We answer by consents or non-consents and not by words.  
(William James, *Psychology The Briefer Course*)

The fact that life is problematic shows that the shape of your life does not fit into life’s mould. So you must change the way you live and, once your life does fit into the mould, what is problematic will disappear. (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*)

Understanding oneself properly is difficult, because an action to which one might be prompted by good generous motives is something one also may be doing out of cowardice or indifference. … And only if I were able to submerge myself in religion could these doubts be stilled. Because only religion would have the power to destroy vanity and penetrate all the nooks and crannies. (Culture and Value)

Imagine Wittgenstein coming upon this passage from *The Claim of Reason*:
In philosophizing, I have to bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is a convening of my culture’s criteria, in order to confront them and my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture’s words may imagine for me; to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me. … This seems to me a task that warrants the name of philosophy. (CR 125)

My projected Wittgenstein would have to admire the originality and the power of the arguments that ground the quoted passage. Moral behavior takes on rationality not from following deontological principles but from “following the methods which lead to a knowledge of our own position, of where we stand; in short to a knowledge and definition of ourselves” (CR 312). Only then do we honor the knowledge at the core of “acknowledgment.” The primal scene is mutual exposure where we have only our limited grasp of ourselves to offer to others, and with which to attract possible responses from the other. Exposure in turn brings out the possibility of therapeutic efforts to know the self better, which also entails knowing the other better, which entails also knowing both parties’ limitations. In other words, Cavell extends the figure of the couple basic to his work on remarriage comedies to provide an emblem both of our need for mutual exposure and of a path for the kind of dialectic that can sustain hope the re-marriage will not repeat the failures of the first. In offering what Cavell calls “elaboratives” (CR 324) of one’s own effort to confront the conventional aspects of the culture, one acknowledges one’s limitations, offers to others what one can make of those limitations, recognizes dealing with these limitations as the development of self-knowledge, and realizes that the task is difficult because one must come to terms with a typically internalized and self-defensive skepticism about what we might share with those other minds.¹

Yet one can grant Cavell’s brilliance and still be bothered by how deeply American Cavell is in his setting the “I” over against society so that it can represent
possibilities for coming to own a self who resists conformity in order to enter what we might call a dialectic of mutual exposure. My Wittgenstein would even agree with Cavell that one fundamental challenge for philosophy is to explore the degree to which it can “become literature and still know itself” (CR 496). But I doubt Wittgenstein would think that the way for philosophy still to know itself is for it to turn to confronting the culture with itself along the lines in which it meets in the philosopher. That would seem an especially odd way to pursue “the moral calling of philosophy” committed to “the specification of moral theories which define the particular bases of moral judgments of particular acts or project characters as right and wrong or projects … characters as right and wrong, good or bad” (CW 2). Wittgenstein would probably point out that if there are to be public moral judgments one cannot remain suspicious of the criteria making such judgments intelligible. That is, moral theory, if it is to exist at all, must have a kind of independence from the vicissitudes of self-figuration on the part of any individual subject. And, more important, I think the author of *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty* would be wary of the entire effort to establish a coherent moral position in philosophy capable of any judgments about good and bad character. Only individuals can make those judgments about themselves, and the appropriate theater would have more to do with religious confession than moral assessment according to principles or according to any kind of public dramatic standard like the quality of the agent’s capacities to take in the complexity of moral situations.

That Wittgenstein would not agree with Cavell does not make Cavell “wrong.” It would also be odd to call someone who has written so many compelling dramatic analyses of the values at stake in particular situations “wrong” about the terms of his judgments. But by Wittgensteinian standards Cavell may be overreaching in treating these analyses as contributions to moral philosophy (rather than contributions to states of fundamentally aesthetic awareness that should trouble efforts to involve the language of morality, with its inevitable pressure to attribute or deny authority to certain positions. Therefore Cavell’s ambitions provide an ideal contrast for recovering the possible positive force of Wittgenstein’s decision to have virtually nothing to say about ethics in his published philosophical work after his “Lecture on Ethics” in 1930. Many philosophers and literary theorists now dismiss Wittgenstein’s claims about ethics in the *Tractatus* as part of his strange transcendental positivism outgrown in the later philosophy. Then they can use this later philosophy to show how moral values and moral feelings can be embedded within our linguistic practices. But there is very little attention paid to the surprising fact that Wittgenstein himself did not make those extensions, perhaps because he thought ethics had to include not just a measure of awareness but also a discipline of the will that could not come from philosophy’s commitments to objectivity. If we take this possibility seriously, it becomes crucial not to give the impression that the social structure of language games can encompass the intricacy and interiority of how one determines the happiness or unhappiness that comes to constitute psychological life.

Instead I will argue that Cavell brings out by contrast the force of Wittgenstein’s life-long Tractarian distinction between explanation and display, a distinction wary of any effort to reconcile ethical decision-making with justification by philosophical explanation. This figure of display invokes strong affinities between Wittgenstein’s image of logic in his *Tractatus* and his continued refusal to develop any explicit
There seems to Wittgenstein no compelling reason to accept the giving of reasons as an adequate model for his deeply personal sense of the ethical because the giving of reasons presumes that what is private to the self can take discursive public form, if only in the form of explanations. Giving of reasons about actions is a distinct language game involving self-justification, but that game may not give us access to the actual investments that shape behavior. If “A man can see what he has but not what he is” (CV 49), then there have to be alternatives to the ideal of ethical ethical self-knowledge stateable in discursive terms. One must project possibilities of making visible one’s values by performance or by modes of attunement that are not dependent on explanatory ideas. Who a person “is” has to be displayed by “confession” or by style. (The reasons matter, but as what is displayed of an action rather than as what points beyond the self to something like rationality—either as deontological or as offering rationales for personal interests.) And this contrast may make aspects of Wittgenstein’s ascetic stance more available for fleshing out what values a person might embrace even when these agents allow their suspicions about discursive “ethics” to shape their approaches toward social experience. So this essay will be indirectly an attempt to show why the arts are valuable precisely because they resist discursive language or claims about knowledge have to oversimplify and carve into units that then rest uneasily with one another.

In order to carry out this contrast I have to begin with two caveats. I am not sure that I can replicate Cavell’s thinking at its most sophisticated, so I have to settle for its most general level of assertion. I take this level to consist of his commitment to the philosophical task of being “true to oneself” (CW 11) and to making the working out of this quest a representative means of leading “the soul, imprisoned and distorted by confusion and darkness, into the freedom of the day (CW 4).” “Morally significant” here means establishing possible answers or at least attitudes responsive to the basic traditional questions of philosophy about “what kind of persons” we should “aspire to be” (CW 11). Second, I want to be clear that I am not so much criticizing Cavell as marking some of the limits of his very powerful and useful vision of how values are created by human efforts at mutual acknowledgment. It is obvious that in many particular cases Cavell’s perspective gives brilliant illumination to works of art and to our efforts to make sense of the lives we lead that bring us into connection with other people. I quarrel only with inflating the considerations that go on in such considerations with the honorific title of “morality.” And I do so largely on Cavellian grounds since his own capacities to develop the individuality of characters and situations makes it clear that in such cases he is right to be suspicious of applying public criteria. But if criteria prove problematic for the occasion (and not just difficult to locate), then these cases often call for confession rather than explicit discursive mutual acknowledgment. Cavell’s ideal of mutuality easily collapses into mutual self-congratulation where the agents focus consciousness on what can be shared rather than on what may need to be confronted.

There seem to me two practical issues on which my imagined Wittgenstein would challenge Cavell in order to prepare a context in which he might strengthen the force of his Tractarian position on ethics. The first involves Cavell’s claims about criteria with
which I began; the second involves Cavell’s resort to a discourse about knowledge and self-knowledge for cases when the philosopher finds criteria problematic and so tries to confront “the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me.” This treatment of criteria offers a superb way of putting the individual on stage while promising both the possibility of self-knowledge and the presentation of that self-knowledge as intimately woven into the possibilities of the culture. But Cavell also has to set the self pursuing expressiveness against a condition of ignorance that he attributes to relying on established social criteria. For him grammatical criteria prove “disappointing” and unsatisfying because they seem to bind agents to a collective enterprise that almost by definition cannot satisfy the desire for individuation. In essence grammar is the study of criteria by which we “settle judgments” (CR 31) about how a given utterance meets conditions of shared intelligibility. In its ordinary form, however, hewing to grammatical intelligibility binds the subject to those shared terms without reflecting on what one is doing in and by an utterance. Even the richest sense of community afforded by criteria cannot completely reflect what goes in human speech, nor will it afford the kind of knowledge of oneself and openness to the other that constitute full human exposure and exchange: “Appealing to criteria is not a way of explaining or proving the fact of our attunement in words … it is an appeal we make when the attunement is threatened or lost” (CR 34). Criteria are crucial for identifying what something is, but they do not necessarily demonstrate how that something may become significant for particular agents (49). So it takes something more than operating within criteria if the philosopher is to speak significantly “for others and allow others to speak for me” (CR 28).

This kind of exchange consists in fleshing out the subject’s capacities to own his or her speech by attuning it to existential circumstances and, more important, to the social circumstances that seem to demand making the claims by others on the self as fully visible as possible (28). Rather than reduce acknowledgment to a matter of recognizing shared criteria, which would make morality rational and impersonal, the expressive agent makes these circumstances into “a need, to convey how perfectly, originally, I satisfy the criteria” (462). In Claim of Reason Cavell never loses sight of how supplementing those criteria involves an originality that is responsive and responsible to other’s claims on our reasons. In fact what I think of as Cavell’s Americanized existentialism gets most interesting and most useful when it grapples with how the self’s drive to visibility through language becomes inseparable from the self’s exposure to the claims and the scrutiny of other people. All of his talk of self and self-knowledge takes place against a backdrop of “disappointment with one’s expression” (350) because no words may suffice to allay the subject’s neediness in relation to other people: “The brink of misunderstanding is here because the brink of emptiness is here: we do not know to whom such words are being said … . We do not know why we want to say them, what lack they will fill” (339).

Grammar then is not the glue that allows language its power in society but the articulation of a conventionality that “strong” philosophers (to borrow the language of Harold Bloom) will have to set themselves against. These characters become for Cavell (but not for Bloom) representatives for everyone else of the power to supplement grammar by expressive acts that combine knowledge of the self’s possible social interactions with work to define the self. One has the opportunity to face one’s vulnerability before the differences represented by the other so that one can offer an
effort at self-knowledge that gives the other a purchase on that self (CR 432-49; 368). This pursuit of self-knowledge affords a significant space within which the other can dwell, and perhaps offer that same kind of space in return: “All anyone knows or could know is what I am able to show them of myself” (443). Words can open worlds for those who risk the necessary exposure.

I find three problems with this line of thinking. 1) While Cavell is right in pointing to why we invoke criteria, I don’t think it wise to define the range of uses of criteria by the fact that the uses only get raised to self-consciousness when disputes arise. That would be like making a quarrel between one of Cavell’s reconstructed couples define the conditions of the life they have learned to share. So it seems reasonable to look for how criteria enable agreement or clarify, say, the kinds of mistakes in which philosophers impose language games derived from dealing with things on dealing with processes. As we will see in a moment, Cavell on criteria does not give sufficient place to the work “perspicuous examples” can perform.

2) More generally, Cavell’s remarks on criteria are difficult to judge because he seems deliberately pushing a Wittgensteinian envelope to see how far he can bend the concept of criteria to allow them to be forged by individual conversation, while at the same time he knows that criteria have to hold for more than individual conversations to apply in any given instance. For example at one point he argues that Wittgensteinian criteria do not pertain to “what one is doing in and by an utterance.” Instead, as Stephen Affeldt puts it, such acts “constitute” the philosopher’s or the speaker’s own twist on public convention. One can make the private public without just submitting to the culture. Yet Wittgenstein takes great pains to teach us to recognize the difference between acts of describing situations and acts of exemplifying rules. After all, while Cavell is an American eager to resist conformity, Wittgenstein is an exile fascinated by how sociality can be sustained (c.f. PI p. 223). Wittgenstein has to admit that particular criteria can be called into question by inventive behavior. But there remains a huge difference between general claims about disappointment with criteria (so that one needs a general cure) and disappointment with specific criteria, which is a practical question. In most cases even when grammatical criteria seem to fail because there is authorial invention at stake, we identify the inventive dimension precisely by the fact that it acknowledges the criteria even as if reapplies them, just as poetry acknowledges the force of public expectations even as it alters them. Such linguistic acts rely on criteria to make manifest that our attention must be redirected to internal patterns in order to produce what intelligibility is possible. We understand why we cannot discursively understand what is involved in the final embrace between Leontes and Hermione.

3) Yet Cavell persists in blaming criteria so that he can escape Wittgenstein’s strictures about the role philosophy can play in experience. By generalizing about disappointment with criteria Cavell makes a romantic distinction between convention and spirit as a foundation for his version of moral thinking. There is a Hegelian or at least an idealist dimension of his thinking that has to emphasize the inadequacy of attuning to established social relations because this level of attunement is not fully expressive of the full life of the spirit working through individual self-consciousness. Recognizing this inadequacy is then one step on a path of efforts to found a deeper, more authentic attunement in criteria. In effect Cavell wants a philosophical space for assessing action and for reflection that is beyond the ken of one attending only to
criteria as they stand. This space must establish a dialectic where there is the expressive act, then knowledge about the self revealed in this act, and then the capacity to make public how public criteria convene in making the act potentially representative. The reflective act embodied in self-exposure has the power to reshape conversation and provoke new responsiveness on the part of the audience. Ultimately Cavell can characterize this space for action in abstract terms as a negotiation with skepticism in which the philosopher can present himself as offering a heroic exposure justifying the claim to be the representative of human possibilities for perfection.

Since my argument depends completely on my claims about display, I will deal very briefly with a second general criticism of Cavell that helps frame what can be at stake in distinguishing what becomes manifest in display from what becomes available for any kind of philosophical description, at least so long as we insist that philosophy has to know its own parameters and possible interventions in social life. I distrust Cavell’s claims that the philosopher can “know” what is going on among dramatic agents as they try progressively to define their values and their interests. And I think he needs these claims about knowledge because he does not sufficiently trust the roles criteria play in our lives. When we are open to how criteria make subtle distinctions, we are more likely to share Wittgenstein’s sense that there is a great range of human actions where we consistently make adjustments and responses to others in which any traditional sense of knowing the other must give way to terms like “attunement” or “fit” or simply finding a way to go on.

I find myself in difficult territory here because Cavell completely accepts Wittgenstein’s critique in On Certainty of how philosophers like G.E Moore fetishize knowledge and in the process invite skepticism. When Moore claims to know that “I have two hands,” despite the fact where there is no possibility of doubt, Wittgenstein insists that he misuses the authority of philosophy, precisely because he ignores the criteria for what it is involved practically in negotiating a claim about knowledge. Moore does not provide a picture of a truth but misuses the logic of picturing to confuse it with an example of the frameworks, logical and grammatical, which we have to accept because they make our interpretive actions possible. That we cannot doubt one has two hands suggests that this statement is being used to exemplify certainty rather than to demonstrate it. Ironically Moore is in fact successfully showing what certainty might be like, precisely because he refers to a condition enabling action in the world rather than picturing a significant fact about it. But his not recognizing this betrays an anxiety about knowledge. Rather than refuting the sceptic this anxiety invites versions of skeptical doubt based on psychology rather than on epistemic grounds.

Cavell does not make this mistake. In fact in his early writing he echoes Wittgenstein’s efforts to deal with what “pictures … behavior” can be “expressive of mind; and this is not something we know, but a way we treat ‘behavior’” (MWM, 262). But his need to sustain the authority of philosophy (despite his qualms), his desire to use psychoanalytic concepts, and his fears that acknowledgment gets dangerously sappy without some kind of test of adequate attention to actual behavior, seems to put pressure on him to return to the use of knowledge claims, albeit in contexts that are obviously not traditional epistemic ones. I am not sure how much he needs this language, but it has come to exact a cost. There becomes too close a connection between what has to take the form of avowals that display states or mind rather than
report on them, like “I am in pain” or “I hope he will come” and what can be captured in
the giving or forming of reasons within interpersonal interactions. In such cases he
seems to think that we can “know” what the person means and even “know” what the
agent demonstrates in an avowal that the person is in pain or hopes a friend will arrive,
despite the fact that these are clearly cases of what he called “not something we know
but a way we treat ‘behavior,’.” And then it is tempting to make the reverse claim that
the reasons persons give for their actions are extensions of avowals: in such cases
persons express where they stand by offering reasons for their actions that are not
descriptions of inner states but further articulations of their desires and senses of moral
identity. After all we do depend on such expressions to decide on what our actions will
be in regard to this person.

But does this mean that we are authorized to speak of knowledge in any strong
sense of the term when dealing with the range of avowal behaviors. vi What criteria do
we rely on in such cases? How can we clearly resolve doubts about what a person has
in mind in relation to what they do? How can we separate the agent’s efforts to clarify
desires from the persistence of the desire that in fact shapes the account? Again we
might recall Wittgenstein’s worry that “A man can see what he has but not what he is”
(CV 49). For it does not take poststructuralist theories of the subject to make us
distinguish between what subjects do as agents and what they propose as explanations
or rationales for such behavior. Of course we often have to trust that persons offer us
sufficiently intelligible behavior or want to pursue possibilities for our making sense of
what their investments are. But why bring a language of knowledge to bear on
something so intricate and incomplete? Yet there remains the pressure not to concede
the world of behavior to the arts that concentrate on particular expressive acts. If we
can say we can come to “know” what a person thinks or wants or intends, we can make
rich claims about the work of acknowledgment and the possibility of mutual
responsiveness even when we acknowledge the force of skepticism about other minds.
Cavell’s loosening of what it means to “know” can resist what is limited in scepticism’s
versions of “knowledge” and still allow philosophy to know itself. And because “know” is
a verb with the capacity for expansion, these acts of knowledge can sponsor a
perfectionist orientation without forcing perfectionism to become a theoretical position.

Wittgenstein’s entire Culture and Value seems to contradict Cavell’s orientation
here, since there Wittgenstein is explicit about the fact that significant cultural
expressions are manifestations of singular sensibilities that try by the work of style to
afford something other than knowledge, something that can afford a model of what is
possible if one sees the world or the work in a certain way. (I am using “model” in the
way section XI of Part 2 of the Investigations does.) Models are not pictures. Rather
models elaborate particular situations but do not claim to discover that something is the
case. And the most important models an individual offers become acts of confession,
even where there can be little hope of acknowledgment that a particular state of being
can be made representative. vii What makes the expression worth owning by an
individual may relegate it to something whose social existence remains a more
problematic state than our models of knowledge can handle. viii Confessions gain power
by individuation and not by representativeness, and confessions are addressed to a
range of possible responses involving languages of attention and care, for which
“knowledge” is a chilling substitute. The pursuit of knowledge of what a confession
displays might provide a generalizing context, but at considerable risk of losing what may be specific to the needs driving the individual behavior.

Now I have to make a positive case for the contrast I have been drawing by criticizing Cavell on criteria and on “knowledge.” How can I justify preferring Wittgenstein wariness about philosophy in the face of Cavell’s efforts to dramatize how moral thinking might be much more sensitive individual efforts at mutual acknowledgment? I stress the differences between the two thinkers because I think the more moral philosophy tries to accommodate itself to how individuals compose different kinds of reasons for situations, the more it tends to impose an apparently benign responsibility for something like reasoning on situations which in the arts honor other ways of weaving individuals into their actions.

My case depends on developing the motif of display that links early and later Wittgenstein. He uses essentially the same view of foundations in the *Tractatus* for how logic takes hold and in his later work for the status of grammar. This link in turn helps us see three significant parallels between the early and the later philosophy that I view as central to assessing basic Cavellian themes. These parallels offer one large scale framework for putting to work Wittgenstein’s contrast between what can be known and what can only be exemplified or displayed; they help explain Wittgenstein’s continuing fascination with religion as the alternative to ethics; and they make sense of his interest in style because style affords one paradigm for human actions that involve an irreducible particularity partially shaped by determining forces and not fully amenable to knowledge claims or open to dialogical transformation.

I have to go into some detail because I want to stress Wittgenstein’s concern for the formal or exemplary aspects of learning language games that do not depend on reference and often tempt philosophers to try to attribute substance to what Frege called “function” terms rather than arguments, as in Moore’s claiming to know he has two hands. In the *Tractatus* the formal framework was the structure of logic—something that had to be displayed as a whole rather than argued for in piecemeal elements. In Wittgenstein’s later writing grammar plays the same role as logic and has the same dependence on being displayed rather than discovered through argument: “Everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic” (OC 56). This is because language games, like logic, “did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination” (OC 475), but are simply there like our lives. They are part of the res, not about it, as Wallace Stevens put it. So these forms do not “rest on some form of knowledge” (OC 477) but are the indispensable medium in which to formulate what can count as knowledge. These forms are given as the conditions for using various languages in the first place, so they are learned, and also developed, by further efforts to develop and assess that the language offers.

Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* shared the positivist view that logic cannot have a place for the expression of attitudes because attitudes are intensional and so depend not on how the world is but on how agents give color to their worlds. And if one dismisses attitudes one also dismisses the possibility of coherent assessment of values, since they too involve intentional states rather than pictorial descriptions. The best way to summarize this is Wittgenstein’s image of subjects as not in the world but at its margins:
The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists, and if it did, it would have no value. ... What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since it if it did it would itself be accidental” (6.41).

Values occupy the same marginal status as attitudes because they do not derive from propositions or descriptions, “ethics cannot be put into words”; rather that domain is “transcendental”(6.421). But Wittgenstein does not have a positivist attitude to this marginal status, as the respectful reference to the transcendental indicates. Wittgenstein is careful to indicate where that transcendental domain seems capable of entering the world:

If good or bad acts of the will do alter the world, it can only be the limits of the world that they alter, not the facts, and not what can be expressed by means of language. … The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (6.43).

Analogously Wittgenstein the grammarian can establish how values might be stated and intentions understood, but he can show nothing about how to evaluate values. Therefore it is not a huge jump to think that the lack of evidence to the contrary suggests that Wittgenstein never swayed from his Tractarian belief that what makes agents subjects is something still at the margin of experience where there can be showings but not meaningful assessment. What is displayed matters not because of what it refers to but what it exemplifies as possibilities in the language. Let me take a seemingly simple contrast from section viii of Part 2 of the Investigations to show how insistent Wittgenstein remained about that marginality. Notice here a surprising continued skepticism about knowing what other people feel emotionally (in contrast to knowing whether they are in pain) xi:

I say “Do this, and you’ll get it”. Can’t there be a doubt here? Mustn’t there be one, if it is a feeling that is meant?

This looks so; this tastes so, this feels so. “This” and "so" must be differently explained” (PI p. 186).

The primary point is grammatical. “Feels” in the sense the sentence gives it involves a different language game from the apparent form of description the sentence seems to take at first. Initially we have to interpret “this” is as a demonstrative referring to some observable particular. But the phrase as a whole gives immense force to “so” as the complement of “feels.” Therefore the sentence requires recasting the force of “this.” Only a “this” specified intensionally by the subject’s “model” can flesh out this “so” because that task calls not for description but for illustrating how some aspect of the situation dawns on the agent. And once the agent takes on this degree of importance for determining the sense of “so,” there must be doubt that one agent can understand what the other feels. This situation demands display rather than a picture, but the display does not secure lucid communication. There can be only an effort by each individual to clarify what “so” involves.

This concrete situation can become an emblem for Wittgenstein’s understanding of the work style has to do in cases where a quest for knowledge might be misleading. In most circumstances we can take the expression of this dawning of as aspect as
simply the work of an avowal. But it is also possible that we might ask more of this “so” than an avowal can provide. We might take the “so” as implicating full patterns of how an agent deals with the world. And then we enter conditions where confession or the making of a model must supplement the avowal (PI p. 222) and attempt to give substance to an attitude. In such situations we want to know not just know more about the agent’s reactions but also about her dispositions and history. This history, though, will be particular and will also not be amenable to observation in crucial aspects: we are interested in what the character chooses as a history rather than stopping with accuracy to the facts.

It is not a huge leap to see one aspect of how the agent elaborates this “so” having less to do with efforts at mutual acknowledgement than with the production of style, the display of how an agent frames the world by composing it:

“Le style c’est l’homme”, Le style c’est l’homme meme”. The first expression has cheap epigrammatic brevity. The second, correct version opens up quite a different perspective. It says that a man’s style is a picture [Bild] of him. (CV p. 78)

The second formulation says that style is a picture of the person because the self-reflexive dimension by which it frames the world makes visible how the language has been worked. One might say that style implies ownership but does not entail discursive self-consciousness about ownership or the possibility of describing the terms of that ownership. Style accomplishes this framing by accepting and displaying the individual’s differences from others and not seeking any normative justification: “You have to accept the faults in your own style. Almost like the blemishes in your own face” (CV p. 76). Therefore while this “feels so” invites further elaboration, it is by no means clear that words will add more than they subtract from what “so” displays. Claiming knowledge or self-knowledge through these words only imposes another framework beyond the framework of language, one that is rife with normativity and temptations to make judgments. Those frameworks present “so” only in the terms that are appropriate for knowledge claims.

An intentional act need not be something shaped by meaning or overt purpose that can be stated. The act stands in the world as a showing of the person—hence the obvious connection between style as a condition of action and style in a work of art. Agents may surround acts with reasons, but we cannot take the reasons as explanations as we would if we could treat the person as an object that explanation would suffice to clarify. There is no normative argument about values that can be presumed to have authority between the “I” and the world as I find it, or the world as I decide upon it. This does not mean our actions cannot or should not be judged; it only means that the terms of judgment are not necessarily the terms that matter for agents as they make decisions they feel they can take responsibility for. Sometimes actions follow a Cavellian schema. They seek try to issue in acknowledgment and try to pursue explicit self-knowledge that one can offer to the other. But it seems safer and less likely to induce self-evasion, to be open to the degree which style, like will, extends the personal while resisting our cognitive frameworks.

There are two morals to my tale. First, Wittgenstein’s sense of what is irreducibly private about values requires a corresponding wariness in our expectations about what
it is involved in taking up a position as audience to such individual agents. There is substantial danger in assuming that the other wants to enter a dialectic of mutual self-disclosure—dangerous because both audience and agent are likely to take up self-congratulatory poses that evade the darker or lonelier aspects of what motivates us. So Wittgenstein idealizes learning to accept differences and disciplining the self to attune to those differences by finding what in them can fascinate or instruct despite one’s irreducible discomfort. One can contextualize these first-person framings—hence the role of confession—but one cannot successfully provide reasons for them that are not colored by the very conditions they propose to explain. Agents usually can only display who they have become, and perhaps seek friendships that appreciate such particular orientations. The task for an audience then in responding to style, in life and in art, is to explore different ways of looking at or playing a situation to test what might open up as a fuller mode of engagement or better way of at least accepting what remains quite different from the agent’s own sensibility. One has to distinguish sharply between an appeal to friendship and the appeal to community that asks for recognition as an “ethical” being. The latter requires the giving of reasons because that is the only locus of whatever intimacy can be achieved with a group. One must elaborate one’s decision in terms that allow the community to include the person within its parameters of concern. Yet, as Cavell is acutely aware, the filtering force of the conventions that form the community make it highly unlikely that it will be able to acknowledge accurately any decision not already programmed within its concerns. This is why for Wittgenstein display and confession seek a greater degree of intimacy, and a greater degree of something like grace, that cannot be demanded or explained. Wittgenstein maps a continual quest for the possibilities of friendship that can attune to what confession displays without demanding that the confession be adapted to the normative language of knowing and judging. In fact this refusal of the normative may be what drives Wittgenstein toward the transcendental as the only possible audience for what sits uncomfortably within purported explanations. Even in the domain of practical behavior, grace may be the necessary condition if we desire responsiveness in relation to what must fall outside the provenance of explanatory language.

In this context Wittgenstein’s fascination with Shakespeare takes on exemplary force. Wittgenstein did not “like” Shakespeare and was suspicious of people who said they “liked” Shakespeare (CV p. 86). Shakespeare has a distinctive power that Wittgenstein wants to identify, all the more because he knows it has the force to occupy a place in his real and imaginative world despite the fact of his “dislike”:

I could only stare in wonder at Shakespeare; never do anything with him. I am deeply suspicious of most of Shakespeare’s admirers. The misfortune is, I believe, that he stands by himself, at least in the culture of the west, so that one can only place him by placing him wrongly. It is not as though Shakespeare portrayed human types well and were in that respect true to life. He is not true to life. But he has such a supple hand and his brush strokes are so individual, that each one of his characters looks significant, is worth looking at. (CV p. 84)

Cavell on the other hand writes movingly, but for me disturbingly, on the effort to own some aspects of Shakespeare’s suggestive and rich engagement with issues of skepticism, as if they had a timeless philosophical world in common.
My second moral involves what this excursus may teach us about the inevitable limitations accompanying Cavell’s enormous strengths as a literary critic. My line of argument hopes to make clear the cost of his effort to anchor displays of imaginative intensities within a master plot involving the recognition of scepticism as providing a normative ground for assessing imaginative power. For all of Cavell’s criticism of traditional philosophy, I worry that he restores the same imperious authority to the language of knowledge with regard to selves that he criticizes when it is based on empiricist principles. He posits a determinable, at least quasi-allegorical situation for the action, and he treats the characters as mattering primarily because their actions can be interpreted in relation to how they deal with dilemmas of acknowledgement. What Cavell loses by this allegorical bent is the richness of a literary text’s powers for sheer display, for articulating the capacity of particular situations to elicit values like intimacy, intensity, and wonder without soliciting psychological and moral explanation.

Perhaps these differences ultimately derive from implicit competing ways of interpret the statement “Aesthetics and ethics are one.” Wittgenstein throughout his career tries to emphasize the importance of situations where we cannot “tell” anything but can only “show” what is involved in particular decisions that extend from life to the making of art works. The therapeutic bent of Cavell’s work after his “discovery” of affinities with Emerson, on the other hand, makes his resistance to convention and traditional moral philosophy powerfully open to what art works do, but he has to tilt the aesthetic, in life and in art, back to the ethical where he can thematize what is displayed, and in so doing risk displacing it into what can be known.

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i  In his earlier pre-perfectionist writing Cavell at times seems downright Wittgensteinian about the limitations of moral discourse: “WE do not have to agree with one another in order to live in the same moral world, but we do have to know and respect one another’s differences. And what we can respect, and how far and how deeply, are not matters of what ‘feeling’ a reason ‘causes’ in us” (CR 269).

ii  The best summary I know of how versions of Wittgensteinian ethics have developed is Alice Crary’s “Introduction” and the essays in her edition, Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond.

iii  I elaborate this distinction in “Exemplification and Expression.” But I do not cite there this powerful Wittgenstein passage from 1946: “Where in such cases [of being withdrawn and mistrustful] is the line between will and ability? Is it that I will not open my heart to anyone any more, or that I cannot. … If people are wary even in ordinary life why shouldn’t they—perhaps suddenly—become much more wary? And much more inaccessible? (CV 54.) Richard Eldridge’s Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism, is especially striking with regard to the question of what ethics Wittgenstein might have had because he is acutely and brilliantly aware of Wittgenstein’s concern for dramatic self-presentation rather than trust in any course of reflection (e.g. p. 5). Yet he tries to find
something like a moral philosophy in Wittgenstein’s comments in Culture and Value on the importance of “a shared way of life in culture” (110). With this opening Eldridge can use much of Cavell’s work as a dynamic reflection on what sharing this culture can involve. But this overlooks two things—Cavell’s occasional remarks about distrust or being dissatisfied by the criteria that afford this culture common terms, and the constant temptation to extend this shared culture into a source of ethical demand or ethical criteria. In my view culture is one thing and ethics quite another—something easy to forget in the academy, which is one reason Wittgenstein was deeply suspicious of academicians.

This third claim depends on my worry that the more philosophers try to adapt ethical concerns to include aspects of individual sensibilities, the more they make visible the gulf between the powers of reasoning and the role of those sensibilities, which at best give reasons rather than submit themselves to reasoning. For how can one tell where reasons stop and sensibility takes over? This is why Wittgenstein insists on the role of sensibility and so also insists on confession rather than any ideal of morality that can produce a claim about the quality of one’s reasoning. One can display the ground from which one speaks but I do not think these denials of public criteria have a sufficiently public existence to speak of such displays having the status of self-knowledge.

Eldredge argues that Cavell’s desire is to show how “to speak intelligibly is to define the ground from which you speak,” as if the “ground from which one leaps is itself defined by the leap” (22). I think the very radical nature of what Eldredge describes creates a tension in Cavell between the appeal of one can display the ground from which one speaks but I do not think these denials of public criteria have a sufficiently public existence to speak of such displays having the status of self-knowledge.

What would “know” mean in such cases, where clearly no picture theory is possibly appropriate? When we cannot resolve questions about sincerity or psychological lucidity it becomes difficult even to talk of either knowing how to respond or knowing quite what is involved in the statement. For we risk treating the avowal as a picture of an inner state that causes the pain or generates the hope.

Wittgenstein uses “confession” on only one occasion in the Investigations (p. 222) and two crucial times in the remarks collected in Culture and Value (pp. 18 and 46), crucial because the remarks show complete continuity between 1931 and 1945, a period during which Wittgenstein’s felt the need to reconcile his grammatical approach to philosophy with his concern for the values dealt with by religion. The reference to ‘confession” in the Investigations is interesting because it claims an exposure of the person not claimed at all for “avowals”: “The criteria for the truth of the confession that I thought such and such are not the criteria for a true description of a process. It resides rather in the special circumstances which can be drawn from a confession whose truth is guaranteed by the special criteria of truthfulness.” And then the second passage from Culture and Value becomes apposite because it makes clear that the exposure is not part of any human dialogue but a revelation of a painful individuality that bids to be accepted as such, so close and yet so far from Cavell’s perfectionist bent:

- The Christian Faith—as I see it is a man’s refuge in this ultimate torment.
- Anyone in such torment who has the gift of opening his heart, rather than contracting it, accepts the means of salvation in his heart.
- Someone who in this way penitently opens his heart to God in confession lays it open for other men too. In doing this he loses the dignity that goes with his personal prestige and becomes like a child. … A man can bare himself before others only out of a particular kind of love. A love which acknowledges as it were, that we are all wicked children.
- We could also say: Hate between men comes from our cutting ourselves off from each other. Because we don’t anyone else to look inside us, since it’s not a pretty sight in there.
- Of course, you must continue to feel ashamed of what’s inside you, but not ashamed of yourself before your fellow men.

I think Cavell’s early essays on modernist art understood how there had to be all sorts of attunements before explanation could take place at all. But that was before what we could call “his Emersonian turn to perfectionism.”

On the role of display as affording a link between early and late Wittgenstein see Michael Kremer, “The Cardinal Problem in Philosophy.” And more generally my argument about the continuity between The Tractatus and later Wittgenstein relies in part on the arguments by Daniélle Moyal-Sharrock for a third Wittgenstein who stresses the power of grammar.
“Propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language).-- This observation is not of the form “I know … I know” states what I know, and that is not of logical interest” (OC 401).

I make this remark under the influence of Richard Moran’s superb and subtle recent essay analyzing what is problematic in Cavell’s account of skepticism about other minds. First Moran cites Cavell’s distinguishing two kinds of skepticism—about the existence of a knowable world and about access to other minds. In both cases Cavell uses the figure of the Outsider to envision the kind of knowledge that would refute the sceptic. But the task of the Outsider is different in each case. In the case of external world skepticism the outsider has only to make itself known as a comprehensive position. But for knowledge of other persons the outsider has not only to make itself known but also to “find oneself in the knowledge that others have claimed to have achieved, finding oneself in the language framing the descriptions and explanations” (22 typescript). Objects in the world “do not have a view on how they are described” (22). But persons can reject views of their minds because they fail to capture the right emphases or tones by which they hold descriptions. The person would have “to recognize itself in this knowledge and accept that this is in fact understood” (23). Then Moran makes his most important move. He points out that in the second case we may not be dealing primarily with matters of knowledge at all. At stake is not the outsider’s knowledge of the world but the outsider’s grasp of intentions or decisions to see the world in a certain way: What we think of as a mind … is just that, or that aspect of one’s existence, about which the subject claims with respect to the terms in which it shall count as understood, or where the phenomenon to be understood … includes an understanding of itself as a distinctive element” (25). There can be rich responsiveness to other minds, but it will involve not just minds but wills, and therefore will take a kind of recognition that is different from knowledge, and from generalizations about other minds.

The role of display in late Wittgenstein extends to the claim that agents cannot be expected to be argued into changing values but have to be led to “look at the world in a different way” (OC 92). Notice too how in 1946 he still echoes the motif that ethics is a matter not of explaining the self but of making determinations about the possibility of changing one’s life to accord with the simple fact that the world exists:

I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life. (Or the direction of your life.)

It says that wisdom is all cold; and that you can no more use it for setting Your life to rights that you can forge iron when it is cold. …

Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a Passion. (CV, 53)

It is important here that one reason Wittgenstein has so little to say about morality is that he is more concerned with being justified before his God than before a community of human beings. My invocation of grace (or luck in relation to the domain of personal relations) allows for this dimension of something close to a misanthropy that by no means has to be confined to theological contexts.

I develop this criticism of Cavell in “Wonder in the Winter’s Tale.” I mean by “allegorical reading” the finding of what comes down to a coherent discursively rendered argument within the text or carried by the text. Most criticism speculates about intentions or motifs that give the details of the text significance. But criticism need not locate the major source of that significance in problems that allegedly pervade an oeuvre or stem from issues that can be presented as philosophical problems not visibly present as specific authorial concerns without substantial translation of the rendered details. The alternative is building from the specific situations how each text makes a specific claim on the readers to become imaginatively vital for their sense of what it is possible to experience and to care about.
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