Descartes’ “Traditional Epistemology”

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ABSTRACT: In Descartes’ “Traditional Epistemology,” I examine how Stanley Cavell’s explanation of traditional epistemology, as described in The Claim of Reason, is exemplified in Descartes’ “Meditations.” I use what Cavell provides in The Claim of Reason as a guide to examine the way in which Descartes presents skepticism.

In his “First Meditation”, Descartes sets out to examine the basis of his beliefs. He is able to remember times in which his senses have deceived him, and, as he puts it, “it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.” 52 This being the case, he realizes that he must take a closer look at all of the beliefs he seemingly holds, and in particular, to consider whether beliefs whose truth he had taken for granted are in fact true and justified. He undertakes an examination of what, if anything, he knows about the world around him. Descartes aims to examine this question by focusing on a single, particular example of a claim to know something about the world. Yet, it is not immediately obvious how Descartes is able to arrive at the very general conclusions he seeks about our beliefs as a whole, or our knowledge as a whole, from the consideration of a particular example of purported knowledge.

What must the example of knowledge that Descartes needs be like in order for it to bear the weight of an examination of our knowledge of the world in general? How does the sort of example that Descartes needs depart from the ordinary examples of knowledge that the ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin draws our attention to, and analyzes? What are we to make of the differences between the philosophical examples that the traditional epistemologist needs to

advance his inquiries and the Austinian examples that we meet up with in the course of ordinary life? Are these differences enough to cast suspicion, or even impugn, the philosopher’s examples, as some ordinary language philosophers have charged? In this paper, I aim to address these questions by considering Stanley Cavell’s discussion of the confrontation between a traditional epistemologist like Descartes, and an ordinary language philosopher like Austin.

Cavell begins the chapter entitled “The Quest of Traditional Epistemology: Opening” with three questions that concern the procedures used by traditional epistemologists. Cavell’s first question is, “How can the failure of a particular claim to knowledge (seem to) cast suspicion on the power of knowledge as a whole to reveal the world?” 53 The second question is aimed at answering why the skeptic is only interested in generic, as opposed to specific, objects when conducting his investigation. The third question posed by Cavell is, “How can we reconcile such convincingness as traditional epistemologists have with the fact that in an ordinary context their question about generic objects would seem absurd?” 54 By answering these three questions, we will be more apt to appreciate the three phenomenological data that characterizes the skeptic’s progress. These data need to be accounted for if we are to have a satisfactory treatment of the problematic of the quest for knowledge of traditional epistemology. The phenomenological data are as follows: there is a “sense of discovery expressed in the conclusion of the investigation,” a sense of conflict “of this discovery with our ordinary ‘beliefs,’” and “the instability of the discovery,” i.e., the conviction which skepticism inspires does not seem to hold up “under the pressure of our ordinary commerce with the world.” 55

Throughout Meditations the reader is forced to question herself just as Descartes questions himself. He has decided that his senses do not form a sufficient foundation for all of the knowledge that he apparently holds. In an attempt to grasp an object by sight or touch, Descartes considers a generic object in “Meditation Two.” By meditating about the beliefs he holds concerning an ordinary piece of wax, he is trying to test the foundation of all of his beliefs. He asks, “What is it then in this bit of wax that we recognize with so much distinction?” 56 If not by the senses, then how do we conceive the piece of wax? 57 I will now consider the consequences, for the skeptic as well as the non-skeptic, of the choice of a generic object.

### I. Consequences of the Choice of the Generic Object

Descartes’ piece of wax seems to be so ordinary that anyone should be able to relate to it. He does not describe why he chose to discuss the piece of wax, but it is assumed that he chose it off hand; it is just a generic object in the room. The generality of such an object challenges our power to believe at all. If we are not sure whether the object before us is what we have come to know as a piece of wax, then how can we be certain about any object before us? Likewise with the tomato used by the 20th Century British philosopher, H. H. Price, the person who says “I know it’s a tomato” wants to uphold all our knowledge by investigating whether we have knowledge in the particular case that concerns the tomato. In ordinary life, however, we do not put all of our knowledge into question when we ask whether somebody knows if there is a goldfinch on the grass (Austinian). This is the nature of the generic object, though. Cavell writes, “It is a craving

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54 Cavell, *Claim*, 129.
55 Cavell, *Claim*, 129.
57 Cavell, *Claim*, 131.
not for generality (if that means for generalization) but for totality.” 58 We are assessing the sum total of all of our beliefs when we consider the generic object. On the face of it, the choice of such an ordinary object by the skeptic seems fair, although perhaps this is just another “wile” of the skeptic. The examples chosen by the skeptics are not arbitrary or as innocent as they may seem.

The ordinary language philosopher criticizes the traditional epistemologist for not using his words properly. The former might claim that the latter “does not mean what he or she says.” 59 The traditional epistemologist is not managing to raise the challenge “How do you know?” in the way that he intends because what the skeptic needs to mean, and what he manages to mean never line up. In the case of “How do you know?” the ordinary language philosopher questions whether the skeptic legitimately projects the word “know” into ordinary contexts. Cavell writes, “When the ordinary language philosopher accuses the traditional philosopher of misusing language or changing the meaning of words or speaking with near criminal unconcern for the ordinary meaning of words…one side is as right and as wrong as the other; they are talking past one another”. 60 The ordinary language philosopher will always have a problem with the investigation that the skeptic is conducting; at the same time, the ordinary language philosopher can never convey to the skeptic exactly what it is that is troubling to her about his investigation. They will never be able to see eye to eye on the seemingly problematic aspects of the investigation.

The ordinary language philosopher also complains that we are forced to create a world that is not our world in attempting to make sense of the skeptic’s world. “Should the traditionalist reply that in his context this discrepancy from ordinary language does not matter, and that anyone can ‘just see’ what he means by his words, and the ordinary language philosopher retort that there is no special context in operation, but only one insufficiently described, we have wrongly placed defense countered with a badly aimed advance.” 61 The skeptic cannot describe it “more completely in the way the ordinary language philosopher wishes without changing it.” The skeptic needs to speak about things that anybody speaking the language can understand. This is precisely the nature of the work that the ordinary language philosopher is concerned with. The ordinary language philosopher does not think the context of the skeptic’s investigation is sufficiently conceived, and the skeptic thinks the ordinary language philosopher’s request “misses the problem.” 62

Another problem that the traditional epistemologist has with the skeptic’s investigation is that the skeptic seems to be trying to mean something without signing onto saying it all. If I report that I see the book, a certain unnaturalness arises if the skeptic disagrees with me only because of his claim that I cannot see the inside or the back of the book from where I sit; I don’t “see all of it.” 63 Cavell writes that we project words into contexts when we speak, and also that language is tolerant. By tolerant, he means that our language allows for new projections into unusual contexts. Even though all of that is true, the tolerance still has its limits. 64 Not every context is acceptable, and the book example shows that. We would not be apt to tolerate somebody’s response of “All of it?” after our statement “I entered the room.”

58 Cavell, Claim, 236.
59 Cavell, Claim, 193.
60 Cavell, Claim, 146.
61 Cavell, Claim, 147.
62 Cavell, Claim, 147.
63 Cavell, Claim, 193.
64 Cavell, Claim, 196.
Seeing an object is so fundamental that the ordinary language philosopher cannot tell the skeptic that it is acceptable for him to talk one way while she talks another. They must talk the same way if they are going to talk at all. The skeptic seems to be speaking outside of language games, though; no game could ever give meaning to the skeptic's words. The tension therein lies between the skeptic's desire to mean something and his desire to draw general conclusions about the world.

The skeptic generalizes by using a generic object. These “representative cases” seem to have the ability to cause a disturbance much larger than the disturbance brought about when one realizes that she does not know how to tell whether the bird before her is a goldfinch or a wren (Austinian case). But when one realizes that the object she has always thought of as a piece of wax might not really be a piece of wax, it seems as though she realizes that she has a bigger problem on her hands. All of her knowledge now rests on the wax. But why is that? This is summarized in Cavell’s first question about the whole nature of the project: “How can the failure of a particular claim to knowledge (seem to) cast suspicion on the power of knowledge as a whole to reveal the world?” 65 The skeptic knows that he cannot prevail unless he puts all of our knowledge into question all at once.

Cavell wants to defend the traditional epistemologist if she has the right grounds. If the claim of knowledge that is in question is entered appropriately, and if the challenge rises naturally and is genuine and appropriate, then the entering of the basis is natural, appropriate, and genuine. On the other hand, Cavell writes, “If we take the ordinary language philosopher’s investigations to show successfully that the traditional philosopher's considerations are not fully natural, that should force the traditional philosopher to wonder whether his repudiation of ordinary language is as solid as it seems.” 66 If the investigation does not arise in a natural fashion, then the skeptic is going to have a difficult time getting the investigation off the ground. It is also important for the traditional epistemologist that there be nothing amiss about the situation she wants to discuss. We do not ordinarily require that someone rule out unlikely possibilities, such as the dreaming possibility that Descartes brings up in “Meditation One,” but the traditional epistemologist is requiring that we should rule out such a possibility.

When Descartes considers the piece of wax, he is thinking about its existence from within the knowledge he already has. The skeptic only asks if tables really exist because she knows they really do. The ordinary language philosopher claims that the point of asking whether the generic object exists is not the type of question that would come up in ordinary life. This ties into Cavell’s third question from the beginning: “How can we reconcile such convincingness as traditional epistemologists have with the fact that in an ordinary context their question about generic objects would seem absurd?” 67 Why should this question even come up? It is a generic object, so of course we know it is a piece of wax. This further ties into a larger problem for the skeptic.

Although the ordinary language philosopher criticizes the traditional epistemologist on a few different grounds concerning the choosing of the generic object, Cavell points out that the skeptic himself faces even deeper difficulties. Concerning the choice of the generic object by the skeptic, Cavell writes, “…I do not see that other examples… could express the philosopher’s problem, or doubt, hence could lead him to skepticism about the validity of our knowledge (of the world of objects) as a whole.” 68 The skeptic appears to choose a generic object because it

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65 Cavell, Claim, 129.
66 Cavell, Claim, 192.
67 Cavell, Claim, 129.
68 Cavell, Claim, 138.
secures generality; it is unremarkable and representative of any object at all. The skeptic needs to focus on a generic object because he is attempting to generalize his investigation. The generic object is chosen because of the obviousness it carries with it. To the degree that the skeptic can secure the obviousness of an object, though, he endangers the generality. This works the other way as well. To the degree that the skeptic can secure the generality of an object, he endangers the obviousness. This is precisely the nature of Cavell’s second question. The second question is aimed primarily at answering why the skeptic has an interest in generic objects, and not specific objects, when conducting his investigation.

Cavell mentions that “there is an oddness about the oddness a philosopher may wish to characterize as ‘odd only because obvious.’” The statement “he knows” will seem odd every time it is said if the thing that “he knows” is “flamingly” obvious to everyone. So when the statement is made about an extremely general object, we are going to consider the statement to be overly obvious, and therefore odd. Take for instance a case in which my parents and I are sitting in a room, and before us on the coffee table, there sits a red box. If I tell my mother that my father “knows that there is a red box on the table,” she will not know what to make of my words. She might be concerned to hear me say that father does not see the red box on the table, but if she and I can blatantly see the box, what is the usefulness of my informing her that “he knows” as well there is a red box on the table?

It would be natural for my friend, the ornithologist, to say, “I know that is a wren.” He has had certain opportunities and is in possession of credentials that I am not. He has the knowledge to pick the wren out, and by singling out the wren for me, there is a point to what he is saying. He is, in a sense, telling me (who knows nothing special about birds) what he knows, and at the same time passing on the knowledge to me. The same usefulness does not arise in the case of a generic object, though. Should my friend turn to me and state, “I know this is a piece of wax,” I will be in an awkward situation. Does he think that I do not know what wax looks like? What does he mean by his words? Cavell claims, “We can understand what the words mean apart from understanding why you say them; but apart from understanding the point of your saying them we cannot understand what you mean.” Part of the point of the skeptic’s investigation is that there is no need for credentials or opportunity. When a skeptic considers a generic object, and points it out to another, the skeptic is endangering the demand for coherence and generality: “Without that coherence it would not have the obviousness it has seemed to have; without that generality its conclusion would not be skeptical.”

II. Challenges to Knowledge in Austinian Cases

The Austinian case starts out looking like Descartes’ case: “an example of a claim is given; its basis is articulated; a ground for doubt is raised which, unanswered repudiates the claim.” The difference lies in what happens after the claimant cannot provide further basis for the claim. Descartes’ conclusion at this point is “that the claimant can no longer claim to know it’s true.”

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69 I wish to thank Dr. Kelly Jolley for helpful words concerning this point.
70 Cavell, Claim, 212.
71 Cavell, Claim, 212.
72 Cavell, Claim, 206.
73 Cavell, Claim, 220.
74 Cavell, Claim, 132.
75 Cavell, Claim, 132.
Austin's goldfinch case is actually much different than the Cartesian case. By choosing a specific object and being concerned with credentials and opportunity, the actuality of not knowing the name of the bird before you “carries no implication about what can ever be known, about knowledge as a whole, as a project; but merely an implication about your lack of training.”  

With the Austinian case, knowledge as a whole is never threatened. This is such a deep difference between the two.

Unlike the Austinian cases, the credentials and opportunities never come into play with the choosing of the generic object, as seen in the Cartesian case. This is crucial to the way the skeptic is setting things up. The skeptic slips past the significance of credentials and opportunity because she is not offering an Austinian example. Also, for the specific case, special reasons (reasons that refer specifically to the situation at hand), are needed to support challenges to know. A mere local disturbance arises when one realizes that she does not know how to tell if the bird before her is a goldfinch or a wren. Unlike the specific case, though, when dealing with a generic case, the challenge to know cannot be related to anything rooted in the case.

As it were, a global disturbance occurs when one does not even know if a real tomato is sitting before her. An ornithologist might not be able to tell if the bird that flew by his face was a wren, but he might have been able to if the bird had stopped and the lighting was better and it was not raining, etc. This is not the case with the generic object. You can train somebody for as long as you would like about what a piece of wax looks like, but no training or optimal lighting will help him decide whether he really knows that there is a piece of wax on the table.

Cavell offers another example that I find to be extremely helpful in seeing the difference between the Cartesian and Austinian cases. The specific objects found in the Austinian cases lend themselves to easily being singled out as that specific object. When asked how you know that the bird before you is a goldfinch, if you do indeed know, you could easily point to the marking on the bird that is specific to the goldfinch breed. This is not the case when asked how you know there is a table in the room. One cannot simply state that she knows because of the legs, or because of the flat top. The difference is that “generic objects have no Austinian features in terms of which they are identified.”

It is the essence of the generic object that there can be nothing extraordinary about it. The chair stops being a generic object and begins to be a specific object the minute you point out to me that only Louis XIV chairs share this specific type of upholstery. With Descartes’ piece of wax, though, there is nothing extraordinary about it. It is indistinguishable from every other piece of wax as far as he is concerned.

III. Descartes and a Challenge to Knowledge

Descartes begins with skepticism and walks the reader, as well as himself, through a solution. He is sitting alone in his dressing-gown, detached from the world. Inside the study, I think many of his thoughts are warranted; although when one rejoins the real world, the prior philosophical thoughts are not as compelling. I once thought that Descartes succeeds in getting a challenge to knowledge to arise in his case, but after studying Cavell, I am not as sure. Seeing the pitfalls associated with the generic object in cases such as these has really changed my opinion about the traditional epistemologist's investigation. It is quite a leap for Descartes to conclude.

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76 Cavell, *Claim*, 133.
77 Cavell, *Claim*, 134.
78 Cavell, *Claim*, 161.
that if he can know of the wax that it is clear and distinct, then it therefore must be true that he can know himself. But should I ever find a time in which I have “freed [my] mind from all cares” and find myself “disturbed by no passions,” 79 I am sure that I would have to pick a generic object as something to convince myself of which I am sure. Herein lies our problem.

The nature of the investigation that the skeptic is engaged in forces the choice of the generic object, such as a piece of wax. So I think, inevitably, a case like Descartes’ would arise, but I do not think one should place the burden of proof for all of our knowledge on a piece of wax. That being said, though, “the appeal to ordinary language cannot directly repudiate the skeptic” either. 80 I will end with a quote from Cavell in which he puts it better than I: “I know well enough, intellectually as it were, that these suppositions may be nonsense, seem absurd, when raised as scruples about particular claims to knowledge. But if these experiences have worked in the initial motivation of particular claims, then the attempt to prove intellectually that they have no sense is apt to weaken one's faith in intellectuality.” 81 82

**Works Cited**


80 Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging" *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 240.
81 Cavell, *Claim*, 143.
82 I wish to thank Arata Hamawaki and Kelly Jolley of Auburn University for providing me with very helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.