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Abstract Title:
On being naturally modern

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The phrase *naturally modern* may strike many as an odd construction, even an oxymoron, unnaturalness being so often perceived as a chief characteristic of the modern attitude or condition. Henry Miller gives us a clear picture of the perplexities this form of expression is prone to raise, when in the first of his *Hamlet Letters* he says:

Last night, before going to sleep, I was browsing through a book by Denis Saurat, called *Modernes*, wherein I came across the following: (...) "Il faudrait un écrivain qui, étant naturellement moderne, puisse oublier qu'il est moderne et nous présenter le tableau du monde sans avoir à insister sur cet aspect, tant il lui serait naturel de voir le monde ainsi".

What strikes me as being silly in the foregoing, and yet provocative, arresting, significant, is the little parenthetical phrase – "being naturally modern". (...) To be naturally modern is to be a natural monster, a Hamlet raised to the nth degree. (...) When this monster appears, the modern world will lose its constraints and blow out its brains...

This paper responds to the provocative quality in the phrase *naturally modern*, seeking to comprehend the tensions that it triggers and that are voiced in the passage quoted above, where the possibility of modern naturalness (natural modernity?) appears alternatively as something silly and significant, threatening and auspicious, precluded and expected. The issue is addressed in the light of Stanley Cavell's reflections on what *natural* is or might be, notably the thoughts he develops in "Natural and Conventional", the fifth chapter of his *Claim of Reason*. Against the general background of the author's discussion of modernity and modernism, I explore possible resonances between the disquieting phrase in focus here and another equally provocative one, *anthropological necessity*, put forward by Cavell in his highly distinctive way of inheriting Wittgenstein's legacy – a crucial aspect of which is in this context his reassessment of traditional oppositions between necessary and contingent, natural and normal. Consequences of the proposed articulation are explored with special regard to the place of skepticism within the economy of post-essentialist philosophical and literary enterprises.