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Abstract Title:
Skepticism and Carver's Literary Minimalism

Abstract:

The aim of my paper is to address Stanley Cavell's view on the relationship between philosophy and literature. I will present a philosophical reading of Raymond Carver's story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (1982). It can be read as an invitation to reflect on and respond to the condition that Cavell at numerous junctures, e.g. in his essays on Shakespeare and skepticism, has described in terms of skepticism. The paper will shed light on the import and relevance of Cavell's thinking on this topic—both to literature and our lives.

Carver's story depicts our urge to generalize and to entertain the feeling that our understanding of ordinary phenomena, such as love, is distorted and imperfect. It could be read as enacting the drama of human finitude, and furthermore of how this condition is liable to arouse in us a feeling of distance from the world and other people. Our human condition, i.e. our finitude, our dependence on a historical given language, the historicity of our being, is often interpreted as a severe limitation. Our finitude is often (especially in philosophical contexts) taken to prevent us from knowledge of our selves, others and the world. Carver's story makes vivid, in an emotional register, how philosophy and philosophical problems often get started, i.e. how our personal desires and stories inhere in our philosophical struggles—and the way we often wind up creating philosophical problems for ourselves. This is a topic that has occupied Cavell for a long time.