

The Grammar of Moral Disagreement: Cavell's Vision of Moral Disagreement, Responsibility, and Acknowledgment

The claim of this paper is that Cavell's discussions of moral disagreement and acknowledgment offer a viable alternative to the traditional model of adjudicating moral disputes through an appeal to some method analogous to those found in mathematics and science (i.e., in which disagreement is overcome). In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell argues the traditional picture of moral disagreement is informed by two assumptions (CR 254): one concerning the nature of rationality and the other that of moral argument. The rationality assumption is that "an argument depends upon its leading from premisses [sic] all parties accept, in steps all can follow, to an agreement upon a conclusion which all must accept," and the moral argument assumption is that "the goal of a moral argument is agreement upon some conclusion ... concerning what ought to be done" (ibid.). Cavell goes on to reject these assumptions, because one's interlocutor might reject one's assumption *or* accept the assumption and reject the steps meant to follow from it *or* accept the premise and the steps but reject the conclusion *or* accept the formal argument but endorse a different action. Cavell's point is that each of these four responses are perfectly intelligible, ordinary occurrences of moral disagreement, which *the* method of the "moral sciences" would pass over. The problem with this approach, for Cavell, is that it does not so much as *morally* resolve the dispute as eliminate such dispute. This is problematic, because it denies one's interlocutor as a source of significance on the world, which is each speaker's right as a speaker of a natural language (i.e., to give voice to their perspective on the world). This picks up Cavell's claim that there is a certain "truth of skepticism". By this Cavell means that while we do not have access to the things themselves (or the other's experience), he rejects the negative implication that this means we do not have access to the world or others. The access we have to the world is our finite, limited human access. In this, Cavell develops an account of *acknowledgment* as a moral response to the truth of skepticism; namely, in which one conceives of the other from the other's point of view, rather than using one's psychology as a model for the other (e.g., empathy). To acknowledge the other, one's interlocutor, is to accept them as a source of significance on the world, themselves, and oneself. In the context of moral disagreement, this entails a rejection of the two assumptions outlined above precisely because the grammatical structure of what it means to be responsible to another person presupposes that one respects the other as a source of significance on the world. In this Cavell's point is that "we do not have to agree with one another in order to live in the same moral world, but we do have to know and respect one another's differences" (CR 269). The implication being that the very rationality of responsibility entails that disagreement cannot be foreclosed.