



A sceptical approach to ‘the everyday’: Relating Stanley Cavell and Human Geography



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 August 2015

Received in revised form 28 November 2016

Accepted 10 December 2016

Available online 23 December 2016

Keywords:

Everyday

Scepticism

Stanley Cavell

Wittgenstein

Human Geography

ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades there has been a turn toward ‘the everyday’ in the social sciences and humanities. For some authors, this turn is about making the everyday a new repository of authority of some sort, political, social, cultural or otherwise. For others, however, any turn toward the everyday interrupts any such evaluation. Focusing upon Stanley Cavell and the philosophical lineage that he continues from Emerson, Nietzsche, Thoreau and Wittgenstein, this paper examines Cavell’s interest in the menace and power of scepticism as key to understanding the everyday as a lived experience. As an introduction to this particular part of Cavell’s work for many Geographers, the paper puts Cavell in relation to more familiar approaches to the everyday, including de Certeau, critical Human Geography, non-representational theory, affect theory, psychoanalysis and pragmatism.

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1. The everyday turn and scepticism

“‘everyday life’ has been widely referenced and problematized in recent years within geography and many of the social sciences and humanities.”

[Gregory et al., 2011: 223]

The everyday turn has formed a grounding for a broad range of theories and approaches emerging in Human Geography over the past few decades. Historically implicated in the long cultural turn and the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism, today the everyday runs through an assortment of new approaches in Human Geography. From de Certeau’s (1984) seminal *The Practice of Everyday Life*, to more recently in critical Human Geography (Barnett, 2005), non-representational theory (Harrison, 2002; Thrift, 2008), affect theory (Connolly, 2006; Massumi, 2015), psychoanalysis (Pile, 1996; Blum and Nast, 2000) and pragmatism (Wood and Smith, 2008; Wills and Lake, 2017), the everyday continues to weave its way through many of our key concerns (Eyles, 1989; Crang, 2000; Gregory et al., 2011). This paper explores the Philosopher Stanley Cavell’s particular engagement with ‘the everyday’ and puts this in relation to these key debates in contemporary Human Geography. As Rorty (2005) says, over the past sixty years Cavell has developed a particularly innovative way of approaching the everyday; which, unlike many contemporary

debates, maintains a much more explicit connection with Western Philosophy’s foundational interest in the sceptical problem of other minds and the external world.¹ As Cavell (2005a: 159) recurrently emphasises, it was this long tradition of scepticism, from Socrates to Descartes, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, which for most of the history of Western Philosophy energised “our fundamental concerns about our relation to the world” and others in it. Yet, as Rorty and Cavell also say, these are not now the sorts of concerns that animate much contemporary debate about the everyday in the wider social sciences and humanities. Cavell has had some impact beyond Philosophy in the fields of Anthropology (Das, 1998), Political Theory (Mouffe, 2000; Rorty, 2005; Berlant, 2011) and Film and Literature Studies (Eldridge and Rhie, 2011). However, there is no article in a major geography journal that takes Cavell’s work as its central focus and running concern throughout. Those Geographers who have drawn upon Cavell to influence their own fields of research in such areas as critical geography, justice and planning most notably include Barnett (2004, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2014), Laurier (2011, 2012), Laurier and Brown (2008), Laurier and Lorimer

¹ A good example of this is Wittgenstein’s (1953: §253) sceptical statement: “I have seen a person in a discussion on this subject strike himself on the breast and say “But surely another person cannot have THIS pain!”. Wittgenstein’s point, as explained in this paper, is that the answer cannot be affirmed or denied with certainty; but rather the associated drive for the transcendental can become constitutive of a sense of illusionary qualities, rupture and impasse in human sociality and the everyday as a lived experience. For Cavell, Wittgenstein then reworks, but also continues, the Western tradition of philosophical scepticism that goes back to Socrates.

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(2007, 2012) and a few others (Entrikin, 2002; Hillier, 2006; Gunder and Hillier, 2007; Pugh, 2013). This paper systematically places Cavell's work in relation to a broad range of key themes in contemporary Human Geography and the everyday – specifically, de Certeau, critical Human Geography, non-representational theory, affect theory, psychoanalysis and pragmatism.

2. De Certeau and Cavell

Michel de Certeau's (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life* is one of the key historical texts to have shaped the 'everyday turn' over the past few decades. Like Lefebvre's (2002) *Critique of Everyday Life*, Highmore's (2002) *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* and Thrift's (2008) *Non-Representational Theory*, this book is among the most formative and frequently cited in geography and related disciplines. As Mike Crang (2000: 136) says, de Certeau is a good place to begin any reflection on what we mean by 'the everyday' in geography, as he has become something of a "small-scale mantra in geographical writings". In particular, de Certeau's invocation to turn away from geography 'on high' still makes him, for many Geographers, "the champion of the common folk and street level social theory" (Crang, 2000:136; Kwan, 2013; Saunders and Moles, 2013). De Certeau has played a key role in the everyday turn in Human Geography (McDowell, 1994; Nash, 2000; Lorimer, 2005). He has influenced mainstream definitions, such as in the *Dictionary of Human Geography*, which defines "everyday life" as

"A realm associated with ordinary, routine and repetitive aspects of social life that are pervasive and yet frequently overlooked and taken-for-granted. For many commentators, the everyday is inherently ambiguous and indeterminate, something that is both everywhere yet nowhere, familiar at the same time as it escapes."

[Gregory et al., 2011: 223]

But here we can schematically pick out at least two ways of approaching the everyday that allow us to bring the work of Cavell to light. On the one hand, there is de Certeau's (1984) grounding of authority in the everyday that amounts to something like a kind of therapy against the longstanding abstractions and Idealisms of Philosopher Kings, Metaphysics and Transcendental Reason that have permeated the Western Philosophical tradition since before Plato. Here de Certeau (1997: 22) says:

"A theory which takes as its theme, (and often for a taboo) 'what is happening' would be precisely the means of eliminating what is happening here and now. It would be discretely but surely . . . since the heterogeneous element has been a priori eliminated".

Here de Certeau's approach to the everyday famously focuses upon how the metaphysical freezes out the critical pluralities and heterogeneity of everyday life, and he therefore says we should submit to the authority of the ordinary rather than the abstractions of Philosopher Kings and Transcendental Reason. But on the other hand, there are less read philosophical traditions, such as those engaged by Cavell (but which also include Emerson, Thorau, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Berlant see below) that adopt a very different way of approaching the everyday. Unlike de Certeau, this different philosophical lineage does not invoke the authority of 'the everyday' to sceptically stress pluralities and distribution of agency in everyday life at the expense of the metaphysical drive, precisely because this can work to denude the everyday of its more critical capacities. Instead, in Cavell in particular, an engagement with scepticism and the associated drive for the transcendental is bound up in a radically different and distinct way of approaching the everyday. This more critically brings to the fore how a sense of non-identity and illusionary qualities become constitutive of

the everyday itself as a lived experience – a sense of absence, loss or disconnection from the everyday, from which a sense of self and community may recover from, or otherwise. As we will see later, Cavell's foregrounding of such states of suspension as everyday experiences further makes his work appealing for more recent contemporary theorists of the everyday, such as Lauren Berlant (2011: 260), who argues that a "Cavellian ethics" is a means of telling stories about trying to reconstruct a sense of self and/or community, whilst living through feelings of ongoing impasse and wandering absorptiveness. But when it comes to Cavell in particular make absolutely no mistake about the fundamental stakes at hand in his approach to the everyday and associated key tropes of impasse and suspension. Cavell's (1996a) central and recurrent argument is that the sceptical problem of other minds, the external world and associated critical capacities cannot be expunged from our experiences of the everyday, precisely because, as I now explain, scepticism is part and parcel of the human form of life.

A useful way to bring this out is to stay with a comparison between de Certeau and Cavell. Both begin their analysis of the everyday with Wittgenstein, but they make very different readings of undoubtedly the most important Philosopher to have shaped the everyday turn in the early 20th century. In the opening pages of *The Practice of Everyday Life* de Certeau (1984: 9) singles out, credits and applauds Wittgenstein as the "Hercules" who, through his turn toward ordinary language philosophy, cleared the pathway for what was eventually to become the everyday turn. In particular for de Certeau (1984: 9), Wittgenstein invoked the everyday as a "critique of the Philosopher as Expert", casting out the realms of Transcendental Reason, Metaphysics and Philosopher Kings from our analysis of the everyday so that we focused instead upon the mundane and the ordinary (see also Pugh, 2012). As de Certeau (1984: 9, emphasis in original) says, after Wittgenstein, "henceforth" there should be a "submission to the ordinary". However, I contend, there is a fundamental problem with de Certeau's reading of Wittgenstein and his understanding of the everyday which also works to draw out the distinctiveness of Cavell's approach. In particular, the problem with de Certeau's reading is not what he *does* say, but what he leaves out or reads out of Wittgenstein that Cavell insists should remain and be kept in play. For allowing de Certeau his point that the metaphysical acts to freeze out the critical pluralities of the everyday, the question for Cavell still remains: how is it that this sceptical impulse away from the authority of everyday, that drive to make transcendental, does still remain in play; and, indeed, quite naturally becomes constitutive of the everyday as a lived experience? Moreover, are there not many conceivable contexts and circumstances where to gloss over the sceptical problem and the associated transcendental drive would be to deny the very conditions of alienation, exile and oppression that brought scepticism about in the first place; leaving us a mystery to ourselves, let alone the world? (Cavell, 1972/1981; Affeldt, 1998; 2010; Laugier, 2009; 2013). Thus, for Cavell (1988: 170), "[i]t seems to me that the originality of [Wittgenstein's] *Investigations* is a function of the originality of its response to scepticism, one that undertakes not to deny scepticism's power (on the contrary) but to diagnose the source (say the possibility) of that power" as it becomes constitutive of the everyday. Here Wittgenstein "has as fully worked out a theory of how language becomes metaphysical as he does of how language becomes ordinary." (Cavell, 1994: 6–7). Picking up on this, in Cavell's wide ranging studies – from his critiques of dominant philosophical traditions, to his work in film and literature – what is therefore recurrently at stake is this radical concern with the sceptical impulse, associated transcendental limits and how people find their way back to each other; acknowledging each other, somehow, or otherwise, in the midst of exile, separateness and finitude. Scepticism and the associated drive to exile from the ordinary is not a problem to be avoided or read

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