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The Threat of Solipsism: Wittgenstein and Cavell on Meaning, Skepticism, and Finitude by Jônadas Techio

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Techio, Jônadas. *The Threat of Solipsism: Wittgenstein and Cavell on Meaning, Skepticism, and Finitude*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021. xiv + 210 pp.

Mr. Techio belongs to that somewhat rare breed of philosophers who dislike both reductions and generalizations. A few decades ago, there were a multitude of others like him, now only a handful. His style is the opposite of Twitter, and may seem unfit for our times. It appeals to a more perennial taste, more attuned and more responsive to the complexities and subtleties of human nature, demanding more of self-reflection and less at ease with broad judgments and conclusions. It overtly follows, to be sure, Wittgenstein's "attention to particulars". But its spirit is equally akin to Henry David Thoreau's saying that "[t]he finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling" (2004: 6). And a delicate touch this book indeed has. It comprises seven essays mostly on skepticism from the perspective of Stanley Cavell. Because Cavell's views were highly influenced by Wittgenstein, so too is the author of this book. Each chapter offers a reading either of a major writing by Wittgenstein on the topic – the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, *Philosophical Remarks, The Blue Book,* and *Philosophical Investigations* – or of major debates connected to his views prompted by Saul Kripke, P.F. Strawson, and Barry Stroud. All seven essays had already appeared in philosophy journals over the last few years, but the author informs that they were revised and updated for this printing (cf. p. ix). Some of the discussions, especially those featured in the first four chapters, will interest mostly Wittgenstein and Cavell scholars and readers. They advance what has come to be known as the 'resolute' reading of Wittgenstein, initially put forth by Cora Diamond and James

Conant. The last essay discusses perfectionism and movies, a recurrent theme in Cavell's philosophy. All of the essays have a foot on Wittgenstein and another on Cavell, and in this sense this is a mostly scholarly work (of excellent quality). But Techio has his sights trained also on the more existential issue of human nature. With this book he apparently means to outline his own views of what he takes himself to be, from a philosophical point of view:

The book opens with the statement that "[c]onceptions of philosophy are inextricably tied to conceptions of what it means to be human" (p. 1), and it ends with a sort of exhortation: "resist the temptation of abandoning prematurely the complexities of our ordinary lives" (p. 201). The underlying idea throughout is that the generalizations and idealizations that are typical of philosophy are forms of intellectual escapism. The ancient pull towards essences and first causes as well as the modern pull towards theories (of knowledge, of ethics, of art, of mind, of justice, of whatever) not only lift us away from the mismatch and patchwork of daily life but – more importantly – shelters us from the dread of loneliness, rejection, meaninglessness, fallibility, and mortality. Techio argues (p. 56) that intellectually this appears as a nearly obsessive need to thoroughly rid philosophy of solipsism and skepticism. That an idea can appear as a threat to someone reveals quite a lot about the person who fears it. Hence, the fact that solipsism and skepticism have been viewed as recurring threats in our philosophical tradition, especially our modern tradition, is revealing of who we take ourselves to be, philosophically at least. The overarching goal of this book is to peel away the layers of thought and illusion that veil us from the uncomfortable nakedness of our own vulnerability.

It does so by following Wittgenstein's maxim of *attention to detail*, examining the contingencies and fragilities of the meaningfulness of our words. A good example is the analysis of how Descartes formulates skeptical doubts by introducing a "generic object" (Chapter 6, especially p. 166 ff.), drawing from Thomson Clarke's seminal papers on skepticism. The object of Cartesian skeptical doubt is then not the particular objects with which we are acquainted and which ordinarily surround us (this particular house in which I live, this particular book that was given to me by a dear friend years ago, this particular tree under which I have been many times etc.), but an ideal object detached from my particular life and which could be any other object. Generic objects are philosophical fictions. They have no place in our ordinary experiences and play a limited role in scientific theory. Hence, inferences based on them do not warrant conclusions about the objects we actually do experience. The more interesting point, however, is that their recurrence in philosophical discourse reveals a kind of dread, of which philosophical detachment is a rationalization. The meaningfulness of our words, the knowledge of the objects around us, the deliberations of courses of action require instead, Techio argues, engagement and re-

sponsibility, which can be at times demanding and costly – even painful. To engage with others and to commit oneself to an endeavor are things we do at our own risk. And the perils involved (those of being deceived, disliked, and let down) cannot be avoided by philosophical detachment (cf. p. 184). In pointing this out, the book can be said to be therapeutic. It traces the sources of rather common philosophical illusions, and has us face our all too human fragilities.

The first four chapters focus on Wittgenstein's analysis of solipsism, in the *Tractatus* (chapter 1), the *Philosophical Remarks* (chapter 2), the *Blue Book* (chapter 3), and in the *Philosophical Investigations* (chapter 4). The idea here is that although Wittgenstein's philosophy changed throughout the years, there is a common thread that weaves together his views on solipsism. In the *Tractatus*, solipsism is viewed as attempting "to secure [...] a direct, objective and impersonal relation between subject [...] and the world" (p. 52). In the *Philosophical Remarks*, solipsism deflects "attention from the real difficulties faced by creatures endowed with such capacities (and burdens) as we have of taking up our experiences, our condition in the world, and give them sense – or fail to" (p. 93). In the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein describes a range of uses of the word "I" and how some of those uses might provide a metaphysical route to solipsism (cf. p. 106). In the *Philosophical Investigations*, which the author discusses by contrasting Kripke's "skeptical conclusion" with Cavell's understanding of "our permanent and personal responsibility in keeping our words and the world aligned" (p. 133).

All this is done in the book in much detail and sophistication, which deserves commendation. I end this brief review with two critical reflections of my own, which were stirred up by the reading of this excellent book. The first is whether this kind of philosophical therapy might not end up bringing about an excessively bleak picture of our human condition. Apparently we are led to a sort of dilemma: either we delude ourselves in philosophical generalities or we stoically accept our vulnerabilities and insufficiencies. Are there no alternatives? Techio does not indicate any, but surely there are. Although there are degrees to this, it seems that most people worldwide live their lives neither in the deluded philosophical alternative nor in a stoic acceptance of human finitude. They do so by conceiving themselves religiously, or spiritually. This means that the vulnerabilities and fragilities of our daily lives are then viewed as less significant aspects of our existence. They are not denied, but viewed as serving a purpose. Techio says at the beginning of the book that "for many of us in the West God is indeed dead" (p. 5). There is a history and a cultural context for this idea. The majority of the population even in the West does not belong to the "many" mentioned by Techio, and thus does not behave towards our finitude in the stoic (there is nothing we can do about it, so let us just accept the facts) sort of way suggested by the author. Yet another alternative would be not to view the world as made up of objects that are

alien to our minds (or "external" to them – hence the constant threat of solipsism), but as being made of agents which form a community (together) with me from which I cannot escape. One such example is the worldview that anthropologists (for example, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 1998) have been calling "Amerindian perspectivism." It seems then that the view of his own humanity that Mr. Techio thinks appropriate is not a fact about humanity (as his wording may suggest, for example, when he speaks of the "human condition"), but a contingent fact about his own particular cultural and historical context.

One may also wonder whether similar outcomes of the kind of philosophical therapy laid out in the book cannot also be achieved from within a more naturalized epistemology. Several portions of the book criticize traditional epistemology, and at one point the author says that

> Cavell and Stroud [presumably Techio too] want to make room for a new kind of epistemology, less concerned with establishing certainties and foundations [...] instead focusing on understanding the real limits that define finite cognition" (p. 164).

Yes, but is this not what most of cognitive science, and other outgrowths of naturalized epistemology have been doing over the last few decades? Perhaps there is not so much a need to make room for this kind of enterprise, as there is for integrating it to the endeavors of the more therapeutically minded philosophers. This is not a criticism, of course, only a reflection and a skewed invitation for others to read and engage with the wonderful work that Techio has delivered.

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