How to Do Philosophy Without Despair

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Beginning with Descartes, traditional skeptical philosophy asks whether we can know anything at all. These kinds of questions lead me to a feeling of isolation which, in its extreme, I call despair. In this paper I will explain what this despair is and how I think it arises. I will discuss a paper by Cavell called "Knowing and Acknowledging" in which he identifies despair with the skeptic's motivation. By comparison with Russell, I will show that Cavell has not correctly identified the skeptic's motivation. Nevertheless, I think Cavell's discussion of this "sense of separateness" (which is clearly related to skepticism) addresses the problem of despair by giving it due attention. Next, I will explore reasons why traditional skeptics like Russell are not in despair. Following this, I will discuss the attempts by Cavell and Wittgenstein to resolve the problem of uncertainty and, by extension, the problem of despair. Finally, I will offer my own reflections about how successful I think Cavell and Wittgenstein's solutions are.

Firstly, I will clarify what I mean by despair and explicate the reason why I think philosophy brings one to this state. Despair arises out of the skeptical tradition in Western European philosophy. It begins with Descartes' assertion that he "will apply [himself] earnestly and unreservedly to this general demolition of [his] opinions" (Descartes 18[6]). Descartes sets out in search of a ground that can serve as a foundation for all his knowledge. He finds this ground in his own subjective certainty that he is "a thinking thing" (Descartes 27). I think this method of doubt, by which one subjects all previously unquestioned assumptions to careful scrutiny, leads to a feeling of separateness from other human beings. As Russell says, "if we cannot be sure of the independent existence of other objects, we cannot be sure of the independent existence of people's bodies, and therefore still less sure of other people's minds" (Russell 17). For me, this slippery slope which leads

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[6] References to Descartes are indicated using the original page numbers which appear in the margins of the translation cited in the bibliography.

inevitably to a solipsistic position is deeply disconcerting. Contemplation of this absence of certainty increases my feeling of isolation in the world and, as a result, creates what I call despair; the feeling I have at the moment when I realize that everything I have ever believed is uncertain (including the existence of other minds). We engage deeply with these skeptical questions only in philosophy. On a daily basis we operate under the assumption that these questions are secondary; we presuppose certainty. Yet, when I read Descartes' first meditation, or the opening statements of almost any skeptical philosopher, I feel the power in their ability to doubt and I cannot help but wonder why we take the existence of things for granted. I think that when those aspects of daily life which ordinarily go unquestioned are challenged, "a perfectly good reason [should] be found" (Russell 111) . In the moment of despair, I "have fallen into a deep whirlpool" of confusion and I cannot see a way out (Descartes 24). In my attempts to orient myself, I have read the solutions offered by Russell, Wittgenstein and Cavell but, still, I am not satisfied. I have a strong sense of the magnitude of the problems these questions create. I remain in despair because I have yet to resolve them.

Why ask these skeptical questions if they lead to this despair? Wittgenstein tries to make us stop asking these questions, but Cavell tells us why we must take them seriously. Cavell asserts (in response to ordinary language critics who dismiss skeptical questions) that there are good reasons why we ask skeptical questions. The fact that I cannot know that another person is in pain is something that ought to concern me. He asserts that there is a sense of separateness that the skeptic is pointing to, it is something "real", and neither appeals to ordinary language nor to common sense constitute an adequate "repudiation" of the skeptical position (Cavell 238). He defends this view by arguing that we can understand what the skeptic is saying because at the core of what the skeptic seeks is truth.

Taking the example of our ability to feel pain, Cavell addresses the skeptical claim that it is not possible to know that two people are actually feeling the same pain. There are two senses in which we say that something is the same: (1) descriptively the same, and (2) numerically the same (Cavell 243). For the first case, I will use Cavell's example of cars. If you and I both have the same car, this generally means that there are two cars of the same

design. In this case, the cars are *not* numerically the same--i.e., there are two of them. However, they are *descriptively the same* in so far as they are of the same design. That is, the words used to describe the cars will be, for the most part, the same. If we want to speak of something that is numerically the same, Cavell claims we can do so by using an example with colours. He claims that if we have two cars with the same colour, then the colour is *numerically the same*. That is, the black colour of your car and the black colour of my car is numerically the same colour; according to Cavell there is only one black.

How does all this relate to pain? According to Cavell, the skeptic realizes that pain is like cars and not like colours. While you and I may both have the same car, "I have mine and you have yours" and the same can be said for pains (Cavell 245). Take a headache for instance: if you and I ask whether we actually have the same headache, I must answer that my headache is not numerically the same as yours. For, "if I do not the skeptic would seem justified in feeling that I was *avoiding* the answer, avoiding the truth" (Cavell 244). Hence, Cavell shows that there is a genuine truth to be found at the root of skeptical questions. Nevertheless, he admits that the skeptic arrives at a "scary conclusion. . . that we can't know what another person is feeling because we can't have the same feeling, feel his pain, feel it the way he feels it--and we are shocked"(Cavell 246). There is a moral reason why we must be concerned with the skeptic's questions. Namely, if we cannot know the pain of another, we will not be able to attend to that person's pain in the appropriate way (Cavell 247). Thus, Cavell is able to show that the skeptic's concerns are justified; i.e. if we consider the question with honesty, we will realize that the skeptic is after the truth.

According to Cavell, these questions are motivated by a sense of separateness from others. He characterizes this feeling as follows: "I am filled with this feeling--of our separateness, let us say--and I want you to have it too. So I give voice to it" (Cavell 263). This points to the "phenomenological pang in having to say that knowing another mind is a matter of inference" (Cavell 253). Here Cavell points to the feeling of despair. The "phenomenological pang" is what I feel when I contemplate skeptical questions. As Cavell says, when we take the skeptic seriously, "[his] knowledge. . . is devastating: he is not challenging a particular belief or

set of beliefs. . . he is challenging the ground of our beliefs altogether, our power to believe at all" (Cavell 240). If this prospect does not frighten you, then I do not think you are taking the skeptic seriously.

As I stated above, I share this sense of "devastation" that Cavell describes. I too feel that these questions are worth asking and that they often lead to a feeling of despair. However, I am not entirely sure that the traditional skeptic is *motivated* by despair. To explore this issue further, I will use Russell as a model for the traditional skeptical philosopher and show that Russell's motivation is not necessarily a sense of separateness from other human beings.

The first sentence of Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* expresses his skeptical roots: "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?" (Russell 7). His answer to the question is clearly *no,* and before we come to the end of the second page he claims that "anything. . . may be reasonably doubted" (Russell 8). He questions everything from the existence of the table to whether other minds exist. He asserts that reality is not what it appears and that "even the strangest hypothesis may not be true" (Russell 16). Regardless of this fact, Russell proceeds to explain which things are self-evident truths for him; i.e. that which is certain knowledge for him. He claims that the most certain kind of self-evident truths are the "principles of logic" (Russell 112). The only other kinds of self-evident truths for Russell "are those which are immediately derived from sensation" (Russell 113). These are what Russell calls sense-data. Examples of sense data are things like "brown colour, oblong shape, smoothness, etc." all of which are associated with external objects (Russell 12). The immediate perception of a patch of blue is, therefore, intuitively certain according to Russell. Despite all this certain knowledge, Russell still admits that the possibility "that [the] outer world is nothing but a dream and that [I] alone exist...cannot be strictly *proved* to be false" (Russell 17). I find it astonishing that he concedes that all knowledge is ultimately uncertain and then goes on to proclaim some semblance of certainty for himself. Also, he concludes by saying that it is the process of asking skeptical questions that is important to philosophy, not whether an answer can be found. Thus, Russell's doubt is not evidently driven by the sense of separateness that

Cavell refers to. He is by no means despairing. He seeks a ground for truth. He seeks certainty. Yet, he is not the least bit concerned by the possibility that we may not be able to answer these skeptical questions. On the contrary, he claims that these questions "increase interest in the world and show the strangeness and wonder just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life" (Russell 16). Clearly, Russell is not asking these questions to fill the void of some feeling of isolation that Cavell alludes to. Rather, he is driven by a desire for certainty and yet there is no indication that without certain knowledge he feels any despair.

Although I think Cavell is in error when he suggests that the skeptic is motivated by this sense of separateness, I think that this feeling does arise out of skeptical questions. It does for me and it does for Cavell. So the question remains: why does not Russell, our paradigmatic skeptic, share this feeling of despair? How does he avoid it? Surely he ought to sense that there is something wrong with thinking that everything can be doubted. The most I can find in Russell's philosophy is an admission that "[t]his is an uncomfortable possibility" (Russell17). Beyond that, it seems he is content to question these things indefinitely.

Ecofeminism offers a possible explanation about why Russell does not have this sense of despair that Cavell and I share. In her article titled "Nature, Self and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy and the Critique of Rationalism," Val Plumwood describes something called the "relational account of self" (Plumwood 208). Plumwood claims that there is a dichotomy between *reason* and *emotion* which is "stressed in the rationalist tradition" (Plumwood 202). This dualistic perspective leads one to see the self as separate from nature. That is, what is defining of humans is their rationality alone, and as such they are distinct from nature which is seen as non-rational or emotional. "What is taken to be authentically and characteristically human. . . is not to be found in what is shared with the natural and animal (e.g., the body. . .)" (Plumwood 202). This separation leads to the image of the self as non-relational. The non-relational self is not seen as having any necessary connections to ways of knowing that are rooted in emotions. Plumwood claims that these dualisms are harmful as they perpetuate the idea that feeling emotional bonds with the rest of nature is irrelevant, both to one's sense of

self and to epistemology; this leads to both the oppression of women and contributes to environmental devastation. She proposes instead that we adopt a model of the self-as-relational. This is one which regards "the self as embedded in a network of essential relationships with distinct others" (Plumwood 208). This dissolves the dividing line between reason and emotion; it gives the self a place in nature; it does not regard others (of whatever sort) as disconnected from the self.

Russell is operating in the rationalist tradition which Plumwood describes as non-relational. Perhaps the fact that Russell favors the rational attitude which contemplates the universe "dispassionately" prevents him from feeling the sense of despair that can result from this ultimate doubting (Russell160). There is evidence in Cavell's moral objection that he has a much more relational perspective as he is concerned with our ability to sympathize with others. The ecofeminist position suggests to me that Russell may lack an understanding of the self as relational and emotional which prevents him from feeling despair (after all, despair is an emotional state).

However, I do not think that Plumwood's criticism effectively explains Russell's lack of emotion. In fact, Russell does appear to have a relational concept of the self. He argues in the final chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy* that the ultimate goal of philosophical speculation is an expansion of the self; "a form of union of Self and not-Self" (Russell 159). He claims that this contemplation ". . . enlarges not only the objects of our thoughts, but also the objects of our actions and our affections: it makes us citizens of the universe, not only of one walled city at war with the rest" (Russell 161). Plumwood's relational conception is a highly complex identification of the self's connections to others in the world. While Russell's union of self-and not self is not the same kind of relationship that Plumwood is talking about, he does seem to want to lessen the gap between the self and the other. He is, in some sense, acknowledging a relationship to the other. Insofar as he acknowledges this relationship, he cannot be guilty of not regarding the self as discontinuous with the rest of the world.

In addition to this concept of the relational self which seems to be present in Russell, there is also evidence of a strong emotional component in his philosophical pursuit. One cannot help but feel that he is rejoicing in the

power of what he believes to be a benevolent pursuit of skeptical questions. He regards philosophical speculation as a quest for expanding spheres of concern for others that leads one *not* to "view the world as a means to [one's] own ends" (Russell 159). Thus, I do not think that the ecofeminist position is an acceptable solution to the problem of why Russell does not have this sense of despair.

Another possible reason for the absence, in Russell, of a sense of despair is his faith in the analytic method. He raves about the power of logic and terms it "the great liberator of the imagination, presenting innumerable alternatives which are closed to the unreflective common sense" (Russell 148). He describes how the principle of induction can be used to prove other principles. Although Russell admits the possibility of asking questions without any answers, there may be a question as to whether he is actually uncertain at all. For he seems to have found some ultimate principles (e.g. the principles of logic) from which other certain (or highly probable) instances of knowledge can be derived. Perhaps, Russell is not really as skeptical as he claims. I realize that this is a contentious claim and I am only putting it forward as a possibility, for I cannot otherwise understand why he does not have this sense of despair.

Next, I will consider the solution offered by Cavell which claims to bring despair to an end. After describing his sense of separateness, Cavell offers a way out of this skeptical despair. Cavell identifies the fact that the desire to *feel* the pain of another the way she/he does is an adolescent desire. That is, it does not matter that I cannot *have* the same pain as another; this is simply "a general fact of human nature" (Cavell 260). The skeptic does not need to *feel* that another person is in pain, what the skeptic wants is *knowledge* that the other is in pain. Beyond feeling it, what constitutes such knowledge? First, Cavell considers what it is like for a person to know his/her own pain, for this appears to be something that we can know (Cavell 261).Yet, Cavell raises an objection to suggest that, in fact, one does not *know* one's own pain. Rather, there is a continuous sensation of what is referred to as pain but it is not *known* in the ordinary sense of the word (Cavell 261). Although one cannot know one's own pain, one can acknowledge it. For example, if a friend of mine trips and falls down while

we are walking down the street and either cries out in pain or expresses her pain in another way that I can understand, then I will acknowledge that pain by showing that I know she is hurt. I will express concern and sympathy for her. By both of us acknowledging the pain, both of us are able to know that she is in pain. This is what Cavell means by acknowledgment. One person's suffering "makes a *claim*" on another person--the other person must "do or reveal something" (Cavell 263). This "doing" or "revealing" something constitutes acknowledgment. This does not mean that one must always express one's pain, nor does it mean that one must always acknowledge the pain of another; it may go unnoticed in many cases. However, Cavell asserts that if you acknowledge that you are in pain then you know you are in pain, or to use his example with lateness: "from my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know I'm late. . . but from my knowing that I am late it does not follow that I acknowledge that I'm late." (Cavell 257). In this way, "Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge"; i.e. once you know something you can go on or go "beyond" that knowing to acknowledging. When I see my friend fall I can know that she is hurt, but far better than simply knowing it is the fact that I acknowledge her pain. Hence, Cavell's final statement, "To know you are in pain is to acknowledge it, or to withhold the acknowledgment. --I know your pain the way you do" (Cavell 266) By this I think Cavell means that in so far as I can acknowledge your pain and you can acknowledge your pain, we both know the pain in the same way. This is what the skeptic wants, a way for two people to know the same pain. Through acknowledgment, one is able to express certain knowledge that another is in pain.

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, takes a unique approach to skeptical questions. He sidesteps doubt by suggesting that the skeptic is taking the ordinary use of the word "know" and applying it to a context in which it does not belong. In *On Certainty*, he says "Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment" (Wittgenstein 378). Acknowledgment for Wittgenstein is a form of life. Forms of life consist of ways of acting in the world. Wittgenstein appeals to the ordinary ways of speaking and acting in the world as a repudiation of skeptical questions. He finds grounds, not through breaking something down into parts, as analysis would require, but in ways

of acting. Knowledge for Wittgenstein is made possible by all of the things we tacitly acknowledge to be the case. He states, "I say with passion 'I know that this is a foot'--but what does it mean?" (Wittgenstein 379) Here, Wittgenstein points out that the use of the word know in saying "I know I have a foot", is not an ordinary use of the word. I am much more likely to say "I know that Whitehorse is the capital of the Yukon" than to say "I know Whitehorse exists". There are also many things that I know about my foot but the fact that it exists is not something that I usually say I "know". Wittgenstein wants us to notice that a statement like "I know I have a foot" only occurs in a certain context, i.e., in a certain language game. One can imagine a situation in which someone is doubting whether they have a foot and asserts with "passion" that he/she knows she has a foot. "Here one must realize that complete absence of doubt at some point, even where we would say that a 'legitimate' doubt can exist" (Wittgenstein 375). Thus, Wittgenstein is admitting that a doubt is possible but remarks that we do not doubt most of the time. Acknowledgment consists in not doubting even if it is possible. Therefore, acknowledgment makes knowledge possible. In order to have knowledge of anything, there must be things which you implicitly agree (i.e. that you acknowledge) to be the case--things you simply do not doubt. The existence of Whitehorse is something that does not need to be explicitly articulated because we may talk about it and even plan a trip there without ever checking to see whether or not it exists--we just assume it exists even though it is possible to doubt it.

By consulting his own intuitions about the ordinary use of the word know, Wittgenstein is able to show us that skeptical questions remove words from their usual context to create doubt. For him, this obscure application of words, which express skeptical concerns, is a misuse of language. He regards language as something that is engaged with the world. He believes that philosophical language lacks this engagement and, as such, it is idle. This leads him to insist that we must "expunge the sentences that don't get us any further" (Wittgenstein 33). Wittgenstein insists that we put an end to skeptical questions because they do not lead anywhere.

Despite the attempts by Wittgenstein and by Cavell to help me get out of despair, I am still not satisfied. Cavell is not able to completely take away

the feeling of separateness. He offers acknowledgment as a substitute for knowledge, but a substitute will not do. Cavell shows me a way to live with the fact that I cannot know beyond what can be acknowledged. However, he has merely provided a way of acting in the world, he has not given me certainty. I am still swamped in the muddy waters of skepticism.

In a sense, I am inclined to agree with Wittgenstein when he says that it is the search for certainty itself which gets the skeptic into trouble. If I stop asking these questions and realize that they do not lead anywhere, then I will not be caught in this state of despair. But, like Cavell, I think that doubt does, in fact, make sense. I understand what it means to doubt the existence of the external world (even though I do not act that way). I only really find myself deep in doubt when I engage in philosophical speculation. Still, I want to be able to ask these questions and to find a way out of the uncertainty. Cavell points to the importance of asking these questions; there are moral reasons. I also share with Russell this sense that there is a value for the human mind in asking these questions. He describes philosophy as "food for the mind" (Russell 154). In addition to moral reasons, there are political reasons for engaging in this kind of pursuit. It is important not to take things are face value in the world. World War II taught us that we must not always believe everything we are told, we must always ask ourselves whether the beliefs of society at large are justified. Philosophical speculation cultivates our capacity for asking questions. I agree with Russell when he says

> ...it is the business of philosophy to continue the consideration of such questions, to make us aware of their importance, to examine all approaches to them, and to keep alive that speculative interest in the universe. . . (Russell 156)

By doing philosophy we practice asking questions and can apply this skill to our lives. Perhaps the skeptic's questions are not as divorced from our lives as Wittgenstein would have us believe.

If I am thus far unconvinced by these attempts to relieve me of my despair, where do I go from here? Is there a way which will permit me to ask these questions and not feel the despair of uncertainty? And if so, "what is 'being completely convinced' like?" (Wittgenstein 246). Ideally, I want to find a way that provides the kind of sureness that Wittgenstein alludes to but

also allows for me to continue to ask philosophical questions. By saying that we ought not to ask skeptical questions because to do so is a misuse of language, and that we ought to look at how we act and thereby see that we had certainty all along, Wittgenstein's philosophy does provide me with certainty. Yet, I find his conclusion unacceptable. I want to be able to feel the certainty that Wittgenstein provides and at the same time be able to still ask these metaphysical questions which doubt all that we normally leave unquestioned. However, these two positions are utterly irreconcilable.

It may be the case that I have not sufficiently absorbed the power of Wittgenstein's position. Maybe if I go on to read more of his works I will be able to understand why it is better not to ask these questions at all; maybe his ground for certainty will be enough. Although, I cannot help but feel that his solution avoids the real problem; namely, that these questions do not admit of certain answers. At the end of Cavell's essay and throughout Wittgenstein, there are references to non-linguistic ways of knowing. While I recognize the value of such mediums, they do not help me get out of philosophical doubt because skeptical questions are phrased in philosophical language and I feel the need to answer them in the same context in which they are raised--I believe that this is the only means to a satisfying answer (if one exists).

In conclusion, Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical approach does not appeal to me as I have metaphilosophical intuitions that push me in the direction of metaphysics. Yet, neither Russell nor Cavell are able to produce a sufficient solution to the problem of doubt. Perhaps by reading more rationalists I will be provided with a satisfying way out of despair. As it stands, I have only begun my exploration of the problem. There may be an answer out there which will provide the kind of firmness that I seek. As it stands, I cannot reconcile my need to ask these skeptical questions with the desire to achieve a ground to serve as my foundation.

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