



Cavell and Kuhn: Editorial Comment

Brad Tabas, Paul Jenner

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Cavell and Kuhn

EDITORIAL COMMENT

The tenth issue of *Conversations* takes as its starting point the mutually expressed importance of the intellectual relationship and friendship between Stanley Cavell and the historian of science Thomas Kuhn. Their dialogue is all the more striking given that both thinkers were as concerned with difficulties of communication as with its achievement. Yet there is no hint of a struggle with incommensurability in Kuhn's claim that Cavell was "the only person with whom I have been able to explore my ideas in incomplete sentences."¹ Cavell likewise explained, in *The Claim of Reason*, that the work owed much to having been "at times almost in possession of the something you might call an intellectual community" while working with Kuhn at Berkeley.² This issue springs from these conversations between Cavell and Kuhn, exploring and extending their encounters through readings which cross Cavell with Kuhn and Kuhn with Cavell, and in so doing extending our understanding of each, while also illustrating the ways in which their work can still provide inspiration for grappling with science, art, and philosophy.

There are compelling reasons that make this virtual reunion timely. New scholarship on Kuhn, and the publication of recent posthumous works by Kuhn, has cast his work in a fresh light, helping to redress an earlier phase of its reception – identified by Cavell as a time when the "fame" of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* "overshadowed its teaching (so that it is cited as in support of relativism and even irrationality)."³ What becomes clear is that Kuhn, or at least the late Kuhn, particularly when read with Cavell, was a New Realist *avant la lettre*, making his philosophy of

1. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), xiii.

2. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), xix.

3. Cavell, "Who Disappoints Whom?," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 608. For an excellent overview of new scholarship on Kuhn, see K. Brad Wray, ed., *Interpreting Kuhn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). See also Kuhn, *The Last Writings of Thomas S. Kuhn: Incommensurability in Science* (Chicago, IL: The Chicago University Press, 2022).

science, as well as, though somewhat differently, Cavell's work on language, literature, and the arts more generally, an inspiration for thinkers aiming to develop alternative approaches to the strongly anti-realist "theory" which has dominated many humanistic and historical disciplines. One example of such path-breaking scholarship is the work of Toril Moi, one of the contributors to this collection, whose Wittgenstein-inspired critique of poststructuralist literary theory's failure to confront the contexts and conditions of ordinary language has done so much to make available Cavell's teachings to scholars of literature.⁴ Here, her focus is on Kuhn's uptake of Wittgenstein's investigations into aspect-seeing, an exploration that at once helps us to mark ever more clearly Kuhn's difference from the advocates of the strong program whose project he is often read as endorsing or even underwriting. This work helps issue in a richer understanding of parts of Cavell most clearly owing a debt to his conversations with Kuhn, for example his account of modernism, but also, and perhaps more importantly, his distinctive reading of Wittgenstein.

That said, the essays collected here in no way hew to a party line, and one can find divergences within their readings of our two protagonists. Arya Mohan, for example, offers up a much more post-structuralist picture of Kuhn in a stimulating essay which considers the prominent role that the concepts of convention and novelty play in philosophical discussions of the arts and sciences over the second half of the twentieth century. Reading both authors through a lens that could be qualified as Nietzschean, Mohan finds an ironic if also tragic sensibility at work in Kuhn's account of changes of convention within scientific development, a disciplined relinquishment of self in paradigms lost or given up, which she contrasts with a comic sensibility in Cavell, for whom changes in artistic convention are experienced as a form of continuity — a humanised epistemology of tradition and subjectivity preserved through change. In bringing out these commonalities and differences, Mohan argues that Cavell and Kuhn's work can contribute to overcoming the "two cultures" divide.

Similarly dwelling on the relationship between the arts and the sciences, Timur Uçan offers an intricate reading of Kuhn's signature concept, the "paradigm," which stresses the ways in it proposes an innovative solution to the problem of recon-

4. Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017).

cing freedom with determinism, and so also reconciles moral philosophy and aesthetics with natural science. As Kuhn noted, the fact that “science and art are both products of human behaviour is a truism, but not therefore inconsequential.”⁵ Uçan’s essay begins by considering Cavell and Kuhn’s efforts to inherit Wittgenstein, a philosopher whose attention to human practices is mindful of what Kuhn referred to as “the numerous prices we pay for ignoring the obvious.”⁶ Resemblances regarding the places of paradigms in the arts and sciences are then affirmed, in the essay’s first part, through their analysis in terms of contingency, freedom, and community. The essay’s second part then focuses upon autonomies, asymmetries, and diversities in order to consider the limits of these resemblances. Throughout, the essay underscores the communal, Wittgensteinian role of paradigms in mediating what Uçan terms “the unrestrictive circle of the ordinary.”

Paul Jenner’s essay also explores Kuhn’s account of the role of paradigms within science. Drawing Kuhn towards Cavell, he shows how related notions of normal science, progress, and crisis, played a structuring and thematic role in Cavell’s philosophical writing. As he makes clear, while many scientific disciplines congeal around novel normative paradigms, philosophy, at least on Cavell’s Emersonian but also Wittgensteinian reading, is paradigmatically aversive, its norm is revolution and conservation, in the sense that every philosophy finds its paradigmatic belonging precisely because it provides an aversion, an alternate but also kindred version of what was previously counted as philosophical. Kuhn’s account of normal science and its progress through an apparent ability to postpone fundamental debates over scientific methods and goals — until such debates become salient in extraordinary, revolutionary moments of disciplinary crisis — becomes transformed in Cavell’s philosophical writing. This writing dramatizes how philosophy, in holding paradigms in abeyance, takes upon itself metaphilosophical questions that the possession of a paradigm would resolve as it were automatically and in advance, performatively echoing and resisting becoming what we would normally call a paradigm. Responsiveness to crisis thus becomes thematised as a normal part of Cavell’s voicing of philosophical progress.

5. Kuhn, *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago, IL: The Chicago University Press, 1977), 351.

6. *Ibid.*

Not all the essays in the collection are in the strict sense readings of Cavell and Kuhn, and this is in an exemplary fashion the case in the contribution by Ruochen Bo, which teases out from Kuhn and Cavell novel understandings of automatism and autonomy, which she then employs in a moving reading of Robert Bresson's film, *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966). Bo argues that Kuhn's theories of scientific development and Cavell's reflections on the ontology of cinema can help us to see that these two notions are not straightforwardly opposed, with automatism giving birth to a certain type of autonomy, and autonomy, in turn, requiring a certain degree of automatism. Thus the apparent heteronomy of "normal" science is the condition of possibility for the autonomy of "revolutionary" science, whilst the automatism of the scientific object becomes fundamental to paradigm change. Bo isolates comparable proximities between automatism and autonomy in *The World Viewed*, noting how Cavell's "impulse" to understand an artistic medium as an automatism helps to articulate "the experience of the work of art as 'happening of itself.'"⁷ Turning this entanglement of automatism and autonomy in an ethical direction, Bo shows how the radical non-anthropomorphism of Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar*, helps us to acknowledge, via the automatism of film, the autonomy of non-human creatures that — at least since Descartes — have often been imagined automata, with this term being understood not in the sense proposed by Bo, but rather, and precisely, as beings deprived of any capacity for autonomy and so also of any right to moral acknowledgment.

Brad Tabas's essay is likewise a creative inheritance from Cavell and Kuhn, an attempt to develop certain themes from their work in novel directions while simultaneously reading back through this work for guidance and inspiration. It takes as its theme the exploration of the openness of ordinary language to the future, what Tabas calls the "extraordinary ordinary" situation. Taking as its starting point the fact that earthlings can now view objects on the surface of Mars televisually, this situation becomes paradigmatic for thinking about the problem of meaning what we say when we have near consensus regarding the fact that we do not know, apriori, what we are talking about. Tabas develops what he calls a critique of planetary reason, a critical awareness of how our ordinary language and imaginable forms of life, even what we call

7. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 107.

reasoning itself, are planetary, caught up with the forms of life that prevailed as we Earthlings learned to speak. Developing an expressive ethics for encountering alien objects on screen, he suggests that our encounter with a Martian world viewed calls for a reconvening of our criteria, and so offers an occasion not only for education (or philosophy) but also for an education of philosophy, a new way of thinking about practicing ordinary language thinking.

Jostling for attention amidst the close readings of Cavell and of Kuhn found in these essays, readers will find mentions of as manifold a collection of figures as H. P. Lovecraft, Arthur Danto, Robert Bresson, Walt Whitman, Andy Weir, Clement Greenberg, and David Foster Wallace. The editors hope that one of the accomplishments of this collection is to bring out not just the vitality of Kuhn and Cavell, but also the profound variance among existing interpretations of their work, and even the fecundity of their texts for thinking about the place of the humanities within an age in which scientific discoveries about the planetary system are having radical effects on our understanding of everyday life. Cavell, in a 1992 essay recently republished in his posthumous collection *Here and There*, entitled “In the Meantime,” observed of his own work that it contains an obsessive repetition of “certain textual fragments,” aligning these with past conversations, and describing these unforgotten phrases as akin to an undead coven “rebuking me for not being able to master them,” before finally suggesting that “the reasons for this persistence of conversational fragments evidently go beyond their manifest content, as though they contain some orientation for me that I cannot quite follow.”⁸ In the same way, it seems that we can say, the fragments of those conversations between Cavell and Kuhn haunt us in these essays, returning with an uncanny persistence. Cavell’s tone, which borrows certain tropes from psychoanalysis, may make it seem as if this haunting by philosophy is but a form of mourning or even of madness, though it is doubtful that any of the contributors to this volume find his obsessive interrogations expressions of delusions but rather what we call philosophy. But can the same be said of us in turn? And finally, “What’s the difference?” (as Cavell once commented, quoting none other than Archie Bunker).⁹

8. Cavell, *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 207.

9. Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 42.

Cavell gives a characteristically aversive response in the closing of that essay, a reflection on the split within philosophy, on the relationship between philosophy and authority, and ultimately also on what it means to inherit philosophy: “what we have to say to one another must be said in the meantime.”¹⁰ We thus submit this collection of essays about conversations to the world, hoping that our return to Kuhn’s and Cavell’s encounters offers orientation beyond nostalgia.

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10. Cavell, *Here and There*, 209.