

**Thinking Changes**  
*Stanley Cavell and Eugene Gendlin*

**Abstract**

**The two American thinkers Stanley Cavell and Eugene Gendlin independently from one another open up perspectives on human experience and language, that strive to overcome conventional concepts based on the tradition of scepticism. Both thinkers are linked to Psychotherapy, yet in very different ways. Stanley Cavell detects at the root of scepticism the experience of alienation from a “world object”, and also from the meaning of words: words are treated as if they were labels for things. Eugene Gendlin sees process rather than representation as fundamental for the relation of symbol and experience. In his work he shows how words can be conceived in their interaction with our bodily situation.**

**Key Words:**

**Scepticism, Wittgenstein, experience, meaning, language, symbols, body, connection, process, implying, carrying forward.**

1. Introduction

Since Descartes expressed his radical doubts in the “*Meditations*”, scepticism about knowledge has remained part of the philosophical agenda; indeed over the past centuries it seems to have been of growing interest. Descartes’ reflections about the possibility of knowing that amount to the question how we can know, if anything exists at all, seem to accompany Western thinking and its scientific ideal of certainty. Anglo-Saxon and Continental Philosophy are similarly dominated by its challenge, each reacting with specific strategies of attempting to secure regions of knowledge being able to withstand the sceptical challenge or proving that no knowledge can resist it. Thus Hannah Arendt writes: “In modern philosophy and thought, doubt occupies much the same

central position as that occupied for all the centuries before by the Greek *thaumazein*, the wonder at everything that is as it is. Descartes was the first to conceptualize this modern doubt, which after him became the self-evident, inaudible motor which has moved all thought, the invisible axis around which all thinking has been centered.” Arendt, H. 1958, 249.

In the last century however, philosophers have started questioning the sceptical paradigm on different levels. The hermeneutical and phenomenological school each in their own ways demonstrate, that key notions of experience and objectivity must be understood in a radically different fashion, to do justice to human conditions of knowing. And these lie beyond the scope of scepticism. Names like Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty or Gadamer stand for a critical stance toward scepticism’s monopoly. A crucial criticism is that skepticism ignores characteristic traits of the specific human way of experiencing and being. This gives weight to a hermeneutical concept of truth related to the meaning of philosophical and literary texts, rather than to the methods and criteria of the natural sciences.

The following article outlines two *contemporary* reactions towards the problems arising through scepticism. Two American thinkers, Stanley Cavell and Eugene Gendlin, develop positions that are indebted to the above mentioned thinkers, but also draw on other sources, like Wittgenstein, Austin and the American Pragmatist Tradition. Above all, however, they both provide a highly original outlook, that breaks new ground. Stanley Cavell transforms scepticism’s approach from being a challenge into being a symptom, thereby expressing something about the character of modern thinking. Eugene Gendlin’s philosophy seems to ignore scepticism as a starting point altogether, which is strikingly unusual. His alternative approach transcends traditional notions by establishing a dynamic mode of understanding human experience and symbols. Cavell’s reflections establish a critical meta-position, from which the boundaries of the sceptical mode of thinking become visible throughout its different cultural forms. Gendlin develops terms capable of deriving the underlying conditions of scepticism as a late and derivative form of thinking.

In the following I want to consider some aspects of the relationship between Gendlin and Cavell, a relationship which is peculiar in several ways. Both combine philosophy and psychotherapy, yet in different respects. Whereas Cavell employs a *psychoanalytical* perspective to open up a different interaction with our tradition, Gendlin, who is a celebrated therapist himself, analyses *philosophically* the implications of the psychotherapeutic situation. Whilst it is obviously not possible to discuss their thought in its entire scope here, perspective on their central concepts will emerge from a comparison of the two thinkers.

## 2. Cavell – Scepticism as the Experience of the “Sealed off” Position

Cavell’s main work, *The Claim of Reason*, unfolds a perspective on scepticism which is also detectable in the make up of classical works of literature and modern film<sup>1</sup>. Starting with positions of classical sceptical philosophy, Cavell gradually works towards a different sort of question. What causes this insecurity in thinkers, he inquires, so that they doubt their knowledge to such an extent that nothing seems to be left? Is it really just the fact of sense-deception and the possibility of being mistaken? In subtle analyses, working his way through Descartes, Wittgenstein and Austin, Cavell connects the question of the reliability of our knowledge to a different kind of question, - the question of self-knowledge. It is challenging philosophical work to delve deep into the sceptical contexts, into the forest of its arguments, and slowly to carve out a *different dimension* of the actual question. By careful exegesis of Descartes as well as Wittgenstein he demonstrates that if one merely only criticizes or adopts the radical sceptical position, one fails to acknowledge the actual points of depth that Descartes and Wittgenstein reach out for. Together with ordinary language philosophers like Austin, Cavell demonstrates that Descartes’ argumentation does not suffice to make the radicalness of his

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<sup>1</sup> See his books “Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage” or “Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life.”

doubt plausible<sup>2</sup>. Although Cavell was able use this logical level of the argument to dismiss Descartes, – as ordinary language philosophy claims to have – he continues to take Descartes’ point extremely seriously by making an astonishing move – he shifts his attempt to understand on an experiential level. Thereby he is able to show how critics that make Descartes endeavour seem plainly senseless on an analytical level miss out on something, which deeply belongs to being human.

“My major claim about the philosopher’s originating question – e.g., “(How) do (can) we know anything about the world?” or “What is knowledge, what does my knowledge of the world consist in?” is that it (in one or another of its versions) is a response to, or expression of, a real experience which takes hold of human beings. ..It is not “natural” ... But it is, as I might put it, a response which expresses a natural experience of a creature complicated or burdened enough to possess language at all.” Cavell, S. (1979) 140.

By emphasising an “experience” behind certain philosophical questions, which complex creatures like human beings are capable of having - he moves the discussion into a different context. Whereas the sceptical question is fixed to objects, Cavell subtly turns the perspective of scepticism 180 degrees back onto the subjects asking these questions. What has happened to us, to think that way?

This shift in perspective makes his similarity to Gendlin obvious. It consists in connecting a schematic to an experiential layer.

To outline this in more detail, one must consider the experience Cavell detects behind a philosophy driven by scepticism. Imagine Descartes sitting in his chair and asking himself, whether the people outside the window are real, the piece of wax is wax, and he himself – and everything else (!) – really exist or are just part of a dream. During his Meditation his doubts become increasingly radical, urging him to “ensure” the situation through elaborate constructions leading up to a proof of god’s existence and the foundations of modern epistemological theory. The situation itself, however, loses its immediacy and hence its ability to speak for itself. It needs heavy reconstruction through rational steps. What

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<sup>2</sup> See for that especially the chapters: “The Quest of Traditional Epistemology: Opening” and “The Quest of Traditional Epistemology: Closing”, in *The Claim of Reason*.

kind of experience leads up to this line of thought ? It is an experience, Cavell writes:

“which I described as being sealed off from the world, within the round of one’s own experiences, and as one of looking at the world as one “object” (“outside of us”). The philosopher’s experiences of trying to prove that it is there is, I will now add, one of trying to establish an absolutely firm connection with that world – object from that sealed position. It is as though, deprived of the ordinary forms of life in which that connection is, and is alone, secured, he is trying to re-establish it in his immediate consciousness, then and there (This has its analogues in non-philosophical experience, normal and abnormal)”.  
Cavell, S. (1979) 238

Cavell draws our attention away from the theory to a background which does not show up in it. A situation thereby becomes noticeable, in which the philosopher indicates a position in which humans look at the world as if it were a mere object outside of them. From this position (which the sceptic assumes without question), the realness of the “world-object” seems to become shaky, to need to be protected from dissolving. This creates the assignment the sceptical philosopher has set himself: to “re-establish a firm connection” with the world, which is given in “the ordinary forms of life”. Cavell’s step back, looking from the theoretical question to its implied situation, creates a new kind of picture. The awkward question of what came first – a mode of thinking, creating the disconnected world-object or an experience, creating this kind of thinking – remains open. Cavell examines closely the features of the theoretical frame of mind, demanding re-establishment of a firm connection with the world object out of its “immediate consciousness” independent of the forms of life that deliver this connection. Cavell shows that the obligation of proving the reality of the “world-object” and firmly to connect it with the human perceiver goes along with a thinking in parts and units, strengthening the “sealed off” position, which motivates the corresponding philosophical position. Everything becomes a “thing”, of which the existence has to be somehow proved, be it pain, wax, the jar on my desk, the people outside my window.

“We construct ‘parts’ of objects which have no parts; ‘sense’ which have no guiding function; become obsessed with how we can know ‘the pain itself’ in a context in which the question ‘Why do you think this expression of pain gives a false picture of it?’ have no answers (...) And we take what we have fixed or constructed to be discoveries about the world, and take this fixation to reveal the human condition rather than our escape or denial of this condition through the rejection of the human conditions (...) Why this happens, how this happens,

how it is so much as possible for this to happen, why it leads to the conclusions it does, are further questions – question not answered by claiming, for example, that we have ‘changed the meanings of our words’, ‘been inattentive to their ordinary meanings’, ‘misused our language’”. Cavell, S. (1979), 216

Cavell thus opens a kind of meta-criticism of a range of theories that all too often are just taken at face value (or criticised on account of inappropriate use of language). According to him what is at stake at the bottom of those questioning theories is not the alleged prove of the reality of the external world – but something very different, namely the escape from or denial of the human condition.

### 3. Gendlin – Pulling Experience and Concepts Together Again

Similarly, yet not as drastically as Cavell, Gendlin summarizes a tendency of thinking to cut off its own experiential feed-back.

“In the Western tradition of philosophy, experience (and nature) has usually been interpreted as basically a formal or logic-like system. This was done through a philosophical analysis of the basic assumption of knowledge or science. These assumptions were then attributed to experience.” Gendlin, E. (1973), 282

But how are we to think *of* and above all *with* experience in a different fashion?

Gendlin says:

”The crucial problem has two parts: 1) If experience is not like a verbal scheme and we do not wish to say that it is, then how can we say anything at all about it without imposing a verbal scheme? 2) If we wish, in some way, to appeal beyond logical schemes to a sense of “experience” not yet organized verbally, in what way do we have such ‘experience’ present and available (...)”. Gendlin, E. (1973 ), 282

Gendlin’s main philosophical endeavour concentrates on showing how to face the challenge of these questions<sup>3</sup>. The philosophical motivation behind this task

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<sup>3</sup> “The problem is not only ours; it was also a problem for Wittgenstein. He knew that he was usually misunderstood, but he did not think it possible to speak **about** the showing he was doing. To do so, one would have to present language as if it were an object that could be presented. To substitute such an artificial representation would be misleading, and would miss how words actually work -- not as representations, nor based on representations.” (Gendlin, E. (1997 c) 1. How to work with language on this line, where showing is not substituted by something else, which disturbs what is pointed at, is what Gendlin attempts in careful

is nothing less than breaking through the sealed position, which Cavell vividly describes as *the* philosophical one. Working on the boundary, where experience touches philosophical concepts, Gendlin therefore refashions certain starting points for philosophy. The main challenge of this task is not to expand the notion of experience by simply creating a new concept of experience. As mentioned above, he wants to demonstrate the possibility of thinking experientially, so that the tendency of being sealed off conceptually from our constant experiencing – even while philosophising about experience – can be overcome. He establishes this possibility by uncovering the constant functioning of experience in our symbols, concepts and expressions, by conceiving a model (*A Process Model, 1997*) making understandable, why experience has the complex and also expressible traits it has. To be able to think in this fashion, he establishes terms that systematically exceed the boundaries of their conceptual structure.

These terms show what they do, which means their point is not only given through definition, but by using them. This is why Gendlin emphasizes: “The process of forming must itself be the new type of approach” Gendlin, E. (1967) 291. This approach reintegrates the effect of words into the process of saying (or writing) them. His special kind of phenomenological attention to the way we use words discover a specific interaction between something Gendlin calls a felt sense and the fixed form of a word.

“We shall devise a method so that language can help us refer to our experiencing, help us create and specify aspects of it, help us convey these sharply or roughly. We can use any word in an experiential sense. We need not limit ourselves only to the world’s logical and objective definition. Of course, an experiential use of words is different from a logical and objective use. It is necessary to distinguish between the experiential and the logical use of language else we lose the precision of words when used logically and objectively. But we need not lose this, nor need we be limited by it. We can have both”. Gendlin, E. (1962), 19

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steps: “So far it has become clear that we face a dilemma: If we talk **about** Wittgenstein's showing, we exceed the bounds he set for himself, but if we do not, then we cannot make sense of his position. How to navigate between these two pitfalls is the problem. Rather than pretending to solve it, I will traverse the problem in very small increments, pausing at each juncture to examine exactly what in Wittgenstein we may have violated.” Gendlin, E. (1997 c) 2

#### 4. The puzzling connection between words and things: Wittgenstein and Cavell

Detaching the logical from the experiential use of words is what has happened at certain milestones in the history of thought, in its endeavour to secure knowledge, thereby creating as its side-effect radical options for doubt<sup>4</sup>. This detachment has resulted in a situation, in which we are not just alienated towards a “world object”, but also towards language and its functions. Both thinkers, Cavell and Gendlin, react to this alienation in specific ways.

The connection between language and scepticism becomes evident, if you consider a very obvious conception of words. If one conceives words as referring to something (like the word apple to an apple, or the word atom to an atom), the question seems obvious, if the things words refer to really *exist*. This question divides realistic theories of science from instrumentalistic, constructivistic or internalistic theories etc. If you believe that words correspond to something “real”, then inquiries arise in many regards. One can become radical in each direction: as one can have no clue, what kind of existence e.g. subatomic particles have, yet words treat them as being similar to apples, one can view words as mere instruments, constructs or convention. If we adopt this relationship to our terms, we concede complete ignorance of the referent beyond the word. If one says the opposite – everything a word refers to exists – one can go so far as to even insist on the existence of abstract universals (e.g. Platonism). In this context Wittgenstein marks a shift, by applying this widespread conception of language (of words referring to existent or non existent objects) to contexts, where this implication becomes utterly hard to bear. Cavell starts from here, playing his own melody on Wittgensteinian keys. By carving into this (mis-)conception of language, he deeply displays it’s problematic.

Cavell’s thinking often seems like (verbal) meditations, working their way in concentric circles around the point of interest. He thus meditates on the so-called private language argument, gradually leading up to the unorthodox

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<sup>4</sup> Compare Gendlins outline of this development in an Gendlin, E. (1967) 267f. and Gendlin, E.(1997 c) Chapter A 2



perspective of sceptical interpretations not being “sceptical enough”, Cavell, S. (1979) 353, concerning our possibilities of understanding each another. A sceptical interpretation of the Private Language Argument (e.g. Kripke 1982) seems to conceive Wittgenstein as demonstrating that there is no way of knowing, if what we express about ourselves is right or wrong. Because if we imply that words refer to something *existing*, we have no possibility of examining whether what I or you refer to really exist. What kind of existence would this be? How does one know the other person has pain? How do I know I have pain? What criteria do we have? Is pain behaviour criteria enough? How do I know, what the other person feels? How do I *know*, what I feel? Another problem from a different angle: as we communicate in collectively grown “language games” it seems impossible to really express privacy, or to conceive it to be really private. This very special thing I feel can only be expressed in shared language, in common containers of meanings. How then can I really say what I mean? There is no language just created for me and my specific subjective states, and if there were something like that, it would not be understandable by others, so it could not be a correct language<sup>5</sup>. With questions and reflections like that, Wittgenstein has uncovered problems based on a shared intellectual understanding language. It takes statements to refer to objects, for which certain criteria of identification exist. As a consequence our own inner states are also conceived in an object-like way, or more precisely as objects belonging to me. Following this line of thought one must explain that we therefore cannot talk about our own inner states in such a way as to make sense, because we cannot really *know* them in a sense which does justice to the conditions of knowledge. Wittgenstein’s various examples and reflection show that talk about feelings, inner states etc, make this kind of conception of language unsustainable. He thus points to our fundamental inability to understand what we actually do, when we communicate with each other.

Cavell argues for a different reading, by understanding Wittgenstein as pointing out that conventional ways of thinking about language ignore widely practised modes of communication. The point of Wittgenstein’s and Cavell’s various

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophische Untersuchungen, § 258f.,

examples and reflections seem to be, that a conception of language resp. knowledge is indeed the actual blockage of grasping something we practise daily<sup>6</sup>. Thus certain philosophical ways of thinking about how mutual comprehension and the meanings our words come about, not only fail to explain, they actually prevent us understanding the evidence<sup>7</sup>. Cavell uses metaphors like “attunement”, “being in harmony, like pitches or tone, or clocks, or weighing scales” to point to the phenomenon of a connection given in language, that exceeds explanations along the lines of “conventions of basic terms or propositions which are to provide the foundation of our agreements.” He adds: “For nothing is deeper than the fact, or the extent of agreement itself.” Cavell, S. (1979) 32

## 5. Gendlin’s approach to entangle the puzzle

Cavell stops where Gendlin begins. Drawing a connection between basic layers of interactional behavior, bodily expression, signs and words, Gendlin tries nothing less than to establish an exemplary account for the extent of agreement in language which Cavell stresses metaphorically in words like attunement. In his two main Works, *Experience and the Creation of Meaning* (1962) and *A Process Model*, Gendlin demonstrates how meanings can be conceived of as grown rather than posited, by relating organic processes and behavioural dynamics to expression and symbols<sup>8</sup>. He thereby faces the challenge of

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<sup>6</sup> “A question whether we know what pain-behaviour means? What question? Whether we are ignorant of this fact? Or have forgotten it? It is only the knowledge that a body which exhibits pain(-behaviour) is that of a live creature, a living being. Not to know this would be the same as not knowing what a body is. And yet this seems to be knowledge that Wittgenstein takes philosophy to deny (under the guise of affirming it)”. Cavell, S. (1979) 340f.

<sup>7</sup> “Appealing to criteria is not a way of explaining or proving the fact of our attunements in words (...) rather, it is an appeal we make when the attunement is threatened or lost. (...) Wittgensteinian criteria are appealed to when we “don’t know our way about”, where we are lost with respect to our words and the world they anticipate.” Cavell, S. (1979) 34.

<sup>8</sup> A short summary of the program that is in full length elaborated in “A Process Model”: “The next bodily-implied bit of human living is often something that we want to *say*. Speaking is a special case of bodily interaction. If we let “speaking” mean the speaking we do, then the subtleties of language no longer seem to float, as they do in much of current philosophy. Humans expedite food-search partly by speaking. The plant absorbs from the ground; animals interpose food-search between hunger and feeding. Behaviour is a special case of body-process: each bit of food-search is a special version of hunger implying the eventual consummation of feeding. But in animals the plant-body is elaborated; not it need for more than food. Animals need each other, groom each other, pick each other’s fleas – and not only because the fleas bite, but to comfort each other. Animal bodies imply many more bodily consummations than plants do, and we humans even more. Our interposed behaviour, no less than the animal’s, carries forward a bodily implying. The body implies what we want to do *and say*. Therefore sophisticated linguistic and philosophical details

describing the transitions from one level to the next that create an open ended complexity of interaction in human experiencing. Unfortunately, it is impossible to show this here adequately, without going beyond the scope of the article. Gendlin's *Process Model* however supports Cavell's meditations in many ways. If the latter ponders over the possibility of using a word in various contexts, without this use being arbitrary, demonstrating "what we will count as a legitimate projection is deeply controlled", Cavell, S. (1997) 183, he seems to put his finger on what Gendlin develops under the notion of a *precise, yet responsive order*, Gendlin, E. (1997 b), inherent in our use of language.

The agreement between the two thinkers seems to be especially evident at this point. Cavell's vivid descriptions of the many dimensions playing together in the learning of a word, his emphasis of the importance of fantasy and imagination, which are necessary, strengthen the same point. Cavell writes how Dickens through his words could get

"the Pecksniffs and Murdles of the world to cry over the pictures he presented of poverty and the deaths of children, but this did not get them to see their connections with these pictures. Imagination is called for, faced with the other, when I have to take the facts in, realize the significance of what is going on, make the behaviour real for myself, make a connection." Cavell, S. (1979), 352.

That words can touch deeply, that imagination is needed to understand their significance, that definitions are not enough, to know what we mean, that we can make the connection of words to our own behaviour – these phenomena are self-evident, but difficult to conceive of and to understand. They cannot be grasped by current methods. Gendlin writes accordingly:

"The intricate system is first cut away, as if language sounds fell from heaven like separate hail stones, and then that system returns as a puzzle. But the system suggests that the units formed as a system, that is to say they formed in and with their complex internal relations. But how can we think from bodily onomatopoeic expression to sound that are not iconic, and yet intricately and systematically related to the contexts in which they form?" (Gendlin, E. (1997) 175

## 6. Concepts as traps

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can make *our bodies* uncomfortable. From such a discomfort the body can project (imply...) finely shaped new steps to deal with such a situation. Such a ... can exceed and rearrange the common phrases until we can speak from it." Gendlin, E. (1997 d) 28

For a Psychologist those philosophical insights and meditations may seem utterly evident. On the other hand, it seems to be their daily business as well to get people out of their rigid modes of thinking/feeling, which block processes and even make them seem impossible. Philosophy is especially prone to fall into this trap. In its continuous struggle to grasp, the instruments of understanding and conception may be the first obstacles that have to be overcome. This may be the reason why Cavell quotes Wittgenstein as saying: “that philosophy causes us to lose ourselves and that philosophy is philosophy’s therapy”, Cavell, S. (1997) 34. Wittgenstein, Cavell and Gendlin seem to belong to this sort of philosophical species: being philosopher-therapists of philosophy (although Gendlin does not only do therapy to philosophy). Cavell expresses clearly, what the philosophical symptom of its deranged approach is: “The philosopher (...) wants to speak without the commitment speech exacts. I could express this by saying: In Philosophizing we come to be dissatisfied with answers which depend upon our meaning something by an expression, as though what we meant by it were more or less arbitrary (...) It is as though we try to get the world to provide answers in a way which is independent of our responsibility for claiming something to be so (to get God to tell us, what we must do in a way which is independent of our responsibility for choice); and we fix the world so that it can do this (...)” Cavell, S. (1979) 216.

To *re-fix* the world in such a way as to reverse the denial of the *human condition*, which has crept into a academic intellectual tradition, which has grown sceptical is no easy, linear task. How is one to make clear that something is missing in the foundations that makes what is missing unnoticable? One must re-include something which has been excluded invisibly on the basis of a certain conceptual realm – which alone is the accepted one. Again, this problem does not only apply to philosophy alone. Gendlin writes: “People use a phrase from the common store, without noticing whether it speaks from what they are living in their situations. The commonly used phrases come easily in each situation. Most people assume that one of these must be what they are experiencing (...). As one person said: “Where I grew up, whatever I may have felt, it had to be one of two or three things.” He went on to say with some intensity: “If there is another way to think, I want it.” He can have it, Gendlin adds, if he will let experience ..... play its role.” Gendlin, E. (1997 d), 20

Cavell seems to add:

„It seems to me that growing up (in modern culture? In capitalist culture?) is learning that most of what is said is only more or less meant – as if words were stuffs of fabric and we say no difference between shirts and sails and ribbons and rags.” Cavell, S. (1979), 189

What is difficult on a personal level, is even more difficult in a philosophical context. It not only needs well-rehearsed and accepted rules and practise, which we lack – but also an acknowledged relationship between different claims to know in order not to get entrapped in preset conceptual frameworks.

Wittgenstein already made apparent the necessity of shifting out of a dominant framework. The challenge, however, is that this shift has to proceed by approved and comprehensible methods which simultaneously have to be transcended. This may be the reason why Cavell, and Gendlin even more are considered to write difficult philosophy. The challenge is to create traceable ways to move from one realm of meaning to another, that until now, coexist without connections.

## 7. Connecting Meaning to Experience

Let me quote Gendlin, also referring to Wittgensteins Private Language

Argument:

“The situations we live in do not come in “handy denotation” packages, nor in any single set of already cut-out units. (...) We must assert both that this further organizing is not the pattern of the experience, *and* that it does have something to do with the way the experience is already organized. (..) We must examine and explicate situations, feelings, and language *in their relation* to each other, realizing that explicating give them a still further *relation*.” (Italics by me)  
Gendlin, E. (1973), 293

What Gendlin alludes to by emphasising a specific relation becomes clearer by drawing on another passage in an article on “Experiential Phenomenology”, where he refers to Husserl. For the latter “Expression and what is expressed (are) two layers that are congruent, one covers the other. ... One must not expect too much from this image of layers, expression is not something laid on ... rather it *affects* the intentional underlayer”. Gendlin, E. (1973) 289

Those few words point to a central motive in Gendlin’s own phenomenology and in his systematic philosophy. The *affecting* mentioned above, which

Gendlin unfolds is not easy to grasp, as it easily disappears behind the usual concepts of experience. It is not one of the known experiential constituents such as sense data affecting us, leading up to concepts, that give order to them. The expression's ability to *affect* the expressed signifies a possible relationship, to which one can only refer. It is not an entity, but first and foremost a possible reference. This reference can qualify every concept anew, even every attempt to define it. It cannot be replaced by its definition, by saying what it is. This role of expressions' affecting the expressed (and vice versa) accounts for the importance of Gendlin's word "function"<sup>9</sup>. The relation cannot be substituted by a concept, because it functions – while you formulate and afterwards again. I quote Gendlin:

“Of course, one cannot stand outside this relation in order to conduct such an examination. The relations to be examined will obtain in the very process of examining. Experiencing will play some of its roles in the process of speaking about – and with – them. This philosophy is therefore constantly reflexive. It can say what it says only as what it talks about also functions in the very saying. And since it tells how the experiential side always exceeds the concepts, this also happens in the concepts right here.” Gendlin, E., (1962), XI

If Cavell speaks about a necessary connection enabling us to know what we mean, demonstrating with Wittgenstein how theories tend to speak “outside language games” and to consider expressions in opposition to the natural forms of life, leaving words only to mean “what a good dictionary says they mean”, Cavell, S. (1979) 207, (whereby we lose the point of saying them), then it seems as if Gendlin contributes a detailed view of how the strength and vitality of *meaning* actually come about.

What are “natural forms of life” then, in which alone our expressions gain their meaning? Gendlin shows that they need not be conditions referring to an external situation. The meaning of our expression is inherent in a certain relationship that we carry with us. Not to leave out what we mean by our words, seems to be something that even can be relearned in cultures or contexts (like

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance: “Yet there are many different ways in which symbols and concrete experiencing can function together. (...) thought is really a functional relationship between symbols and experiencing” Gendlin E. (1962) 10f. “Since experiencing functions in every instance of thought, we can take any concept in any theory or discourse, and we can refer directly to the experiencing that is involved in having the concept at that given point of theory or discourse.” (Same place, 19)

the academic one), in which a language game outside of language games seems to have established itself.

By bringing to mind a key-feature in the relationship of experience and symbols which seems to have been overlooked by a wide-spread conception of language, Gendlin demonstrates the possibility of consciously becoming aware of it and of using it. This feature is best described by applying the characteristics of a *process* to the relationship of word and meaning. Putting it simply: if the word we use manages to convey the meaning we want to convey, something happens. This happening can be explicated in different ways: something has been completed, a situation has changed (in ourselves or between us and someone else), or, using Gendlin's classical notion, the *implicit* has been *carried forward*. The relation between what we mean to express and what we express is not static, but procedural. This experiential procedure precisely controls our words, lets us reshape them, look for a different expression, rewrite passages of articles several times, look for a theory, which is not yet there. This implies however:

“The preconceptual is not constituted of actual defined existent contents or meanings.(...) All these meanings “exist” in a sense, but it is not the sense of marbles in a bag. These “implicit” meanings are not complete and formed (...). When they become “explicit”, they become different from what they were, when they are “implicit” Gendlin, E. (1962), 28.

The last sentence has the potential to unsettle the mentioned set up of the private language. If what we express is not to be conceived like “complete” and “formed” marbles in a bag, then expression of feelings is not to be questioned on the representational basis of whether the expression adequately represents what is expressed<sup>10</sup>. If expression implies a change, its relevance is not to be made out in terms of an identity-relation between symbols and contents<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Then the question, whether the word meets what it wanted to convey cannot be answered through categories going between the word and the meaning, trying to fix possible forms of likeness. This absurdity Wittgenstein also wanted to get at, yet did not account for the reason of this absurdity: “For how can I go so far as to try to use language to get between pain and its expression” (Philosophical Investigations, § 245). Cavell comments to this: “This question is, apparently, an attempt on Wittgenstein's part to express a frame of mind in which one feels that in order to insure the connection between a sensation and its name one has to get to the sensation apart from its expression, get past the merely outward expression, which blocks our vision as it were.” Cavell, S. (1979) 341

<sup>11</sup> “We cannot present language in terms of the artificial scheme of signifying, symbolizing, reference, denotation, an external relation between words and what the “stand for”. We cannot present language as

Expressing feeling, meaning or the sense we want to convey then has a different purpose and scope altogether. Something is changed, something “implicit” has become explicit, something has *occurred* by saying or symbolizing it<sup>12</sup>. This ultimately also accounts for being responsible for the conveyance of meaning, a point Cavell stresses implicitly. The fact that expressing meaning changes something makes therapy effective, constitutes the effect of poetry and the quality of progress of theories. This fact accounts for the big difference between a felicitous or unsuccessful communication. Expressing meaning changes something which implies that words affect experience and experience affects the words. Therefore awareness of their mutual completing and developing relationship can lead to sensitive ways of expressing oneself and communicating with others. *Both* thinkers refer to poetry to express this empowerment of language, making us *capable* of being responsible for the meaning we create<sup>13</sup>. I quote Cavell:

“If learning a first language is thought of as the child’s acquiring of it, then poetry can be thought of as the adult’s acquiring of it, as coming into possession of his or her own language, acquire full citizenship.” Cavell, S. (1997) 189.

“Full citizenship” according to Cavell means, that one can speak for others as well as for oneself without subordinating oneself to conventionality at the expense of individual meaning. This implies the possibility of finding one’s own voice in the world and not – as the sceptical framework would demand – speaking only according to defined patterns, unconnected to our situation, as our situation seems unconnected to the “world object”. An analogous competence belongs to that kind of person Gendlin calls a “focuser”<sup>14</sup>. He too takes on the challenge of conveying the intricacy of his personal point of view,

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something before us, even though words do bring patterns and pictures. But we can let how language works and moves tell us about how language works and moves.” (Eugene Gendlin; *Language Beyond Postmodernism*, 21).

<sup>12</sup> “When the right phrases come, they don’t copy the blank. A set of words look different – it cannot be the copy of a blank. When we say that the right phrases “*were implied*”, we tell about a special relation, not a correspondence. It is the relation of which I said that we notice its absence keenly, when we try to tell ourselves a nice story about a bad event. We saw this relation also when I said that rephrasing a point *carries* the point *forward* so that we discover more of what is “was”. It happens also when a special step of thought excites us because it has the carrying-forward relation to the ..... at the edge of our thinking” (Eugene Gendlin; *Language Beyond Postmodernism*, 22f.)

<sup>13</sup> See Gendlin’s “A story from poetry”, in Gendlin, E. (1997 d).

<sup>14</sup> Focusing is a practise Gendlin developed from his philosophy, which helps to become aware of the highly responsive relationship between experiential and symbolic levels, see Eugene Gendlin (1982) “*Focusing*”, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group; 1982.



that is inseparably connected with his environment, enabling him to be personal and general at the same time. This position is more subtle and precise than any definition and preformed pattern would allow it to be. Therefore it seems possible to conclude that there is an apparent correlation between the way we conceive of our relation to the world and the way we understand our language. As if the manner in which we connect ourselves to the world in thought has an effect on the way we conceive of our words and their possibilities. The political impact of the respective approaches – on first sight merely a theoretical problem of philosophy – has hopefully become more obvious.

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