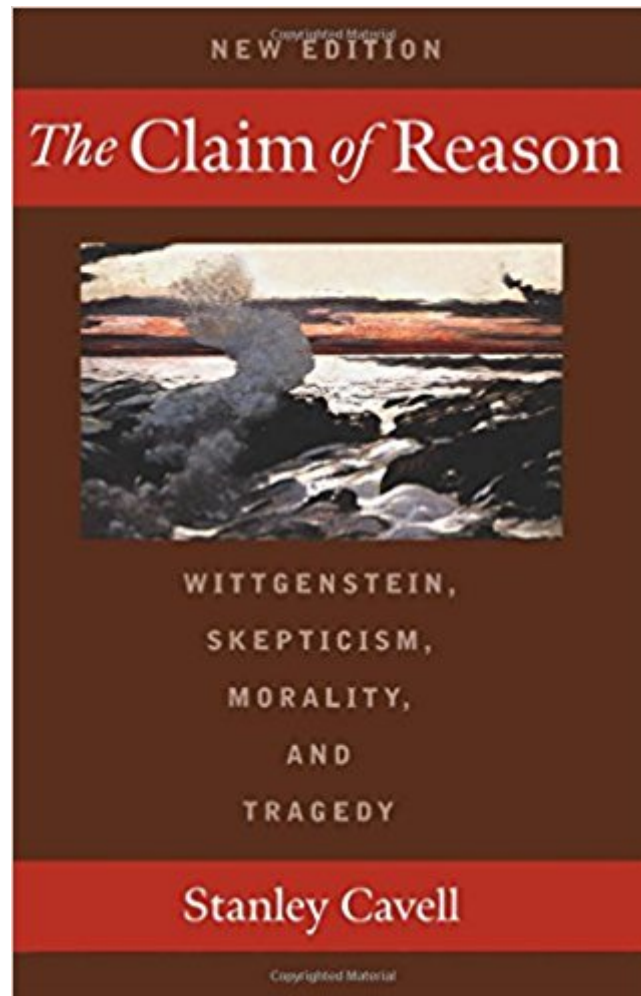




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The Claim Of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, And Tragedy



Synopsis

This handsome new edition of Stanley Cavell's landmark text, first published 20 years ago, provides a new preface that discusses the reception and influence of his work, which occupies a unique niche between philosophy and literary studies.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"An altogether remarkable work of American philosophy...that occupies the buffer zone between poetry and philosophy in a unique--and perhaps uniquely American way."--Critical Inquiry
"An intensely personal and uniquely provocative book. Stanley Cavell is a philosophical original."--Review of Metaphysics

Stanley Cavell is at Harvard University.

Great

The entirety of Cavell's work arranges itself around The Claim of Reason, a 564pp book that was extraordinarily long in its gestation (over two decades), as it grew out of his thesis on Wittgenstein into a much stranger shape. In Cavell's inimitable self-citing way, since its publication he's rarely written anything that doesn't refer back to The Claim of Reason. I'm not going to summarize it here. Its basic burden ("burden" is a word Cavell likes to use--think of it in both senses, as both "weight" & "refrain") is an effort to grapple with the Western epistemological tradition, & to suggest

that it contains a major blind spot. Post-Cartesian philosophy has been preoccupied with skepticism about the possibility of proving the accuracy of our knowledge about or, or even the existence of, the material world. Cavell is interested in this skepticism for two reasons: (1) its ultimate unanswerability; (2) the curious evanescence of its conclusions: as Hume notes, once one leaves the study & goes out into the real world of social interaction & daily concerns, the skeptical conclusion evaporates, looks "cold & strained". Cavell then traces out another kind of skepticism: the problem of the existence of other minds, or more generally the question of our knowledge of others. In Cavell's view, other-minds skepticism "makes sense" in a way that material-world skepticism does not: or rather, it is "live" in our everyday interactions (it's not news to anyone that we have only glimpses of the inner being of others). In other words, with the problem of other minds, "we live our skepticism" (the four-word formula which the entire book builds up to). This is a neat opposition which Cavell admits is itself somewhat unstable. But it leads him to suggest that the history of Western & in particular post-Cartesian philosophy has been a history of ignoring the problem of the other; for Cavell it is a concern that has been instead most deeply grappled with in literature. The book concludes with a sketch of four of what he takes to be the most fruitful ways philosophy could develop a history of the problem of the other; & with readings of *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Winter's Tale* & (in particular) *Othello* as dramas of other-minds skepticism. As you'll see I've approached the book, so to speak, from the back-end: it takes quite some time before these larger themes are fully set forth. The opening sections take on several different thinkers (Rawls, Austin) but are largely an exposition of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. The key move here is his case that Wittgenstein's notion of "criteria" has been misunderstood by most of Wittgenstein's readers: Cavell (to my mind persuasively) argues that Wittgenstein did not conceive of criteria as criteria for (proof of) something's *existence*; but that instead they are criteria of *meaning*: of what makes something "count as", identifiable as something. This is the kind of book which is, simply, too full for any single reading: it's as much a sourcebook as it is a sustained argument, & I can see why Cavell continues to use it as such. There are elements I wish he had extended further. For instance, I find myself desiring that Cavell had taken time to spell out, not just the distinction/interrelation between material-world skepticism & other-minds skepticism, but also between material-world skepticism & scientific knowledge & practice, as forms of thinking that both contradict what we "know" about the world in everyday life. (What I'm getting at is: in the "skeptical recital", as Cavell puts it, the exchange runs something like: "How do you know this envelope on this table exists?" "By means of my senses." Then: "But could you not be deceived by a clever trickster?" "Couldn't you be hallucinating or dreaming?" or "But you

can't see the _other_ side of the envelope." &c. But what if instead the speaker pointed out the disparity between the data give by the senses, & the way that the world is conceived of in the modern atomic theory for instance? What distinguishes this kind of cognitive dissonance from skepticism?) This is not a criticism, exactly--obvious Cavell has different fish to fry--but it seems an odd omission given the book's interest in Romanticism, which on my understanding is in part a response to science's disenchantment of the world (Keats complaining about optical science's ruining the charm of the rainbow, &c). Cavell's discussion of our disappointment with knowledge would have been richer, I think, if it had touched on this other area. A last word on the style of the book, which I might describe as "companionable". The book is not without its miry spots, but on the whole it's an enjoyable, rather friendly read, with a lot of interesting eddies of internal dialogue (like Wittgenstein, Cavell likes to introduce imaginary interlocutors). The more tortuous (Henry) Jamesian style of later Cavell is only rarely in evidence, perhaps because so much of the book derives from his early dissertation (though obviously extensively reworked). For all the sheer unruliness of the book's structure, it's the kind of book that stays with you, a touchstone & resource.

Despite "long sentences," this book is an essential and personal Auseinandersetzung with philosophical issues ranging from Skepticism (of the world, of other minds), rule-following, common-sense knowledge, ordinary language philosophy, essentialism, foundationalism and much more. Cavell articulates a very particular and unorthodox interpretation of Wittgenstein, making use of his methodology, his examples and characterizations of ordinary, everyday problems by taking his 'philosophical intentions' to be essentially 'therapeutic' as opposed to 'constructive.' This is something Cavell has in common with both McDowell and Rorty though his hopes and desires for philosophy go beyond a simple critique of culture and beyond 'vocabulary changes' (Rorty) to include positive attempts to embody a philosophy that can live with the age old problems (of skepticism, the mind-body problem) that has plagued it for thousands of years. Though there are no end-all solutions to these problems, he believes, there is also no way to avoid grappling with them. The Claim of Reason is an attempt to embody and exemplify this belief by confronting traditional epistemology as well as the Wittgensteinian and Austinian methods of coming to terms with it. (Other reading sympathetic to this line of thought can be found in 'the new wittgenstein' eds. Alice Crary & Rupert Read)

I recommend this book to anyone who, like me, is in love with ideas but cannot figure out why anyone would bother to read the dry, technical, specialized prose of contemporary Anglo-American

philosophy OR the windy, pseudo-profound, obscurantist convolutions of European postmodernism. I came to this book from Cavell's brilliant volume on screwball comedy, "Pursuits of Happiness," which treated Golden Age American cinema with the intellectual and aesthetic seriousness it deserves without ever straying from an essential love of the films. "The Claim of Reason" was a difficult read (I was 20 when I read it and had never read an entire book of philosophy): Cavell can be windy and obscurantist himself, yet there is also something beguilingly sensual about his prose (a little like Henry James), and even when one is not the least bit sure that one fully understands him, one is inexorably led on because the book, unlike any other modern philosophy I am aware of, treats philosophical problems as though they have meaning for the deepest concerns of one's daily life, and vice versa. Cavell also, throughout his writings, treats morality as being of urgent concern, without ever relying on platitudes...

Professor Cavell's exploration of Wittgenstein's writings, skepticism and the drama of tragedy is itself a long journey for the reader. I think that the philosophic re-enactment of Wittgenstein's philosophical thoughts, and the analysis of skepticism as a theme of tragedy of the doubting self may elude the non-philosophic reader, but once the reader gets it, it is worth these few hundreds of pages.

One of the finest works of American philosophy ever written. Cavell brilliantly and carefully traces the intersections among language, literature, and ethics, and ultimately demonstrates how philosophizing (and living in general) is a kind of reading. His reasoning is subtle and his writing is clear, stimulating, and thankfully not for specialists only

Whenever the first sentence of any book--Faulkner excluded--exceeds 200 words, you know you're going to suffer, and suffer I did. One might claim this to be a great book, and some have; but this could well be one of those great books collecting dust on your bookshelf.

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