell himself explicitly reads the Shakespearian corpus in such a manner, adding that “I suppose this is why the idea of Shakespeare as producing a ‘secular scripture’ does not quite satisfy me” (*DK*, 18). I take Cavell's description of his reading of Shakespeare to indicate his general stance toward religion and theology. “Competing” does not mean “ruling out,” because that would amount to a secular reading that would dissatisfy Cavell. On the contrary, in the same book Cavell claims that “the reason a reader like Santayana claimed to find everything in Shakespeare but religion was that religion is Shakespeare's pervasive, hence invisible, business” (*DK*, 218). Although “competition” can imply an attempt to overcome and succeed or renew religion, I take Cavell's statement about Shakespeare's pervasive business to imply that competition means that religion also enters into drama or philosophy, perhaps as the mutual informing and mutual rivalry of different voices—hence as a conversation. Cavell has detected such an internal conversation in both Emerson and Heidegger and thinks of them as “internalizing the unending quarrel between philosophy and theology” (*SW*, 131). Such a juxtaposition makes the two disciplines cast new light on each other according to their shifting constellations, yet without diminishing their separateness. As Jürgen Habermas has suggested, theology should regard its exposure to secular outlooks, and vice versa, as a dialectical learning

process.¹² Such a recommendation comes close to the conversation I take Cavell to invite. Something can be gained by taking a detour through the dialectics between theology and philosophy. However, lack of mutual exchange has too often been the rule, and in 2010 Cavell notes his regret of the loss of that conversation, especially when it comes to reflecting on what he understands as skepticism or skepticism. “In this, philosophy has suffered from the way it has put distance between itself and theology. Theology is drenched in fallen worlds, the only ones there are, anyway the only ones that contain philosophy (or theology)” (*LK*, 446). Consequently, I want neither to extricate Cavell’s philosophy from theology nor establish a forced unity, but rather to think of his philosophy and theology as a fruitful companionship. But exactly how far such companionship can go remains in question: there are points where Cavell cannot follow theology, and conversely, there are aspects of Cavell’s thinking that seem highly problematic from a theological point of view. But as I hope to demonstrate, the companionship between the two still carries us remarkably far.

Given my wish to emphasize and elaborate on Cavell’s relation with not only theology but also what is generally known as continental philosophy, I should briefly comment on another divide that has occupied Cavell, namely the divide between Anglophone, analytic philosophy and continental philosophy. Cavell was attracted by continental philosophy’s characteristic style and broad historical and cultural scope, while analytic philosophy offered a sharp eye for philosophical puzzles and problems, particularly having to do with our conceptual presuppositions in thinking. Despite the undeniable presence of the analytical philosophical inheritance in Cavell’s oeuvre, as influenced by Wittgenstein and Austin, in the following chapters I focus as much on Cavell’s responses to thinkers who tend to be grouped under the heading of continental philosophy, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Levinas. From his earliest publication, with the telling title “Existential and Analytic Philosophy,” Cavell has been torn between those two philosophical traditions. In the preface to *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell speaks of his writing as witnessing the loss of that separation and as taking on the aspiration of healing the rift (*CR*, xiii). Cavell elaborates on the acute sense of how philosophical problems arise within our language, central to Anglophone philosophy, in a manner and breadth that brings it into touch with continental thought. “Existential and Analytic Philosophy” most extensively deals with Kierkegaard, which suggests that healing the split between the analytic and continental traditions can also prove fruitful for the other split—that between reason and faith, between philosophy and theology. But, as Cavell has noted, the other way also holds true: the presence of German theology in the United States during the years of his philosophical maturation, represented by Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Karl Barth, ensured that the continental tradition could not be erased entirely under the pressure of logical positivism (*LK*, 456–457).

The Ordinary

A sharper picture of what Cavell calls the ordinary or the everyday is needed before we investigate his religious register. Clarifying these notions poses some initial problems, however, for as Heidegger has pointed out, what is nearest to us is also most distant from our apprehension—far from obvious, it first appears, the everyday is instead most enigmatic.¹³ Wittgenstein expresses a similar insight thus: “We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand” (*PI*, § 89). To make matters worse, according to Cavell there is no “approach” to the ordinary, or at least not what Wittgenstein depicts as the ordinary; for an approach implies that we start out at a distance. But we are in fact already immersed in the ordinary as we attempt to find some philosophical orientation (*CR*, 6)—so how, then, can we even begin to come

grips with the ordinary? That is Cavell's problem, or philosophy's problem, which can only make progress by the experience of the ordinary as problematic—when we are lost to it and thus already some distance from it. My present problem is more restricted, since I provide here essentially an account of Cavell's writing on the ordinary.

One way to come to grips with Cavell's pervasive and perplexing notion is to follow how different aspects of the ordinary surface at different stages of his evolving authorship. At the risk of oversimplification, I suggest three decisive strands as signposts for readers of this study. The first, and most formative strand, is connected to Cavell's highly original way of receiving and elaborating ordinary language philosophy; the second strand is connected to his interpretation of romanticism; and the third strand concerns what Cavell has called moral perfectionism. Although these different strands come to the fore at different stages of his authorship, they do not eclipse one another; rather, later strands preserve the former and add new dimensions to a constantly developing and increasingly enriched notion of the everyday.

Must We Mean What We Say? (1969), Cavell's first book of essays, bears witness to the impact brought about by J. L. Austin's and, later, by Wittgenstein's attention to the language of the ordinary. These two philosophers undertook in distinct ways the patient and laborious work of tracing how we use words under shifting circumstances; they brought out "what we should say when" and what we mean by what we say, that is, what the implications are in the relevant contexts (*MWM*, 20). An appeal to this perception—that what we normally say and mean deeply controls what we can philosophically say and mean—seems hopelessly weak compared to the past metaphysical aspirations of philosophy. To the logical positivism that held sway in the 1940s and 1950s, it seemed to shatter all hopes for logical precision and the progress of knowledge. Actually, the philosophical appeal to ordinary language was accused of being overly conservative—despite the fact that its protagonists regarded it as revolutionary. Indeed, this is how Cavell saw it: the encounter with the writings of Austin and Wittgenstein exacts nothing short of a conversion, where what before appeared trivial now takes on great importance (*CR*, xvii). Apart from the religious overtones, such a conversion does not so much provide new, previously hidden information as redirect our vision of our relation toward what we already somehow know. All that ordinary language philosophers have to go on is the appeal to our willingness to find ourselves captured in the representative exposition of what we say when. Voicing such an inclusive "we" as the source of philosophical authority is doomed to hit a note between arrogance and humility—arrogance insofar as the philosopher claims to speak representatively of the human condition; humility insofar as such voicing must subject itself to the demands of our mutual acceptance of the ordinary and common as the laws of intelligibility (*PoP*, 8).

So what does the adherence to ordinary language offer philosophy? On the face of it, not much. It provides neither theses nor any testing against empirical facts; it is essentially armchair philosophy insofar as its only source of authority is our willingness to agree on what we can say when. In this sense, "philosophy concerns those necessities we cannot, being human, fail to know" (*MWM*, 96). Competent speakers cannot fail to know what we call a chair, what it means to be expecting someone, why someone might find it difficult to point to a color on an object, and the like. It demands no expertise since everyone is in the position of recognizing what philosophy wants to know. So it seems that ordinary language philosophy is a way of defending common sense. But Cavell denies this also, for however widespread some opinions might be, they can always be disputed. Nonetheless, the very fact that an opinion can be disputed is important, because it requires that we agree on the use of words that express the opinions in question. The existence of such agreement and the way it influences what we can say and mean reveals the conditions of possibility for our intelligibility as speaking animals.

Hence, what is articulated in ordinary language philosophy is what Kant would call transcendent knowledge—knowledge about ourselves, our conditions, and our limitations (*MWM*, 65).

But the question remains: why would such an agreement in what we say and do be important to elucidate? The question can only gain importance because the agreement is all too easily lost, as in ordinary language philosophy as in life. At this point, Cavell's otherwise relatively orthodox version of ordinary language philosophy stands apart: whereas ordinary language philosophers will typically claim that the loss is due to the misuse of words or conventions or the transgression of constitutive rules, Cavell thinks that stance drastically underrates the linguistic competence of competing philosophers. Cavell suggests instead that when we fail to recognize necessities we cannot fail to know, it is due not to an unintended misuse of words but to denial: we *willfully* avoid the meaning of what we should say when we speak, as if casting ourselves out of the garden of meaning. For some reason, we, or the skeptic in us, continue to utter words that cannot really interest us—words uttered without any point, placed outside the rules of language games.

In Cavell's depiction, it seems as though humans long for something absolutely certain and metaphysically assured. Such certainty must be established apart from my reliance on another's participation in the notoriously unreliable ordinary language, for example, by means of sense impressions or perceptions that are in principle indubitable. But if such aspirations are ultimately frustrated, the craving for certainty easily turns into its skeptical counterpart—we have no knowledge of, say, other minds or of the external world at all. Both the craving for absolute certainty and its rejection attests to an underlying nostalgia for the presence of the world, which again attests to the lurking sense of being at a distance from the world (*WV*, 41). This is a typical condition for modern subjectivity, according to Cavell, but its skeptical resolution can be devastating. At the heart of skepticism Cavell detects a wish to escape the fact that our meaning is conditioned by our form of life with words. Skepticism displays the human wish to transcend the human condition, whether called the drive to inhumanity or, in a religious register, sin. What we truly need is not more information or new discoveries, but to be brought back in touch with what is right in front of us. Wittgenstein famously writes, "What we do to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (*PI*, § 116). This everyday use is in turn upheld by the constant participation in "the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'" (*MWM*, 52). Without having explicitly agreed on conventions or without relying on metaphysical support, we are still so profoundly and so systematically attuned to one another in that form of life that we can provide meaningful exchange. To acknowledge such perception without despair is an achievement to which Cavell aspires.

Cavell diverges from the more traditional interpretation of Wittgenstein in shifting the emphasis from rules toward Wittgenstein's notion of criteria. Criteria are the means by which we regulate our application of concepts, and hence they manifest our mutual agreement in meaning.¹⁴ But since criteria rest on nothing more than our continued capability and willingness to participate in a shared form of life, they can also be dismissed or repudiated. And to be sure, out of disappointment with our vulnerable intelligibility so conceived, we seize this opportunity—either in terms of metaphysical speculation or skeptical denial. Yoking metaphysics and skeptical denials together under the notion of skepticism, Cavell repeatedly underlines that skepticism is something that a philosophy committed to ordinary language should not and cannot refute. Criteria's vulnerability to skeptical denial is essential to language being *ours*—that it depends on us and that we are responsible for its continued existence (*IQO*, 5). Taking skepticism seriously and as internal to the ordinary, Cavell has spent most of his career pondering this strange and yet relentless human drive to repudiate or repress our very conditions that make us intelligible creatures.

The second strand of Cavell's notion of the ordinary relates to his reception of (particularly Anglo-American) romanticism. Fragments of romantic themes found their way into part 6 of *The Claim of Reason* (1979), but romanticism was only in the subsequent years picked up and treated separately in a more sustained way (especially in *In Quest of the Ordinary*). Cavell takes his cue from Wordsworth's foreword to *Lyrical Ballads*, where romantic poetry is supposed to make "the incidents of common life interesting" (quoted in *IQO*, 6). Broadly speaking, Cavell locates not only romanticism but also Wittgenstein's and Austin's work in this evolving tradition. Emerson and Thoreau can be considered as America's belated romantics, and their foreshadowing of occupations central to ordinary language philosophy is indispensable for Cavell's understanding of the ordinary. Cavell writes: "[T]he sense of the ordinary that my work derives from the practice of the later Wittgenstein and from J. L. Austin, and their attention to the language of ordinary or everyday life, is underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau and their devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low" (*IQO*, 4).

According to Cavell, romanticism not only challenges the professionalized division between literature and philosophy, but it does so by way of its incessant occupation with our intimacy with the world and the loss of that intimacy. According to romanticism, this loss is tantamount to death: it is motivated by a fear that not only words but along with it the world tend to become dead for us; it is nourished by the conviction that philosophy has participated in deadening it, emblematically expressed in Kant's securing of knowledge by renouncing the thing itself (*IQO*, 53). The romantic poetic-philosophical task then becomes one of bringing the world back to life. Such lost and regained intimacy with the world is what romanticism adds to the depiction of the ordinary—it adds something that Austin and Wittgenstein were never able to find a satisfactory expression of (*NYUA*, 81). One way in which Cavell thinks romanticism helps us understand the ordinary concerns how this intimacy comes to expression by means of an acute attentiveness to the ordinary. However, such attentiveness must be gained or regained against the odds: the intimacy and familiarity with ordinary life makes it almost invisible and often not regarded as worthy of attention. Still, what Emerson demands of his students is precisely the attention to such things as "[t]he meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and gait of the body" (*PH*, 15). Cavell claims that this list epitomizes "what we may call the physiognomy of the ordinary, a form of what Kierkegaard calls the perception of the sublime in the everyday" (*PH*, 15). Whatever the surprising invocation of Kierkegaard and the sublime implies—a question that is the topic of [chapter 2](#)—suffice it here to point out that it invests the apparently trivial and dispensable with philosophical importance.

The task of calling attention to the physiognomy of the ordinary betrays that we have already lost interest in the ordinary. Cavell contends that Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, and Wittgenstein all share the perception that we are in a state of boredom. The hunger for fantastic excitement and hence what is at least an intellectual escape from such boredom might seem a reasonable motivation for our attraction to metaphysics. The anti-metaphysical reduction to logic and semantics is not necessarily better off. At least for Cavell these are both fundamentally skeptical responses that cannot satisfy our true needs—Cavell can even state that such skeptical attractions are driven by a will to emptiness (*IQO*, 7). From this state, romanticism must, by means of philosophy and literature, attract us toward the ordinary again, breathe new life into it, which for Emerson and Thoreau means examining and consulting one's experience by means of something phenomenologists would call a reduction, that is, a consultation of your experience by means of "a momentarily *stopping*, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track: coming to attention" (*PH*, 12).¹⁵ To sum up, the first two strands of the

ordinary offer parallel recoveries from our state of loss or skepticism: either, according to the first strand, being led back to the everyday by following the injunction of what we should say when, or by consulting one's experience and re-establishing one's interest in and intimacy with the ordinary, which romantics call our home.

Addressing the third strand of the ordinary, we must ask: What exactly is our home? Where is the ordinary to which we return? In response to the charge of conservatism, inherent to the returning home, Cavell insists on the returning in the sense of turning—both as turning away from a scene of illusions and as turning toward something new, so that the ordinary to which we return is paradoxically a place we have never been (*PDT*, 9–10). This third strand consists of what Cavell labels moral or Emersonian perfectionism, and it adds a temporal dimension to the ordinary, that is, a futurity and directedness: it centers on selfhood and its split condition between its fallen present state and its striving for its next self through constant change. Even if the foundation for Cavell's so-called Emersonian or moral perfectionism was laid as early as his 1972 book on Thoreau's *Walden*, it first reaches fruition in the 1980s, particularly with the Carus Lectures he delivered in 1988, which were published as *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. In *Conditions*, perfectionism is no longer only Emersonian, but regarded as a dimension of moral life recorded in a vast list of cultural achievements spanning from Plato to Heidegger and Wittgenstein. The striking presence of writers with a strong religious orientation in Cavell's canon is unsurprising; St. Matthew, St. Augustine, Dante, Milton, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky have all found their way into Cavell's list (*CHU*, 5). By broadening the concept of perfectionism in this manner, Cavell makes it clear that there is not merely *one* way toward perfection, as little as perfectionism is committed to one fixed state of perfection—rather points to the incessant movement onward. Perfectionism is a particular care and responsibility for the self—a caring for the self by way of transforming the self, or more precisely, a striving for becoming true to oneself (*CW*, 11). Hence, perfectionist works are knitted together not by a school of thought, a philosophical discipline, or a genre, but by their aspiration to change the writer as well as the reader. Perfectionism is philosophical, moral, spiritual, aesthetic, and political quests—indeed, is all of these at once.¹⁶

I said that Cavell's perfectionism strives to turn us toward a place we have never been—perhaps should rather be said that the ordinary is precisely not a place at all, but instead something like a continuous *task*, something essentially to be achieved. This does not contradict the thought of a home, but puts the emphasis on the notion of a home as something that can essentially be changed and something we must be prepared to leave. Thus understood, perfectionism works retroactively, as we were, into the first strand of the ordinary and makes Wittgenstein's appeal to the ordinary into an appeal of change from inside, a new birth—a sensibility of change that Cavell says that Wittgenstein shares with Luther, Rousseau, and Thoreau. Consequently, we must distinguish between the actual everyday in which we find ourselves and the eventual everyday, which is essentially ahead of us. Reflecting on Wittgenstein's practice, Cavell writes:

His philosophy of the (eventual) everyday is the proposal of a practice that takes on, takes upon itself, precisely (I do not say exclusively) that scene of illusion and of loss; approaches it, or let me say reproaches it, intimately enough to turn it, or deliver it; as if the actual is the womb, contains the terms, of the eventual. The direction out from illusion is not up, at any rate not up to one fixed morning star; but down, at any rate along each chain of a day's denial. (*NYUA*, 46)

Within the perfectionist strand, we are met with a handful of metaphors of the everyday that do not necessarily fit happily together: as a journey onward (from the actual to the eventual), as birth (the actual as the womb of the eventual), and philosophy as descent (the downward direction out of illusions). Perhaps they are all crystallized in Cavell's favorite Emersonian figure of transfiguration (*NYUA*, 47): it denotes a change (and thus a journey) that is affected not from the outside but from the inside of the ordinary (as birth), and its change is not a change of place or of occupations, but a change where the same is perceived differently.

Chapter Outline

Despite the unsystematic nature of Cavell's engagement with religion, I try to show how his engagement is internally linked to the central occupations of his oeuvre, turning on such themes as the ordinary, skepticism, and acknowledgment. My central aim is to see how such notions should be brought to bear on the discussion within theology and continental philosophy, and more specifically how they, within this orientation, convey a particular vision of the human, which I call an anthropology of finitude. Such anthropology of finitude depicts humanity as constantly oscillating between skepticism and acknowledgment, or, put in more Pascalian terms, between angels and beasts. In Cavell's perspective, this is expressed in our satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction with criteria which amounts to our finding us, uncannily, both at home and not at home within the ordinary.¹⁷

[Chapters 1](#) and [2](#) discuss the overarching question of how to relate Cavell's commitment to the ordinary to the presence of religion in his thinking. Because Cavell's ambivalence toward religion is perhaps the most obvious stumbling block for this book, I address it straightaway, in the first chapter. I argue that his ambivalence—say, his unwillingness to decide between Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's perspectives—reflects the positioning of his own thought within what he understands as a modern cultural state. In [chapter 2](#) I proceed from the possibilities that this position leaves open and explore Cavell's thoughts on what I call the ordinary sublime. In striking what is simultaneously a religious, aesthetic, and ethical chord, the ordinary sublime opens up the ordinary to a register that is highly relevant to this book.

With the conditions for a fruitful conversation with religion established in the first two chapters, [chapters 3](#) and [4](#) proceed to a theological terrain. [Chapter 3](#) concerns Cavell's concept of acknowledgment, which I argue is internally related to the kind of self-disclosure and self-knowledge that Augustine calls confessions. Moreover, it also conveys important connections with Luther's conception of the ordinary and the acknowledgement of God in faith. [Chapter 4](#) grapples with skepticism and how it offers important clues to renewed consideration on sin, understood as the unceasingly recurring human wish to deny our humanity. It is arguably not our finite condition as such that constitutes sinfulness, but our relation to that condition, which appears to be pervaded by an unceasing and willed repudiation of it. As the secular articulation of sin, Cavell's skepticism mirrors and sheds further light on the dynamic that animates sin.

That original sin has been thought of as both responsibility and fate is a point of departure for the next two chapters, which in different ways portray two further dimensions related to sin. In [chapter 5](#) I discuss the ethics of language and its tragic dimension, taking off from Cavell's dissatisfaction with Derrida's reading of Austin, which fails to perceive how words are at once our responsibility and yet destined to work beyond our best (or worst) intentions. Such predicaments might (but need not) lead us into tragic relations to others and the world. In his response to Levinas, Cavell has noted the striking similarity between their respective accounts of how experience of the other might give rise

violence, a theme I treat in [chapter 6](#). This provides the opportunity for expanding on how skepticism with regard to the other might lead to violence, and also for reflecting on the violent dimensions both implied and potentially overcome in religion.

However sinister such depiction of human finitude and sin might seem, it is not without counterweights—neither within Cavell’s philosophy nor in theology. The final chapter, then, turns to forgiveness, especially as it figures in Cavell’s readings of Shakespeare and the Hollywood film genre that he has labeled comedies of remarriage. The topic of forgiveness, especially the acceptance of forgiveness, leads to an assessment of passivity—a central concept in Protestant theology that Cavell seems at once to both endorse and resist. In rounding off the book, I treat Cavell’s understanding of how humanity, as portrayed in [chapters 4](#) through [6](#), stands in need of some kind of redemption—by what kind of redemption? In answering this question, I suggest where I think the line must ultimately be drawn between Cavell’s philosophy and Christian theology.

Modernism and Religion

Right from his entrance on the philosophical scene in the late 1960s, Stanley Cavell has insisted that philosophy is confronted with the same cultural problems, burdens, and commitments—collective ones known as modernism—that confront art. From some moment during the nineteenth century, artists' conventions for representation and composition no longer seemed to be adequate bearers of contemporary expression; along with the corrosion of the given framework of conventions, the stable relation between artist and audience also became more fragile, at times broken. As Cavell sees it, the situation is mirrored in philosophy: after Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, there is no simple answer as to how one should establish and continue to write philosophy; its past conveys no reliable answer for how to proceed, its future relevance cannot be known, and its attraction of an audience has become a goal rather than a given. Hence, both art and philosophy must find new modes of continuing their respective tasks. The absence of traditional authorities in art and philosophy might be rooted in the corrosion of a shared recognition of God and a cosmic order. From this perspective, modernism can be regarded as a reaction to secularization: the metaphysical isolation of modern subjectivity, its loss in the conviction of another reality, and its various attempts to connect with the finite reality. But it is also viable to regard religion as entering a modernist situation, that is, not as outdated and hence impossible, but as possible although problematic.

While Cavell at times expresses reluctance toward religion in general and aspects of Christianity in particular, this disinclination is but one side of his stance toward religion, the other being affirmative. Consequently, any reading of Cavell's relation to religion that does not take both sides into account will invariably be one-sided. In this chapter I shed light on the motivation behind Cavell's ambivalent stance toward religion by suggesting that the modernist situation, as Cavell conceives it, not only has bearing on art and philosophy, but also sheds considerable light on the conditions of religion.

Between Christianity and Nietzsche

In order to contest the reading of Cavell as presenting a one-sided account of Christianity, I address the passages on which that reading fundamentally relies. It is incontestably true that Cavell does attack Christianity, particularly some of its conceptions of sin, its understanding of the human body, and its fundamental passivity coupled with the requirement for external intervention. In doing so, Cavell draws heavily on Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity, for example when writing the following:

Can a human being be free of human nature? (The doctrine of Original Sin can be taken as a reminder that, with one or rather with two exceptions humankind cannot be thus free. Yet Saint Paul asks us to put off our (old) nature. What is repellent in Christianity is the way it seems to imagine both our necessary bondage to human nature and our possible freedom

The repellent “way” presumably refers to the Pauline understanding of humanity as bound to sin, and to the depiction of redemption from sin through external grace, made possible through Christ. Though readings of the relevant passage are often restricted to these lines, it is crucial to my reading to cite the passage further:¹

In this, Nietzsche seems to me right, even less crazy than Christianity. But he persists in believing both that humankind must get free of human nature *and* that the human being cannot be free of human nature. Hence the logic of his advice to escape this dilemma of our humanity by overcoming our human nature. I hope he was wrong in this persistence ... that we will ... overcome ourselves nihilistically, solve the dilemma of our humanity by becoming monsters. (CR, 416)

Let me draw attention to two points: first, Cavell’s suggested parallelism of the Christian outlook and Nietzsche’s alternative, and second, the fact that Cavell hopes Nietzsche is wrong, that to opt for the superhuman (*Übermensch*) implies the quest for the inhumane by becoming monsters. Hence, Cavell does not confront us with two options, one obviously wrong and one obviously right. Even if the perspectives eclipse each other—the Nietzschean critique of Christian sin and redemption, versus the Christian objection to Nietzsche’s monstrosity—Cavell is not taking a stance here. He can speak of his conception of philosophy “as the achievement of the unpolemical, refusal to take sides in metaphysical positions” (*PoP*, 22). Accordingly, Cavell’s aim in the present case is not to decide, but to put the options on display. Taken to the extreme—as here—*both* options have their own attractions in light of the other option, and both might repel us.

Another decisive passage reads:

For of course there are those for whom the denial of the human *is* the human. (Cf. “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” 96). Call this the Christian view. It would be why Nietzsche undertook to identify the task of overcoming the human with the task of overcoming the denial of the human.... (CR, 493)

There is a tendency to read the reference to Christianity as a repudiation of it, and to downplay the presence of Nietzsche, at the cost of elucidating the parallelism that arguably is essential to Cavell’s account.² If such parallelism between the Nietzschean and Christian perspectives occurs in Cavell’s thinking, one must assume that if he rejects the Christian view, he also rejects Nietzsche’s. But if one must overcome the human in order to overcome the denial of the human, one moves away from what seems to be Cavell’s abiding picture of the human as placed between: between avoidance and acknowledgment, and between the drive to transcend and to inhabit one’s condition. Moreover, it is not obvious that Cavell believes that both the Nietzschean and the Christian outlooks are misguided. Rather, it seems more likely that what is at stake here is their *truth*—perhaps similar to how it is essential to Cavell’s understanding of skepticism that it also articulates some truth, however distorted it comes out (CR, 241).

No serious reception of Cavell would claim that he is invariably hostile toward Nietzsche; other texts reveal that Nietzsche is one of the impetuses behind Cavell’s elaboration of his moral perfectionism (*CHU*, 48–53; *PDT*, 116–119). If there is a systematic parallelism of Nietzsche’s view and that of Christianity, this would suggest that Cavell holds a similar high regard for Christianit

The quotation above refers to Cavell's own "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," where without mentioning Christianity explicitly, Cavell states that philosophy concerns insights that one "cannot, being human, fail to know. Except nothing is more human than to deny them" (*MWM*, 96). One should take the lesson not to be that such denials should be purged from what we regard as human; rather, Cavell suggests that our standing temptation to deny what is human must be included in our conception of our humanity, as an acknowledgment of something that begins to resemble inescapable sinfulness. The upshot of the quotation above is that both the denial of the human (that is, the Christian view of original sin) and the wish to transcend humanity (here phrased as Nietzsche's overcoming of that denial) are integral parts of Cavell's view of humanity.

Cavell's sweeping generalizations about Christianity are not meant to take its historical and systematic complexity into account, but to draw attention to inevitable dimensions of our own cultural heritage, akin, perhaps, to Nietzsche's genealogy. For Cavell, philosophy is designed to confront our culture with our present criteria for meaning (*CR*, 125). The portrait of culture that emerges from these passages is one that accentuates the split between culture's religious and distinctively non-religious dimensions. The significance of this cultural ambivalence for Cavell's ordinary language philosophy is suggested in what seems to be the most significant passage from *The Claim of Reason* in this respect. Unsurprisingly, we again encounter the juxtaposition of Christianity and Nietzsche:

You might battle against the Christian's self-understanding from within Christianity, as Kierkegaard declares, or from beyond Christianity, as Nietzsche declares. On both cases you are embattled because you find the *words* of the Christian to be the right words. It is the way he means them that is empty or enfeebling. (*CR*, 352)

As the context makes clear, these "words of the Christian" concern passivity and activity; more specifically, Cavell here refers to Nietzsche's suspicion that Christianity disguises actions as sheer passivity. Again, one must ask, whose self-understanding is right? Cavell replies that "the answer is Both" (*CR*, 352), and leaves it to the reader to figure out how and to what extent both can be right, but also, in another sense, wrong.

Far from providing a one-sided attack on Christianity, the remarks on religion in *The Claim of Reason* should be read as interwoven with a more complex cultural and philosophical web. Cavell seems to be attempting to depict the human struggle over its own human condition, as it unfolds within the modernist situation. This situation is characterized by modernism's ambivalence toward religion, but also by the unwillingness of philosophy—or at least the unwillingness of Cavell's philosophy—to settle for either side. The modernist culture, according to Cavell's portrait, is certainly rooted in a secular age in which Christianity does not belong to the unquestionable cultural framework, but neither is it in an age in which Nietzsche's prophecy of the death of God has proved right, at least not in its most straightforward sense.

Meaning Too Much

When Cavell writes above that "the *words* of the Christian [seem] to be the right words. It is the way he means them that is empty and enfeebling" (*CR*, 352), he alludes to a distinction between *saying* words and *meaning* them, which is the central theme of Cavell's title essay in *Must We Mean What We Say?* In this essay, Cavell argues that there is no pure semantic meaning at our disposal that in turn can be applied to an external, pragmatic context. According to ordinary language philosophy

there is no such pure or private meaning; what words *must* mean is exacted by the conventions and implications of what we are saying under particular circumstances (*MWM*, 9–12). Ordinary language philosophy wants to draw attention to how we must use words in order to mean anything at all. Words are never self-sufficient unities of meaning, but are only meaningful in a wider context. To learn words is also to enter the world in which words have their distinct application. Ultimately, language can only be understood against the background of the entire form of life, as Wittgenstein has pointed out (*PI*, § 19). Words are consequently exposed to the shifting historical configurations of that form of life; their meaning can contract and expand, become obsolete, and gain a new life. One can discover treasures among apparently obsolete words, but words can also appear to say things or even to reveal further depths when their meaning—their interest, value, and role in our form of life—has in fact been lost (*MWM*, 43). Naturally, this also applies to religious words. More precisely, such insights have a dual consequence for religion, in that religious words can mean both too much and too little. In meaning too much, words have implications and consequences for the speaker or writer that outrun his or her intentions; in meaning too little, words seem to convey information or express depth when they in fact do neither (*CR*, 351).

Mulhall says that Cavell employs “Christian words in essentially unchristian ways,” which raises the question of whether Cavell can do this consistently.³ Mulhall asks, appropriately, whether such words can be employed without being committed to the framework in which the words have evolved and find their proper meaning—in Cavell’s case, the framework of post-Reformation Christianity. More precisely, what Mulhall has in mind is Charles Taylor’s narrative of the Reformation’s contribution to modern moral identity, summed up by what Taylor calls “the affirmation of ordinary life.”⁴ The Reformation resulted in a new evaluation of daily work, of family life, and of ordinary commitments. Mulhall claims that the appreciation of the near, the common, and the ordinary—whether conceived in English romanticism, American transcendentalism, or ordinary language philosophy—in short, Cavell’s concept of the ordinary—must be regarded as heavily indebted to the inheritance of the Reformation.

But in what sense must this affect Cavell’s thinking? Taylor’s point is that the notion of the ordinary still has an impact on our contemporary conception of the self, and, accordingly, Mulhall thinks this should make us question the coherence of Cavell’s criticism of Christianity.⁵ One might, however, reply with Simon Critchley that although Cavell’s key concepts historically have religious roots, it does not follow that they are still religious.⁶ But this is hardly the way Cavell asks us to think about it; precisely the fact that the inheritance of our religious past is not definitively over, though without exactly answering the present problems either, constitutes the central problem of the modernist state. The troublesome aspect is that religion is still present, haunting even.

More pertinently, Critchley openly recognizes that Beckett—or more accurately Cavell’s reading of Beckett—regards our world as “overfull with meaning.”⁷ In Cavell’s reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*, it is such a conviction that attunes Cavell’s attentive ear to the religious register alluded to in almost every moment of that play. Against the widely accepted assumption that Beckett wants to demonstrate the meaninglessness of our ordinary words, Cavell contends that Beckett seeks rather to highlight their total and even totalitarian success. In other words, Cavell does not read *Endgame* as depicting the void after the death of God, but as displaying our *inability* to rid words of their religious meaning: “Positivism said that statements about God are meaningless; Beckett shows that they mean too damned much” (*MWM*, 120). Accordingly, our language always takes on meanings that lead beyond private control—we are exposed to meaning that, among other things, comes to us from the

past: “Words come to us from a distance; they were there before we were; we are born into them. Meaning them is accepting the fact of their condition” (SW, 64). Hence, it is not up to Cavell, nor anyone else, to prescribe what Christian words must imply; we can certainly choose among various words, but we cannot choose what they mean. This is not to say that meaning takes care of itself independent of us, but neither is it to say that just any form of life will bring the meaning of certain words into life. If words mean too much for Beckett, that proves that they still are intertwined with our form of life, for better or worse.

In *Endgame*, stories of redemption have become a curse to Hamm and Clov; they cannot believe such stories, but they cannot give up faith in them, either. They are torn between despair and hope, entangled with meaning from which there seems to be no escape—and yet, they cannot stop trying to escape. Taken as a clue to how the play asks to be read, this means that Beckett is testing the degree to which we can purge ordinary language of its burdensome religious meaning. One of the procedures Beckett uses is to take words literally: as in positivism, he insists on accepting words only in their denotations, omitting their connotations. For instance, what at first sounds like swearing—“What is God’s name could there be on the horizon?”—turns out to be an actual question, asking whether there is something on the horizon that appears in the name of God. Its dark humor stems from these words’ inexorable meaningfulness, that they cannot but avoid meaning more than we think they mean, which ultimately entails that we, the language animal, are “condemned to meaning” (CR, 351).⁸ Such a condemnation might indeed become a curse. Cavell takes Beckett’s attempt to remove that curse to be infinitely difficult, perhaps impossible (MWM, 120). In Cavell’s reading, the restless, unappeasable movements between such condemnation to meaning and the struggle for silence are precisely what is at stake in *Endgame*.

According to Cavell, to insist that Beckett takes a state of meaninglessness as his point of departure “is as ironically and dead wrong as to say it of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche or Rilke” (MWM, 156). But silence does play a significant role in Beckett’s plays, but not as depicting the given state of our cultural situation (assumedly pervaded by absurdity and meaninglessness); silence is rather an achievement, indeed Beckett’s central goal. One way, and perhaps the most obvious way, to achieve such silence would be to turn one’s back on God, his judgment, and his promises. But I note that Cavell leaves open the same ambiguity we have seen before: silence can be regarded as an attempt just as much to abandon God as to preserve our relation to God, perhaps as freed from some illusion. Silence might indicate the state after destroying false hopes for redemption, but also the state that clears the way for a new (or old but forgotten) conception of redemption.⁹ Invoking Rilke’s approach to silence, Cavell writes, “Then the angel may appear, then nature, then things, then others, then, if ever, the fullness of time; then, if ever, the achievement of the ordinary, the faith to be plain, or not to be” (MWM, 156).

The implied depiction of a troubled, modernist religion keeps the door open for the resurrection of a plain faith along with the transfiguration of the ordinary. In the last pages of his essay on Beckett, Cavell juxtaposes T. S. Eliot’s ambiguous Christianity with Beckett’s similarly ambiguous atheism, noting how they at once rival and perfectly match each other. Cavell even contemplates the idea that Beckett could be encompassed within Eliot’s universe, declaring that within this universe we could understand why we seem to both lack words and have too many. But to take such contemplation seriously means to open up for a radical re-understanding of Christianity:¹⁰

We could re-understand the sense in which redemption is impossible, and possible: impossible only so long as we live solely in history, in time, so long as we think that an

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