

The Concept of America

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Sometimes people call me an idealist. Well, that is the way I know I am an American. America is the only idealistic nation in the world.

Woodrow Wilson, Address at Sioux Falls,
8 Sept. 1919

There is nothing the matter with Americans except their ideals. The real American is all right; it is the ideal American who is all wrong.

G. K. Chesterton, "The American Ideal"

The business of America is business.

Calvin Coolidge, Speech to the Society of
American Newspaper Editors, Jan. 17, 1935

I am willing to love all mankind, *except an American.*

Samuel Johnson, quoted by James Boswell
in *The Life of Johnson*

Your American eagle is very well. Protect it here and abroad. But beware of the American peacock.

R. W. Emerson, "American Nationality"

Is there, as President Wilson thought, an internal relation between the concept of America and a certain ideal? Or is it that, as Chesterton thought, there is nothing the matter with Americans except their ideals?¹ Or does America stripped of its ideals amount to nothing more than President Coolidge's vision of it? And, if so, ought one then to sympathize with Dr. Johnson's view of the matter? Or is there a

distinction to be drawn, as Emerson thought, between the ideal and its debasement by those who most loudly proclaim it?

As these quotations evidence, the topic of America—what it stands for, what it is, and what it should be—excites and aggrieves both those who make their home in America and those who do not. Many of the former (whose visions of America differ as widely as do those of President Wilson and President Coolidge) worry about what sort of home America is or ought to be; and some of the latter (whose views about real Americans differ as widely as do those of Mr. Chesterton and Dr. Johnson) worry about the way Americans worry about this. Some who do not make their home in America are drawn to reflect on the topic not out of distrust or disdain for America's idealism, but out of their own idealism—and often because they, too, wonder what sort of home America, at its best, might be able to make. The reason that there is an America at all is because there have been people of this last sort. Many of these are drawn to wonder about America precisely because they do not (or are made not to) feel at home where they live and imagine America as a place where things might be otherwise. None of the quotations here is from such a person—a prospective immigrant.

Karl Rossman, the hero of Franz Kafka's novel *Amerika*, is such a person. The novel begins as follows:

As the seventeen-year-old Karl Rossmann . . . stood on the liner slowly entering the harbor of New York, a sudden burst of sunshine seemed to illumine the Statue of Liberty, so that he saw it in a new light, although he had sighted it long before. The arm with the sword rose up as if newly stretched aloft, and all around the figure blew the free winds of heaven.²

No other Kafka narrative begins with—or is as suffused with—such a note of hope. What does Karl Rossman hope to find in *Amerika*? What is this possibility that can suffuse even a Kafka narrative with hope? The beginning of the novel provides some hints. But this is still a novel by Franz Kafka and so questions about the soundness of the hope linger. The scene opens with Karl seeing something he had sighted long before and had been seeking to reach for even longer—a statue named Liberty—only now suddenly seeing it in a new light, as if for the first time. Does the sudden burst of sunshine that seems to illumine the countenance of Liberty provide him with a clear or a distorted view of her features? Is the wind that blows around Liberty free? Does the arm with the sword rise up as if newly stretched aloft or will it, upon closer examination, prove overwrought and awkwardly frozen in time? Does or can or should America measure up to the hopes of those who seek the place Karl Rossman seeks in seeking *Amerika*?

A Peculiar Concept

‘AMERICA’ always means two things:
a country, geographically, the USA,
and an idea of that country, the ideal that goes with it.
“American Dream,” then, is:
a dream OF a country

IN a different country,
 that is located where the dream takes place . . .
 'I want to be in America', the Jets sing
 in that famous song from *West Side Story*.
 They are in America already,
 and yet still wanting to get there . . .³

Kierkegaard draws a helpful distinction between *objective* and *subjective* categories. A short and simple way of trying to distinguish the concepts that belong to the former from those that belong to the latter category would be just to say that objective concepts characterize the different kinds of ways in which an *object* can be, whereas subjective concepts characterize the different kinds of ways in which a *subject* or a *person* can be. But this will not quite do: there are many concepts that can be predicated equally of objects and persons—being six feet tall, weighing two hundred pounds, being in a certain location, and so on. So our initial formulation stands in need of some qualification along the following lines: objective concepts characterize the different kinds of ways in which objects qua objects can be, whereas subjective concepts characterize the different kinds of ways in which subjects qua subjects can be. (This allows us to say that being six feet tall, weighing two hundred pounds, being in a certain location, etc., are not characterizations of subjects qua subjects, but rather characterizations of them qua objects.) Or, as Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms prefer to say: subjective concepts characterize a subject or person *qua existing individual*.⁴ Both objective and subjective concepts can be predicated of human beings: a given individual has, say, blue eyes, is six feet tall, weighs two hundred pounds, and is also, say, a husband, a Christian, a philosopher. But the former concepts hold of the person regardless of whether or not he would predicate them of himself; the latter concepts hold of an individual (not merely if he is indeed prepared to predicate them of himself, but) only to the extent that his daily existence is beholden to the ethical or religious demands such concepts entail—to the extent that his life is shaped by these demands.⁵ These latter concepts, Kierkegaard argues, if they are properly understood as subjective concepts—that is, as properly subjective characterizations of the lives of existing individuals—must be clearly distinguished from certain merely objective concepts which these same words ('husband', 'Christian', 'philosopher') might also be taken to denote.

The word 'husband', inflected subjectively, signifies participation in a certain sort of ethical relationship between two individuals pledged to devote their lives to one another; inflected objectively, it signifies a certain juridical status. A husband, in the latter sense, is something one either is or is not (depending upon whether one's papers are in order); a husband, in the former sense, is someone (Kierkegaard says) one *becomes*—it presupposes involvement in an existential task that must be reaffirmed and renewed every day of one's married life. (If a wife says to her husband "This isn't a marriage!" he does not rebut her charge by producing their marriage certificate.) The word 'Christian', inflected subjectively, signifies an involvement in a religious way of life; inflected merely objectively, it signifies certain straightforwardly observable external facts about a person's behavior (e.g., that he goes to church on Sundays, has his children baptized, puts money in the

collection box, etc.). Understood the latter way ‘a Christian’ is something one either is or is not.⁶ Understood subjectively, ‘a Christian’ is someone (Kierkegaard says) one *becomes*—it presupposes the undertaking of an existential task that must be reaffirmed and renewed every moment of one’s existence.⁷ (If Kierkegaard says “While Christendom flourishes Christianity gradually withers away!” someone does not rebut his charge by pointing out how full the churches are on Sundays.)

Here is a characteristic passage in which one of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, offers a comparatively straightforward example of a conflation of subjective and objective categories:

Once it was at the risk of his life that a man dared to profess himself a Christian; now it is to make oneself suspect to venture to doubt that one is a Christian. . . . [I]f a man were to say quite simply and unassumingly, that he was concerned for himself, lest perhaps he had no right to call himself a Christian, he would indeed not suffer persecution or be put to death, but he would be smothered in angry glances, and people would say: “How tiresome to make such a fuss about nothing at all; why can’t he behave like the rest of us, who are all Christians?” . . . And if he happened to be married, his wife would say to him: “Dear husband of mine, how can you get such notions into your head? How can you doubt that you are a Christian? Are you not a Dane, and does not geography say that the Lutheran form of the Christian religion is the ruling religion in Denmark? For you are surely not a Jew, nor are you a Moham-
medan; what then can you be if not a Christian?”⁸

The term ‘Christendom’ is Kierkegaard’s name for such a state of affairs—one in which everyone already thinks he or she is a Christian and thus no one takes the trouble any longer to become one.

Now what about the concept *American*? Should we classify it as objective or subjective? Should it be grouped together with *Dane* or with *Christian*? Well, surely, one can be an American in the same sense that one can be a Dane. Thus understood, an American is something one either is or is not (depending upon whether one’s papers are in order, or upon other equally objective facts about, say, one’s birth, upbringing, or cultural heritage.) But “America”⁹ is also the name of a certain moral and political ideal and thus “to be an American” can also signify a commitment to that ideal,¹⁰ and thus an existential task, a way of life, and even a kind of person that one must struggle—and that one can fail—to become. If we are to follow Kierkegaard’s lead, then we should seek clearly to distinguish between the objective concept of being an American and the subjective one. This will lead us to the conclusion that one can be an American in the objective sense while failing to be one in the subjective sense. We could then further follow Kierkegaard’s lead and introduce the concept *Americadom* to signify a state of affairs in which such the merely objective inflection of the concept has gained ascendancy—a state of affairs in which, because almost everyone in America already knows that he is an American, hardly anyone any longer takes the trouble to become one.

Yet this fails to do justice to the peculiar complexity of the concept of America. As a first step toward appreciating the peculiarity of this concept, it helps to notice that it involves what Kierkegaard seems to regard as an impossible combination of categories: it combines some of the logical features of an objective concept with

some of those of a subjective concept.¹¹ At one and the same time, ‘America’ names a certain place at a certain time with a certain history *and* signifies a certain dream of what might happen in that place if certain moral and political ideals could be realized.¹² To be an American can mean, at one and the same time, to be someone who happens to be a citizen of one particular nation (rather than another) *and* to be committed to a moral and political project whose continuation cannot be guaranteed simply through the continued existence of that nation (as merely one among others).¹³

The aforementioned peculiarity of the concept of America notwithstanding, the following feature of Kierkegaard’s analysis remains pertinent: an expression retains its ethical (or religious) significance only if it continues to be predicated of individuals whose lives reflect a commitment to the exigencies of thought and action it entails; if not—if it comes to be predicated solely of individuals whose lives in no way bear the stamp of such exigencies—it will be drained of its former significance. In the latter case, the expression may continue to circulate in daily use and retain an aura of ethical significance, but it will no longer have its original import.¹⁴ It may, with time, even shed that aura and acquire some other perfectly coherent, utterly non-ethical—descriptive or juridical or institutional—meaning. As a husband can remain “married” in the eyes of the law, even if he has made a mockery of his vows, so, too, Americans can retain their juridical status as “American citizens” and a place named ‘America’ will continue to stand as one nation alongside others, even if America makes a mockery of the words that figure in its founding pledges to itself—the pledges that constitute the original ground of its existence.

Once one has distinguished between objective and subjective sorts of concepts, it becomes possible (as Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms frequently do) to say some seemingly paradoxical things that can come to be understood to be not merely true, but platitudinous—to have the status of *categorical* (or as later Wittgenstein prefers to put it: *grammatical*) truths. Not just things like “A ‘husband’ may not be married,” or “There may be no Christians in Christendom”; but also things like these:

Christianity is not plausible.

Religion only conquers without force.¹⁵

The principle that the existing subjective thinker is constantly occupied in striving, does not mean that he has, in the finite sense, a goal toward which he strives, and that he would be finished when he reached this goal.¹⁶

A human being can forget to exist.¹⁷

The substitution of the word ‘America’ for the word ‘Christianity’ in the first, for ‘religion’ in the second, for ‘existing thinker’ in the third, and for ‘human being’ in the fourth of these sentences would yield four sentences very much like ones scattered throughout Stanley Cavell’s writings about America. But what could it mean to say such things in characterization or criticism of something as seemingly

palpable, enduring, and powerful as America? How could *America* forget to exist? How tiresome of this fellow Cavell to make such a fuss about nothing at all!

Parisian Brilliance and American Diffidence

I have attempted more and more systematically to find a non-site, or a non-philosophical site, from which to question philosophy. But the search for a non-philosophical site does not bespeak an anti-philosophical attitude. My central question is: from what site or non-site can philosophy as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner? Such a non-site or alterity would be radically irreducible to philosophy. But the problem is that such a non-site cannot be defined or situated by means of philosophical language.¹⁸

Walden has a reasonably tight bottom at a not unreasonable, though at an unusual, depth. I fathomed it easily with a cod-line and a stone weighing about a pound and a half, and could tell accurately when the stone left the bottom, by having to pull so much harder before the water got underneath to help me. This is a remarkable depth for so small an area, yet not one inch of it can be spared by the imagination. What if all ponds were shallow? Would it not react on the minds of men?¹⁹

Much French philosophy has a distinctively *French* sound. And there is nothing in that sound that precludes it from sounding like philosophy. On the contrary, to the ears of many today—and not only of those who live in Paris—it *is* the sound of philosophy. If one comes across a passage from the writings of a French philosopher, such as the passage from Jacques Derrida quoted here—regardless of whether one likes its sound (or of whether one takes oneself to understand what it says, or of whether one takes oneself to agree with what one thus understands)—for better or worse, one knows this much about it right off: this stuff is (or is, at least, trying to sound like) *philosophy*.

Derrida is far from alone among philosophers, at least since Kant, in thinking that a radical questioning of philosophy is to be achieved only from a site that is, in some sense, “outside” (what we presently understand to be) philosophy—a site that allows one, without turning one’s back on philosophy, to confront it on an altogether new ground. And Derrida (and, again, not only Derrida) appreciates the difficulty of finding or arranging for such a site. For a radical questioning of philosophy would seem to require a radically new kind of philosophical discourse—one conducted in altogether different cadences from any in which philosophy has hitherto been attempted. And the problem is that nowadays—especially in France—the call for such a discourse tends to result simply in the production of further sentences whose sound is indistinguishable from that characteristic of business as usual in French philosophy. (Sentences that sound like this: “Such a non-site or alterity would be radically irreducible to philosophy; but the problem is that such a non-site cannot be defined or situated by means of philosophical language.”) What else could a call for a different philosophical discourse sound like? Will it not of necessity itself sound like philosophy? And if it no longer sounded like (what we know as) philosophy, how would we be able to recognize it as such?

The sound of much of the language in Thoreau’s *Walden* is apt to strike a reader—at least on a first encounter—as not particularly philosophical at all, as

not even *trying* to be philosophy. Admittedly, the text does have moments when it seems to want to veer toward (something recognizable as) philosophy. But mostly, on a first listen, it can seem to be nattering on about how much certain items cost, how to live in the woods, hoe beans, or measure the depth of a pond. Indeed, the writing's intermittent gestures in the direction of something that has the aspect of philosophy (such as the concluding lines in the quotation) may even strike a reader, at first blush, as puzzling digressions from its primary concerns. Not all of the remarks in *Walden* are of this sort, of course. Some of them may even immediately strike one as sage. ("Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes."²⁰) And some of them may immediately strike one as clever. ("A man sits as many risks as he runs."²¹) The tone may occasionally even remind one of Socrates ("A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone."²²) A sentence or two here or there may even strike one as the sort of thing that might actually have been said by Socrates. ("If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than myself; and my shortcomings and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement."²³) But the resulting whole, made up of these and other remarks, is not apt immediately to strike one as in serious competition with the enterprises of a Kant or a Hegel or a Derrida. If one comes across a quotation from Thoreau, such as the one paired with the passage from Derrida above—regardless of whether one likes the sound of such writing (or of whether one takes oneself to understand what it says, or, if so, whether one takes oneself to agree with what one thus understands)—the following two features of the prose will be hard to gainsay: it has a distinctively American sound, and its sound is not that of European philosophy. Could the finding or founding of a site from which to question the inheritance of European philosophy possibly sound like *this*? How does one measure the depth of *Walden*?

In his book *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell asks: "Has America expressed itself philosophically?"²⁴ Some years ago I participated in a conference in France on American philosophy whose title sought to allude to this question of Cavell's. The conference was titled "*Exist-il une philosophie américaine?*" Many of the French participants understood the question to be asking whether there had been individuals who managed to be genuinely original philosophers even though, at least for the better part of their lives, they grew up in and were educated in America. The French participants at the conference each wanted to answer the question resoundingly in the affirmative; and each did so by giving a paper explaining why he or she admired the work of some particular American philosopher or philosophers—Emerson, Thoreau, Peirce, James, Dewey, Quine, or, notably (in the case of several of the French participants), Cavell. Being French, many of them were equally concerned to make clear why they vehemently opposed some alternative candidate for the title "important American philosopher"—always one, of course, that one or another of their French colleagues were concurrently concerned to champion. (Among the candidates that were particularly contested in this regard were Emerson, Thoreau, Rorty, and Cavell.) I take it that Cavell himself (in asking his question that provided the conference with its title) meant to be asking something that went unaddressed in these displays of generosity and enmity—that is, in efforts to demonstrate or deny that there had indeed been this or that individual who was

both undeniably American and who could qualify as a first-rate philosopher even when judged by the highest European standards.

Cavell's question speaks rather to an internal relation between philosophy and the broader cultural context within which the activity of philosophizing takes place—an internal relation between America and those individuals who happen to be both Americans and philosophers. One cannot hear Cavell's question until one recognizes that it turns upon a prior claim that philosophy necessarily exists on a different cultural basis in America than in, say, France—that a different economy of exchange prevails between the culture at large and those who attempt to speak philosophically in it—and this affects what it can mean for a philosopher to attempt to speak philosophically *to* (or *for*) his culture. In order to become clear why this might be thought to be so, it will help first to review some facts—facts about America and facts about, say, France.

If you ask your average intellectually inclined French citizen if he has ever read any Descartes or Pascal or Rousseau, he will almost certainly tell you that he has (and in most cases he will be telling you the truth). To be a French intellectual and to be simply unacquainted with the classics of French thought and to be happy to admit that one is thus unacquainted is to be a very unusual person indeed. There is no American philosopher ignorant of whose work could strike a measure of fear or embarrassment in the soul of an American man or woman of letters at all comparable to what it would mean for a French intellectual to have never read a word of Descartes. If you attempt to hit upon the name of an American philosopher that almost every educated American has read, you will seek in vain. Insofar as you can find a philosopher that most educated Americans have read, it will not be an American—most likely, it would be Plato or Descartes or Hume or Nietzsche. There is nothing you could call “American philosophy” which plays a role in the formation of an American intellectual identity that parallels the role that French philosophy plays in French culture. A highly literate American intellectual may well have read a great many of the classics of English, French, and German philosophy without necessarily having any literacy in something you might call “American philosophy.” He may, of course, have also read some pages of William James or John Dewey, but then again he may not have.

To be a French intellectual means in the first instance to have a certain literacy in certain landmark moments of the history of *French* thought. To be an intellectual in the United States means in the first instance to have a certain literacy in certain landmark moments in the history of *European* thought. To be an intellectual in France means, above all, learning how to be a *French* intellectual. The intellectual in America is not haunted by the fear that he might be failing to be an *American* intellectual; more often he is haunted by the fear that he might be succeeding in being just that—and hence perhaps someone a European might look upon as a philistine.²⁵ (It generally does not occur to such an American that this is itself a recipe for philistinism.²⁶) Even if someone were somehow to fall under the illusion that becoming an intellectual in America meant, above all, learning somehow how to become an *American* intellectual, there would be few American landmarks by means of which he or she could confidently navigate his or her way toward such an identity.

These facts have a significance that extends well beyond philosophy. There exists no single article of American letters of any sort (say, a novel or an essay) that most Americans share as a common intellectual inheritance in the way that the work of a Descartes or a Rousseau is a shared possession in France.²⁷ Indeed, it is not an uncommon event in the history of American letters for Americans to become excited about some domestic product (say, the stories of Edgar Allan Poe or the novels of Ernest Hemingway) because a Frenchman (a Baudelaire or a Sartre) told them it is the work of a great writer. To the extent that there is some single object of American culture that a group of randomly selected educated Americans will have in common as a shared American cultural reference point, it will, as likely as not be a classic Hollywood movie. This is not to deny that many Americans participate in a shared fantasy of a common literary culture consisting of a range of widely cherished documents—to cite a few candidates: *The Constitution of the United States of America*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Moby Dick*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—but these tend to be cherished at a distance. How many Americans have really read, let alone retained, the words and thoughts contained therein? (Most are at least as likely to remember the details of a TV show or movie or cartoon either about or loosely based on and bearing the title of the text in question.) Regardless of how much significance is attached to the fact of their existence, the bulk of the prose in these documents does not presently circulate in America as shared possessions of the citizenry. With the exception of a few inaudibly famous phrases, there are within American cultural circles no documents of American writing to which one can safely allude with the same confidence in the possibility of shared intimacy that a judicious allusion to a line or scene from a widely cherished Hollywood movie—to cite a few candidates: *The Wizard of Oz*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Casablanca*, or *Dr. Strangelove*—is likely to be able to achieve. If Dorothy were to find herself suddenly transported to a region of America where allusions to literary or philosophical texts were able to forge this sort of intimacy, she would have reason to exclaim: “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore!”²⁸

The facts reviewed here must be kept in perspective if one wishes to understand any of the following: what Cavell means to be asking with his question “Has America expressed itself philosophically?” what could count for him as an answer to it (and why the accomplishments of a thinker such as Quine, however great they may be, cannot bear on it), why this leads him to wonder at the chronically American tendency to undervalue the work of figures such as Emerson and Thoreau as philosophers (and, in particular, to ignore their role in founding a distinctively American moment in philosophy), and why he thinks this is a function of a chronic American tendency to overpraise and undervalue any distinctively American cultural achievement (most tellingly, he thinks, the high-water marks of the golden age of Hollywood²⁹).

Some of my French colleagues at the conference on American philosophy assumed that Cavell’s interest in Emerson and Thoreau was that of someone who wishes to revive interest in two previously famous but now neglected American philosophers. To think this is to miss the salience of the following two facts for Cavell: (1) Emerson and Thoreau have not fallen out of view; they continue to be

celebrated as important American writers of some kind; but (2) precisely on the condition that the title of *philosopher* be withheld from them—on the condition, that is, that one neither take seriously their claim to both inherit and challenge a prior tradition of European philosophy (most especially the tradition they themselves looked back upon as that of German Transcendentalism), nor take seriously their claim to have thus opened up new possibilities for philosophy, let alone their claim that these new possibilities rested on and arose out of possibilities for cultural and intellectual newness possible only in a New World. One way of taking the measure of the degree to which Emerson, in particular, is not credited with having what it takes to be a philosopher is to notice how difficult it is for even Emerson's American admirers seriously to credit Nietzsche's claim to have been profoundly influenced by him,³⁰ let alone his assessment of him as the greatest philosopher of their (i.e., the nineteenth) century.³¹

Part of Cavell's interest in drawing attention to this phenomenon is in order to sharpen the following question: What, within the history of American thought, is America prepared to count as an instance of an American difference in philosophy—an instance of a mode of thought that is both philosophy and distinctively American? Perhaps the answer will be: Nothing. But then Cavell wants to know: Why? Is it because any American candidate that openly bears the stamp of its Americanness is somehow too American to count as an uncluttered instance of serious philosophy? So that to do philosophy just is to participate in and therefore to accommodate oneself to a European tradition?³² So that to speak with a voice that is recognizably philosophical is of necessity to speak with a European accent? Or is it because America is, above all, the name of a democracy and a business that is as inherently practical as democracy can have at best only an incidental bearing on how an enterprise as inherently theoretical as philosophy ought to be conducted? If either of these is our conclusion, then it is one which rests on assumptions—assumptions Cavell wishes to examine—about what can count as an inheritance of philosophy and about the possibilities of thought available to someone who does not wish to suppress the American accent in his voice. It is a further claim of Cavell's that a reception of the thought of Emerson and Thoreau depends upon an appreciation of the ways in which they sought to contest such assumptions—so that the reception of their thought requires not only a simultaneous rethinking of what philosophy, America, and Europe each are, but a rethinking of each in the light of the other two.

On this ambitious conception of what the establishment of a genuinely "American philosophy" is to achieve, there will turn out to be a significant internal relation between the concepts *philosophy* and *America*: a relation between what we are able to recognize as philosophy (and whether it presently rests on an impoverished idea of philosophy) and what we are able to recognize as cosmopolitan (and whether it presently rests on an impoverished idea of the cosmopolitan—one which is itself a form of provincialism—and recognizable as such only from the vantage point afforded by a non-European perspective).³³ An American philosophy is thus to provide a new perspective on our old ways of thinking and living—a perspective which is to enable our European conceptions of the philosophical and the cosmopolitan to come into focus together as somewhat *unphilosophical* (in taking a cer-

tain dispensation of philosophy to be philosophy itself) and somewhat *provincial* (in taking the aspiration to an American culture to be a quest for a secondhand version of European culture).

In the midst of a discussion of J. L. Austin, Cavell indulges in the following offhand sketch of the difference between the French and the American intellectual:

Austin was committed to the manners, even the mannerisms, of an English professor the way a French intellectual is committed to seeming brilliant. It is the level at which an American thinker or artist is likely to play dumb, I mean undertake to seem like a hick, uncultivated. These are all characters in which authority is assumed, variations I suppose of the thinker's use—as unmasked by Nietzsche—of the character of the sage.³⁴

Aristotle's elucidation of the concept of the sage takes the form of a question we are to ask ourselves: "What more accurate standard or measure of good things do we have than the Sage?"³⁵ If it is constitutive of what it is to be a French intellectual that one is committed to seeming brilliant, then it is bound to be difficult for such an intellectual to recognize someone who is undertaking to appear lacking in cultivation as the personification of a sage (in Aristotle's weighty sense of the term), and it will be harder still for him to credit the cultivation of such an appearance as itself a guise through which intellectual authority is asserted—as itself a guise of the Sage.

This is not to deny that many American intellectuals are committed to seeming brilliant. (All that proves is that many Americans seek to emulate a Parisian model of what it is to be an intellectual. Some of them, given the choice, would even prefer to live in Paris—or, at least, to go there when they die.³⁶) Nor is it to claim that those American intellectuals who do not seek to emulate such a model are therefore eager to mount a critique of European intellectual life. It is to claim only that many American authors and artists and thinkers find the Parisian model cannot be theirs. A European will not understand the intellectual manners of a Henry David Thoreau or Mark Twain or William Faulkner or Robert Frost or Howard Hawks if he or she fails to appreciate what underlies their apparently intellectually uncultivated postures—as thrifty woodsman or riverboat captain or Southern gentleman or New England farmer or uncouth cowboy—if he or she fails to appreciate how these modes of cultivating an apparent lack of (European) cultivation are themselves forms through which the American artist or author expresses his refusal of an alien standard or measure of good things and seeks to fashion his own native standard or measure.

These differences between the French and American scenes are themselves a function of a difference in their respective relations to history—and, in particular, to the accomplished edifice of European culture. The French philosopher or author or artist can take that accomplishment for granted and build on it without threat to his or her identity. The challenge for the French intellectual lies in finding or clearing room for something new to do within the confines of that edifice. This is not the challenge the American philosopher or author or artist qua American feels him- or herself to face. Mark Twain narrates the adventures of a Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn in a voice that betrays little hint of interest in or familiarity with the

accomplished edifice of European literature. The apparent naturalness of that literary voice—its apparent innocence of European cultivation—is an integral and easily overlooked aspect of its achievement. Emerson and Thoreau seek to fashion a mode of philosophical writing that actively refuses to lay claim to the accomplished edifice of European philosophy, as if philosophy’s history could be made to begin again—as if “no time had elapsed [since] the oldest . . . philosopher . . . [first] raised a corner of the veil.”³⁷ The American philosopher or author or artist often seems to proceed thus, as if history could be made to begin anew—as if the accomplishments of European culture could constitute only a dangerous temptation for an American, at all costs to be resisted—as if those accomplishments could only become his, for the taking and making his own, at the cost of placing his own identity in pawn.

Among the opening remarks in an address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in 1837, Emerson famously declares the following hope:

Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests . . . In this hope I accept the topic which not only usage but the nature of our association seem to prescribe to this day,—the AMERICAN SCHOLAR.³⁸

Ever since at least this address bearing the title, and issuing its call for, *The American Scholar*, it has been a central ambition of American thinking and writing and art to call forth a form of culture in which American intellectuals—philosophers or authors or artists—can eschew European models—of philosophy or authorship or art—in a manner that will enable them finally to be able to feel at home in their homeland qua philosophers or authors or artists (as they imagine their European counterparts are able to feel at home in their respective cultures). The realization of such an ambition is supposed to require a reciprocal change on the part of American thinking and writing and art and on the part of the homeland itself; and the accomplished fact of such reciprocal change is an integral part of what it means, for Emerson, for the American scholar finally to have come into existence. But to say that American thinking and writing and art have been fueled by such an ambition is not to say that such a vision of America has ever yet been realized—that the American philosopher or author or artist has ever yet been able to feel him- or herself permanently or comfortably at home in America.³⁹

This is not to deny what one shrewd native observer of the American scene has called *the greatest single fact about our modern American writing*—namely, America’s writers’ (and thinkers’ and artists’) “absorption in every last detail of their American world together with their deep and subtle alienation from it.”⁴⁰ What is at issue here is neither the familiar European intellectuals’ loudly proclaimed revulsion at and revolt from the diurnal and everyday (familiar since at least Baudelaire) nor the equally familiar European intellectuals’ loudly proclaimed longing to be reconciled with and incorporated harmoniously into the rhythms of an already available mode of diurnal and everyday life (familiar since at least Tolstoy). An attentive absorption in the details of an American life that engulfs the author combined with a quiet yet ineradicable alienation from the very life which so absorbs

and fascinates him remains a hallmark of great American writing throughout the generations, from that of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville to that of Raymond Carver and Don DeLillo.

This characteristically American (“deep and subtle”) form of cultural alienation should not be confused with a far less deep and subtle form of cultural alienation that is equally characteristically American—an alienation that is cultivated and displayed as a badge of honor by a different constituency of American intellectuals⁴¹—namely, those whose understanding of their identity as “intellectuals” depends upon a principled disinterest in any project of attentive absorption in the details of their American life. Such “American” intellectuals—especially those most preoccupied with what it means to be an intellectual, and most especially those in the thrall of the Parisian model of what it is to be one—will themselves generally never be able see past the rough-hewn manners of a Thoreau or Faulkner or Frost or Hawks to the exquisite cultivation shining through that surface, to the extraordinary rigor of their undertakings (to reinvent philosophy or poetry or the novel or the cinema). But whereas a Parisian intellectual can without threat to herself permit herself to be fascinated by the exotic manners of such an American literary woodsman or cowboy (and thereby discover in them a new and usable measure of the good, the true, or the just), the American intellectual in the thrall of the Parisian model is generally unable to permit himself such latitude. Here his own Americanism comes into play and freezes his powers of perception. He is apt to recoil from what he perceives as the vulgarity of his countrymen’s provincialism and amateurism. But often what chagrins such an American intellectual is simply his Americanism—his fear of his own lack of cultivation. His recoil from cultural efforts distinctively marked by an American provenance is often a reflection of his own shame—a symptom of his fantasy to be someone he is not. Nowhere are the great achievements of American culture more undervalued than in America, which is not to deny that nowhere are they more celebrated. It belongs to the nature of great American cultural achievements that they not only easily permit, but actively invite their audience thus to underestimate them.⁴² (Apropos Emerson and Thoreau, Cavell remarks: “[T]hey leave themselves dismissible.”⁴³) To assess such work requires first punching through its false bottom.⁴⁴ If it is characteristic of the French thinker or author or artist to be committed to seeming brilliant and to playing the part of the genius, then it is equally characteristic of the American thinker or author or artist to be committed to diffidence and to playing the part of someone who is just doing his job—say, measuring the depth of his pond.⁴⁵

America’s Drama of Self-Constitution

It is simply crazy that there should ever have come into being a world with such a sin in it, in which a man is set apart because of his color—the superficial fact about a human being. Who could *want* such a world? For an American, fighting for his love of country, that the last hope of earth should from its beginning, have swallowed slavery, is an irony so withering, a justice so intimate in its rebuke of pride, as to measure only with God.⁴⁶

The quotation is from Cavell's early essay on Beckett's *Endgame*. His subsequent writings intermittently pick up the thread here left hanging, in further sudden remarks, often in contexts no less surprising than a reading of a Beckett play. But this may well be the earliest of these recurring moments in Cavell's corpus—moments that are equally expressions of love and expressions of anger and disappointment in America. The earliest occurrence of an extended meditation on this theme occurs, less surprisingly perhaps, in Cavell's first extended meditation on Shakespearean tragedy, titled "The Avoidance of Love." This is where the question of America's discovery is first broached by him:

America . . . had a mythical beginning, still visible, if ambiguous, to itself and to its audience: before there was Russia, there was Russia; before there was France and England, there was France and England; but before there was America there was no America. America was *discovered*, and what was discovered was not a place, one among others, but a setting, the backdrop of a destiny.⁴⁷

The drama of America begins with its birth; and it is essential to its myth of itself as a destiny that its birth be unlike that of other nations. Long before there was a Russian or English or French nation or revolution or constitution, there were already a Russian or English or French kingdom or empire or realm, already Russian and English and French history and architecture and literature, and already a distinctively Russian and English and French language and people and identity. The issue in founding America was not just to arrange for there to be one more such place alongside Russia and England and France. It was to show the world what a nation and a constitution and a revolution could and should be, and thereby to create not only a new nation but a new concept of nation—one that was to have no history or literature or identity prior to the completion of its revolution and the realization of its constitution, comprising a people united by neither language, creed, nor blood—one whose history and literature and identity were forged through a vision of how a people might be united such that they no longer could be divided. But how is one to tell if such a revolution attains its end, if such a constitution is fully enacted, if such a union stands achieved?

Cavell's meditation continues as follows: "It began as theater. Its Revolution, unlike the English and French and Russian Revolutions, was not a civil war; it was fought against outsiders, its point was not reform but independence." One might argue that America's beginning as theater was both its blessing and its curse. It bore some of the earmarks of other revolutionary conflicts: shots were fired, colonies liberated, ties with a monarch severed, royalist administrators evicted, and so forth. But such a beginning was largely a blessing for the very reasons that might lead one to declare that the American Revolution was not a revolution at all: in its declaration of independence America did not declare war on itself, no king was beheaded, no guillotines were erected, no people's tribunals convened, there was no orgy of bloodletting to expiate, and the empire to which it had once belonged continued happily on without it.⁴⁸ These seemingly unrevolutionary aspects of its Revolution were a blessing because it meant America could begin the business of nationhood with a public debate over its founding principles to determine how each could have a voice in the ensuing whole and what kind of voice it should be,⁴⁹

rather than with a tribunal of inquisition to determine who was a friend of the Revolution and who its enemy, sorting its citizenry into those who formed part of the solution and those who formed part of the problem. The American revolutionaries had no need to justify an extended internecine conflict in the name of an indivisible will of the people, in whose name violence could be demanded and in expectation of whose gratitude all sins would be washed away. Instead of having to invoke the will the people, the Founding Fathers could afford to seek their consent. Instead of insisting upon the indivisibility of such a will, they could seek to accommodate and protect a diversity of opinion. Instead of replacing religion with the state, they could seek to separate them.

Was the American Revolution therefore a success? How does one measure the success of a revolution? Hannah Arendt has devoted a book to this topic. She notes a marked tendency—exacerbated by a literary and philosophical concentration on the example of the French Revolution—that she thinks is apt to cloud our thinking on the topic. The tendency is to identify the concept of revolution with the idea of a violent overthrow of an existing order (something she takes to be a merely accidental feature of the concept). This identification leaves out what she takes to be the essential end of revolution: namely, *the institution of a new order*—not merely in the superficial sense that a new one replaces an old one, but in the deeper sense that it brings into being the conditions of the possibility of a new kind of order—one which alters not only the quantity of freedom but also its quality. A revolution is to be assessed not by how much it destroys, but by what it creates—not by its powers of dissolution, but by its powers of constitution. If, rather than measuring the success of revolutions by the degree to which they afford freedom *from* a prior state of affairs, we instead go by the degree to which they enable freedom *for* the institution of something radically new—an unprecedented yet stable form of social order—then, Arendt argues, this will dramatically affect an estimate of the relative success of the American and French Revolutions. But she thinks this is not the measure usually employed. Arendt laments:

It was the French and not the American Revolution that set the world on fire, and it was consequently from the course of the French Revolution, and not from the course of events in America or from the acts of the Founding Fathers, that our present use of the word 'revolution' received its connotations and overtones everywhere. . . . The sad truth of the matter is that the French Revolution, which ended in disaster, has made world history, while the American Revolution, so triumphantly successful, has remained an event of little more than local importance.⁵⁰

An American such as Thoreau might easily agree with Arendt that it is lamentable that the French Revolution has been the preferred model for subsequent “revolutions,” while still feeling that the question has yet to be answered what it would mean for the American Revolution to have been “triumphantly successful.”⁵¹

Does it mean, as the national anthem declares, that America is now the land of the free and the home of the brave? If so, Thoreau will want to know what those words mean, particularly since, at the time of writing *Walden*, America was hiding from itself the withering irony of its having swallowed slavery. It is at this point that Cavell sees an internal relation between the drama of America and that of Shake-

speare's tragedies—dramas that turn on a hero's failure to acknowledge what he cannot help but know. In *The Senses of Walden*, on Thoreau's behalf, Cavell laments:

For an American poet . . . the American Revolution is . . . apt to constitute the absorbing epic event. Only it has two drawbacks: first, it is overshadowed by the epic event of America itself; second, America's revolution never happened. The colonists fought a war against England alright, and they won it. But it was not a war of independence that was won, because we are not free; nor was even secession the outcome, because we have not departed from the conditions England lives under, either in our literature or in our political or economic lives.⁵²

Thoreau thinks his countrymen have allowed themselves to mistake the first act (the framing of a constitution) for the drama itself (the actualization of the freedoms it envisions), and thus to remain unclear as to what ought to count as their having finally departed from the conditions England lives under. Do we know what the next act of the drama is to be and when it ought to be performed? Or has it already been performed? Is America now the land of the free? It has, we are often told, freed its slaves. So was the Civil War the second act of the Revolution?

America's Civil War does in some ways resemble other countries' revolutions: one half of the country fighting the other, brother sometimes taking arms against brother, one side fighting to uphold tradition and property, the other claiming to represent freedom and equality. But it was not a revolution—the point, according to one side, was to make what was formerly one nation two, and the point, according to the other side, was to ensure that it remained one. And to the extent that either point was settled, it was not by its being settled in the way things are settled in a revolution, not merely because America has as such never suffered defeat, but because, since its initial inception, its subsequent growth pains have been accompanied neither by the sort of overthrow of an existing order that would mark (and has marked) the completion of a successful revolution in England or France or Russia nor by the sort of change in political constitution that would mark the completion of a successful revolution by Arendt's lights.⁵³ And, surely, this is a blessing that has helped to protect it from some of the recurrent crises of coherence and confidence that afflict so many other nations. Yet the fact of America's innocence of such national traumas does not by itself answer Thoreau's question: Is the drama of America—the drama of the nation's taking possession of itself—accomplished or still underway? Is the absence in its history of the moments that are formative in the history of other nations—moments of traumatic birth or loss or change of identity, of defeat from without or overthrow from within, of collapse of empire or toppling of *ancien regime*, of change of constitution or convulsion in system of government—its curse or its blessing? There is, after all, no shortage of those on the outside who think that it has been its curse that it has been so seemingly blessed—and therefore that there is nothing America needs today more than a humbling. What should those on the inside think?

In his early meditation on America, Cavell notes these dimensions of national inexperience and observes:

So its knowledge is of infeasible power and constancy. But its fantasies are those of impotence, because it remains at the mercy of its past, because its present is contin-

uously ridiculed by the fantastic promise of its origin and its possibility, and because it has never been assured that it will survive.⁵⁴

The thought that America must overcome fantasies of its own impotence in order to believe in itself (and thus become itself) provides one immediate link with the topic of Cavell's essay—*King Lear*. But it also provokes a question that reflects a feature of the times in which that essay was written—the late 1960s. Continuing the present theme, I might phrase the question that haunts the essay as follows: Is the Vietnam War (and the War at Home it provoked) a further act in America's drama of self-constitution? Here is the passage in which Cavell touches most explicitly upon the connection between the topic of America (and its discovery of itself), the subject of the essay (Shakespeare's *King Lear*), and the matter mentioned in its title (the avoidance of love):

Since [America] had a birth, it may die. It feels mortal. And it wishes proof not merely of its continuance but of its existence, a fact it has never been able to take for granted. Therefore its need for love is insatiable. It surely has been given more love than any other nation: its history, until yesterday, is one in which outsiders have been drawn to it and in which insiders are hoarse from their expressions of devotion to it. . . . It is the need for love as proof of its existence which makes it so frighteningly destructive, enraged by ingratitude and by attention to its promises rather than to its promise, and which makes it incapable of seeing that it is destructive and frightening. It imagines its evils to come from the outside. So it feels watched, isolated in its mounting of waters, denying its shame with mechanical lungs of pride, calling its wrath upon the wrong objects.

It has gone on for a long time, it is maddened now, the love it has had it has squandered too often, its young no longer naturally feel it; its past is in its streets, ungrateful for the fact that a hundred years ago it tore itself apart in order not to be divided; half of it believes the war it is now fighting is taking place twenty-five years ago, when it was still young and it was right that it was opposing tyranny. . . . *Union* is what it wanted. And it has never felt that union has been achieved. Hence its terror of dissent, which does not threaten its power but its integrity. So it is killing itself and killing another country in order not to admit its helplessness in the face of suffering, in order not to acknowledge its separateness. So it does not know what its true helplessness is.⁵⁵

As I read these lines today, thirty-five years after they were written, I find them to have acquired a peculiar pertinence in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.

America has seldom received more declarations of love, from outsiders as well as insiders, than on the days immediately following the events of that day. Yet America remains, now more than ever, incapable of seeing how it appears from the outside, having squandered that love as unreservedly as it was proffered. America, so confident of its own goodness, has always found it difficult to see itself—as those on the outside see it—as destructive and frightening. But this self-blindness has deepened, now that the fantasy has been catastrophically reinforced that America's evils come from the outside. As America responds to her momentary feeling of impotence with awesome displays of power, and to her continuing fear of violation with calls for unprecedented acts of surveillance, a question about

the times in which this essay (on “The Concept of America”) is written arises: Are we seeing the curtain open on a further act in the drama of America’s self-constitution? Or has the drama become irretrievably stuck, somewhere in the middle of the third act?

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, many things were as different from the days of the Vietnam War as one could wish for. The following descriptions of the nation all seemed to be evidently true: it was not only not divided against itself, but its citizens were eager to declare that they stood behind its president; its young were not ungrateful and openly protesting its hypocrisy in the streets; it was not presently killing another country; its fears of violence were directed not at the actions of its own citizens but at those of outsiders, thereby enabling it to unite against a common enemy. And even if America was not quite able to tell itself, with all the confidence it could muster when younger, that it was opposing tyranny, it could at least tell itself that its enemies were the enemies of freedom and thus would-be tyrants. So whatever threats there were, there seemed to be none that threatened the union as such—whatever national trauma was underway, it did not seem to be one that threatened internal schism—now that its people seemed suddenly able, once again, to stand united, indivisible, and firm. Now, less than three years later, none of these seemingly evidently true descriptions is any longer evidently true.

America’s sense of its own helplessness in the face of suffering was seldom more acute than on that September 11 and its appetite for action seldom more provoked. America feels again, as seldom before, mortal—and wishes proof not merely of its continuance, but proof that it is indeed America (and not just some heavily armed superpower) that thereby continues. Thus the rhetoric of proof vastly exceeds any reality that it thus demonstrates. Seldom have those in power felt less humility when invoking—seldom have they found it easier to pronounce—words such as “freedom,” “justice,” “truth.” Every action America commits, every treaty it breaks, every bomb it drops, every border it crosses, it declares it does in the name of freedom, suggesting that this is something that it thinks it can—and revealing that this is something it has never believed it can—take for granted.

Today, it has once again become evident that the struggle for union is hardly at an end. Today the young, certainly in comparison with the generation of the sixties, are not notably ungrateful or angry: they are not in the streets in great force rebuking the hypocrisy of their elders or protesting America’s betrayal of its promises to itself. But that is not to say that they are grateful, or even that most of them feel any urgency about remembering or reminding others exactly what those promises—what exactly the Revolution or the Constitution—were. America will vehemently deny that it is presently killing another country. But that is not to say that it will now affirm that it is not killing anyone—or even that, when it now seeks to shoot at the enemy, its aim is particularly good. True, its fears are presently directed not at the violence of insiders but at that of outsiders. But that is not to say that it is able to tell the one from the other. It is perhaps in some—alas, increasingly notional—sense still true that it stands internally united against a present common enemy. But that is not to say that it is in agreement with itself about where that enemy is or what would count as having defeated him. (With each

passing day, there appears to be less agreement about what sort of victory ought to be sought and what would count as its having been achieved.) And even if America can still tell itself that its enemies are enemies of freedom, it must now rest uneasy in the knowledge that it has made a habit of befriending its enemies' enemies whether or not they are truly its friends or freedom's friends. Its enemies of today it was calling, only yesterday, friends—friends it was eager to help against a prior common enemy. Amidst these shifting allegiances, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell freedom's friends from its foes—not only when looking at those on the outside but also at those on the inside, and not only for those on the outside looking at us, but also for those of us on the inside looking around at each other. For, as in Kierkegaard's *Christendom*, so, too, in today's America, there is reason to worry that those who experience the least difficulty in declaring themselves faithful to certain values are the ones who are most likely to succeed in depriving them of the necessary conditions of their application.

America could not disguise from itself that the Vietnam War (and the War at Home it provoked) was a struggle over its own soul. But now that America can tell itself that it has been attacked, that it is vulnerable, and that it acts only to protect itself, it has become easier than ever for it to disguise from itself how its continuance depends not only on what it does but on how it does it. America's threats from within—its triumphal assurances to itself that its constitution stands fully achieved and its equally vehement rejections of such assurances—have now become clothed in the guise of arguments about how to deal with threats from without. But if it is to have a soul worth saving, attacks on it from without must not silence its ongoing argument from within over what would count as its having a soul worth saving. For it belongs to that peculiarity of the concept of America that I have sought to elucidate here that there is no contradiction in the following thought: America might cease to exist on the very day that its citizens become convinced that the continued existence of "America" has been safeguarded and now rests assured.

Notes

This essay is an excerpt from a longer manuscript. I am indebted to the audience at the University of Athens and at Wesleyan University for valuable discussions at occasions when parts of it were given, and to conversations with Stanley Cavell about America, with Sandra Laugier and Jean-Philippe Narboux about France, with Aristides Baltas and Vasso Kindi about modern Greece, with Jonathan Lear about Kierkegaard, with Joel Snyder about American art, and with Lisa Van Alstyne about everything.

1. "The American Ideal," *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 1931. Reprinted in *Sidelights* (in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton, Volume 21: What I Saw in America and Other Writings* [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990], 523). The passage continues:

The real, natural Americans are candid, generous, capable of a beautiful wonder and gratitude; enthusiastic about things external to themselves; easily contented and not particularly conceited. They have been deliberately taught to be conceited. They have been systematically educated in a theory of enthusiasm, which degrades it into mere

egotism. The American has received as a sort of religion the notion that blowing his own trumpet is as important as the trumpet of doom.

2. Franz Kafka, *Amerika*, translated by Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: New Directions, 1946), 3 [I have amended the translation]; *Der Verschollene* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1983), 9.

3. Wim Wenders, "The American Dream," in *Emotion Pictures*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 117–19; *Emotion Pictures: Essays und Filmkritiken* (Berlin: Verlag der Autoren, 1988), 142–43. The line here from *West Side Story* (rendered by Wenders as "I want to be in America") also appears in English in Wenders's original German text; but it is a misquotation. What they sing is "I like to be in America"—which in its ungrammaticality is nicely ambiguous between (an observable fact about the singer) "I like being in America" and (a subjective aspiration of the singer) "I would like to be in America."

4. Or, as Kierkegaard says even more frequently: *qua subjectively existing individual*. Someone will want to object that the occurrence of "subjectively" here makes the definition circular. But what is offered here, in any case, cannot be a definition but, at best, an elucidation. And the circularity is already present without the explicit inclusion of the word "subjectively." This elucidation is understood only if one understands "existing" and "individual" here each already as subjective concepts. In ordinary language, we can equally say of rocks and persons that they "exist." To understand what it means to say subjective concepts characterize *existing* individuals requires understanding the relevant sense of "existence." (Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms reserve the term 'existence' for persons and 'being' for objects.) We can, in ordinary language, speak equally of an individual rock and of an individual person. To understand what it means to say subjective concepts characterize *existing individuals* requires understanding the relevant sense of "individual." (Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms will therefore want to distinguish between mere particulars (that merely have being) and genuine individuals or agents (who are faced with the task of existence).) Every elucidation of a subjective concept—including the subjective concept *subjective*—will itself have to employ further subjective concepts.

5. Thus someone may want to predicate such a concept of him- or herself without being entitled to do so. This, Kierkegaard thinks, is the case with most who are eager to avow that they are Christians.

6. Kierkegaard himself refrains from using the terms 'Christianity' and 'Christian' in this way and uses other terms instead—such as 'churchgoer' and 'Christendom'—to refer to individuals whose lives are characterized merely by the external motions of leading the life of a Christian.

7. It is perhaps advisable to head off a common misunderstanding: Kierkegaard's (and his pseudonyms') employment of the terms 'objective' and 'subjective' is misunderstood if it is taken to mark a distinction between that which is epistemically *public* and that which is necessarily epistemically *private*—a distinction the terms 'objective' and 'subjective' are often employed in contemporary philosophical parlance to mark: on this way of speaking, what is 'objective' can be shared, captured in concepts, expressed in language, etc., whereas what is 'subjective' is inherently private, eludes the grasp of concepts, and is inexpressible. The terms 'objective' and 'subjective' in Kierkegaard's parlance do not work in this way. This should be evident from the fact that they are supposed to mark a distinction between kinds of *concept*, each of which is expressible in language (e.g., by terms such as 'churchgoer' and 'Christian,' respectively). Many commentators have been tempted to run Kierkegaard's distinction together with the currently fashionable one. The following features of his thought no doubt have encouraged this misunderstanding: (1) understanding utterances involving subjective concepts, for Kierkegaard, is necessarily a more fragile and delicate

affair than understanding those involving objective concepts; (2) subjective concepts, Kierkegaard thinks, will generally apply only to the thoughts and actions of isolated and extraordinary members of a community; (3) the communication of thoughts involving subjective concepts requires what Kierkegaard calls “indirect communication.” For all of these reasons one might be drawn to say that the acquisition and possession of subjective concepts is a less “public” (hence a comparatively “private”) matter in comparison to that of objective concepts. But none of these reasons entails that for Kierkegaard subjective concepts are *inherently incommunicable* (indirect communication is a form of *communication* for Kierkegaard) or that they have an *essentially private* meaning (when one says of two individuals that they are each struggling to become a *Christian*, Kierkegaard thinks one is saying the *same* thing about each of them—something each of them can also say about themselves or each other—without equivocating on the meaning of the term ‘Christian’).

8. Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [henceforth CUP], edited by S. Kierkegaard, translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 49.

9. “America” for the purposes of this essay means the “America” in “The United States of America.” This is, of course, not all this word can or does or should mean. But this is what it means, and all it means, in this essay. This restriction of topic will, no doubt, appear to some readers (north and south of—as well as nowhere near—the U.S. border) to be inexcusably chauvinistic. My only excuse is that there is such a concept of America and it is the one I am trying to understand in these pages. It lies with others who are more qualified to do so than I to say what the America as it occurs in other contexts—e.g., the compound “Latin America”—can or does or should mean either to themselves or to others.

10. Commitment to this ideal is not a matter of commitment to some fully fleshed out moral, political, or religious orthodoxy. Indeed, it is not a matter of commitment to a doctrine or creed at all in any except a very attenuated sense—namely, the minimal sense in which a commitment to principles such as freedom of speech or freedom of religion can be said to constitute a commitment to a particular sort of political doctrine or creed. The application of such principles within a particular institutional or juridical frame may, of course, involve and even require the specification of very detailed sorts of legal or procedural doctrine. But someone who is committed to the ideal here at issue is not a fortiori committed to any particular specification of the ideal. Thus to be committed to the ideal in question—i.e., to be an American, in the weighty sense of the term—does not require one to be committed to every law of the land. Indeed, one may feel that it obliges one to protest certain laws. (It was, for example, partly out of fidelity to their understanding of America’s pledges to itself that Martin Luther King, Jr., and his followers were able to take themselves to be justified in opposing various municipal and regional ordinances to the point of civil disobedience, as it was out of fidelity to their understanding of America’s pledges to itself that Emerson and his followers were able to take themselves to be obliged to resist certain federal laws—such as the Fugitive Slave Act.) Indeed, often, the closest thing to a point of orthodoxy one encounters in connection with the ideal here at issue is precisely the proscription of certain kinds of orthodoxy. Thus we often encounter unbending pronouncements of the following sort in American public life: “If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official . . . can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion” (*West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 [1943]).

11. I do not mean to suggest it is unique in this regard. Consider the logic of the concept *Jew*.

12. Since the gratuitous chauvinism of Wilson’s remark—that “America is the only idealistic nation in the world”—is bound to annoy and distract, it is worth noting that the

idealism and the chauvinism can be disjoined. But there are more and less delicate ways to disjoin them. Here, for example, is Josiah Royce:

When foreigners accuse us of extraordinary love for gain, and of practical materialism, they fail to see how largely we are a nation of idealists. . . . When I speak, in this way, of contemporary American idealists, I do not now specially refer to the holders of any philosophical opinions. . . . I here use the term in no technical sense. . . . I mean by the word "idealist," a man or woman who is consciously and predominantly guided, in the purposes and in the great choices of life, by large ideals, such as admit of no merely material embodiment, and such as contemplate no merely private and personal satisfaction as their goal. In this untechnical sense the Puritans were idealists. The signers of our *Declaration of Independence* were idealists. Idealism inspired us during our Civil War. Idealism has expressed itself in the rich differentiation of our national religious life. . . . [U]sing the term "idealism" in this confessedly untechnical sense, I say that many of our foreign judges have failed to see how largely we Americans are today a nation of idealists. To be sure, we are by no means alone amongst modern men in our idealism. ("On Certain Limitations of the Thoughtful Public in America," in *The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969], 1111–112)

Royce's way of keeping his declaration of America's idealism from degenerating into gross chauvinism is to suggest that, although America is rather remarkable for the breadth and depth of its idealism, there is nothing peculiar about its brand of idealism—its ideals are the same as those of people elsewhere. This invites the following rejoinder: Is not the concept of America internally related to certain particular ideals (rather than others)—ones that might not be to the taste of certain "idealists" (in Royce's loose sense of the term)—and, however related those ideals might be to ones held by people prior to the founding of America, have not those ideals received a particular and decisive articulation through the course of America's struggle to keep its promises to itself? If so, then—while it is silly to think that America is the only idealistic nation in the world—it is not silly to think that understanding the concept of America involves understanding how America has differed from other nations and how those differences are partly due to the particular ideals that shaped the aspirations of those who helped to shape America: the Puritans, the signers of the *Declaration of Independence*, the author of the *Gettysburg Address*, etc.

13. This is not to deny that "to be an American" can, and nowadays often does, signify little or nothing more than that one falls under certain objective concepts—such as that one is a citizen of a certain country, that one has the right to vote, that one is entitled to a passport, etc. To concede this is not to gainsay the following: if the day comes to pass when this is all the word 'American' any longer means, then we will have lost a concept (of America) we previously had. The question then is: What kind of loss is this? And: Should such a loss be mourned or welcomed?

14. This is the topic of my "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Anscombe on Moral Unintelligibility" (in *Morality and Religion*, edited by Timothy Tessin and Marion von der Ruhr, New York: St. Martins Press, 1995).

15. Variants of both this sentence and the preceding one recur throughout Kierkegaard's *The Case of Adler* (in *Fear and Trembling and The Book on Adler*, translated by Walter Lowrie [New York: Everyman's Library, 1994], see, e.g., pp. 147n–148n, 162); originally published in English as *On Authority and Revelation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955). For reasons that will become clear, it is worth noting that both remarks are quoted by Stanley Cavell in his essay "Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* [henceforth MWM] (New York: Scribners, 1969), 169.

16. CUP, 84

17. See CUP, 223.
18. "Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, edited by Richard Kearney (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), 108.
19. *Walden*, chap. 16, par. 6 (in *Walden and Other Writings*, Modern Library College Edition, edited by William Howarth [New York: Modern Library, 1981], 256).
20. *Walden*, chap. 1, par. 36; p. 21.
21. *Walden*, chap. 6, par. 16, p. 139.
22. *Walden*, chap. 2, par. 1, p. 74.
23. *Walden*, chap. 1, par. 79, p. 44.
24. *The Senses of Walden* [henceforth SW] (San Francisco: North Point, 1981), 32.
25. Not that there has ever been any shortage of Europeans willing to second Matthew Arnold's quip: "[O]ur Society distributes itself into Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace; and America is just ourselves, with the Barbarians quite left out, and the populace nearly" (Preface, *Culture and Anarchy*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960], 19–20).
26. There are, of course, those who attempt to escape the problem by simply recoiling into the opposite point of view. Nothing I say here is meant to deny that this is a recipe for a far more terrifying species of philistinism—more terrifying because of the unsavory mixture of chauvinism and anti-intellectualism it encourages. The cultural inferiority complex of those Americans who fear the condescension of Europe is not cured (but merely repressed) in those who imagine that they make progress when they undertake simply to shake off their cultural hypochondria by declaring that it is actually we—Americans—who ought to be doing the condescending. The following passage from Daniel Boorstin, from a chapter bearing the title "Our Cultural Hypochondria and How to Cure It," exemplifies this recoil from insecurity to smugness:

We are too easily persuaded that the cancers of European life . . . are healthy growths and that we are deformed for not possessing them. . . . It is, of course, some solace to a declining European culture . . . to think that their ills are simply the excesses of their virtues. That theirs must be the virtues of all cultures. And hence that the accidents of history which may have immunized us against such vices also sterilize our culture and doom us to philistinism and vagrancy.

There is no denying that our intellectuals and, most of all, our academics, being the most cosmopolitan part of our culture, have been especially susceptible to the well-meaning advice of our sick friends in Europe. Like many sick friends, they are none too sorry to be able to tell us that we are not in the best of health.

We have, in a word, been too easily led to deny our peculiarly American virtues, in order to seem to have the peculiar European vices. Moreover, our intellectuals . . . have been much too sensitive to the charge of chauvinism. Hence they, too, have been readier to tell us what we lack than to help us to discover what we have. Our historians and political scientists . . . have failed to help us discover the peculiar virtues of our situation. . . . Is it any wonder that the very word "patriotism" should come to be suspect among intellectuals? Is it any wonder that we suffer from cultural hypochondria? (*The Genius of American Politics* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953], 182–83)

Boorstin retains the central assumption of the view he opposes: namely, that Europe and America between them have only one form of culture worthy of respect and admiration. The view he opposes takes European culture to be the real article and American culture to be a pale imitation. He suggests instead that we ought to regard European culture as sick and dying and American culture as healthy and vibrant. These two views are mirror images of one another—each feeds on and sustains the other. One can sympathize with Boorstin's thought that one of the reasons that patriotism comes less naturally to American intellectuals

has to do with their tendency to identify culture and cosmopolitanism with Europe, without sympathizing in the least with his thought that the way for America to cure itself of this unhealthy self-conception is to learn to view itself as the paradigm of a healthy nation and to look upon the glories of European culture as symptoms of illness.

27. Cavell is concerned to take the point much further than I do here. The issue turns for him not merely on the relatively superficial matter of the extent to which there are certain commonly shared texts in the culture at large but on the far more searching matter of how they circulate in the culture and authorize what can count as a contribution to the culture's discourse about itself. Hence Cavell writes:

Suppose it is true, and significant about the American "style of thought," that it has lacked the concept of ideology. . . . Is this like lacking thirteenth-century cathedrals (also true, and significant, of American culture), or like lacking churches of any kind, or like lacking the concept of religion altogether? In the last case you may have a theory of human culture that tells you this is impossible, in which case one tack for you to take would be to look for what concepts "do duty" for the absent concept. I think a related cultural difference between American and European intellectual life is that the American (with isolated exceptions) has no sacred intellectual texts, none whose authority the intellectual community at large is anxious to preserve at all costs—no Marxian texts, no Freudian, no Hegelian, no Deweyan, and so forth. Every text stands at the level of professional journal articles, open for disposal. . . . If the concept of ideology depends for its usefulness on its functioning with such favored texts, then its absence in American intellectual life would be explained by the absence of such texts. . . . [I]t surely makes for drastic barriers to communication, both within American intellectual life and between American and European thinkers. (*Themes Out of School* [henceforth TS] [San Francisco: North Point, 1984], 59–60)

28. *The Wizard of Oz: The Screenplay*, edited by Michael Patrick Hearn (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1989).

29. Cavell holds, on the one hand, that the relatively accomplished edifice of distinctively American cinema is able partially to compensate for America's failure to realize that it has expressed itself philosophically, while holding, on the other hand, that the significance of this accomplishment must, nonetheless, remain obscured in the absence of a correspondingly accomplished edifice of American philosophy:

I assume that movies have played a role in American culture different from their role in other cultures, and more particularly that this difference is a function of the absence in America of the European edifice of philosophy. And since I assume further that American culture has been no less ambitious, craved no less to think about itself, than the most ambitious European culture, I assume further still that the difference everyone recognizes as existing between American and European literature is a function of the brunt of thought that American literature, in its foundings in, for instance, Emerson and Whitman and Poe, had to bear in that absence of a given philosophical founding and edifice, lifting the fragments that the literature found, so to speak, handy and portable. Finally, I assume that American film at its best participates in this Western cultural ambition of self-thought or self-invention that presents itself in the absence of the Western edifice of philosophy, so that on these shores film has the following peculiar economy: it has the space, and the cultural pressure, to satisfy the craving for thought, the ambition of a talented culture to examine itself publicly; but its public lacks the means to grasp this thought as such for the very reason that it naturally or historically lacks that edifice of philosophy within which to grasp it. (*Contesting Tears* [henceforth CT] [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996], 72)

30. "Emerson.—Never have I felt so much at home in a book, and in my home . . . —I may not praise it, it is too close to me." (Nietzsche, posthumous fragment, translated

and quoted by Walter Kaufmann in his translator's introduction to *The Gay Science* [New York: Vintage, 1974], 12.)

31. "The author who has been richest in ideas in this century has been an American (unfortunately this has been made obscure by German philosophy)" (Nietzsche). For a discussion of Nietzsche's relation to Emerson, see my "Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*," in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, edited by Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

32. Was Socrates, when he pestered his fellow citizens in the Agora with his questions, participating in a European tradition? How does a tradition of philosophy *begin*?

33. I am drawing here on remarks from Cavell's essay "An Emerson Mood" (see SW, 148).

34. TS, 29.

35. Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, fragment 5; in *Aristotelis Fragmenta Selecta*, edited by W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 33.

36. "Good Americans, when they die, go to Paris" (attributed to Thomas Gold Appleton, reported by Oliver Wendell Holmes, in *Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* [Pleasantville, NY: Akadine, 2001], 125). Oscar Wilde, in his play *A Woman of No Importance*, adds a characteristic wrinkle:

Mrs. Allonby: They say, Lady Hunstanton, that when good Americans die they go to Paris.

Lady Hunstanton: Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go to?

Lord Illingworth: Oh, they go to America.

(*The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* [Leicester, UK: Galley Press, 1987], 421)

37. *Walden*, chap. 3, par. 1, p. 90. In connection with this question, Cavell himself offers a contrast between Derrida's (characteristically European) and Emerson's and Thoreau's (distinctively American) relations to the history of European philosophy; see CT, 64–65.

38. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar"; in *Essays and Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 53.

39. This pertains not only to how an American writer is apt to experience his or her relation to a wider American public, but to the converse relation as well. Archibald MacLeish, in a striking passage, speaks in this connection of how American writers often appear to live in a kind of domestic exile:

[T]hough the possibility for artists and writers to work in America can be demonstrated by the work itself, it is not so obviously self-evident that they have a place in American life Our writers appear . . . to live in a kind of domestic exile. They are noticed in the news columns when they die or when they distinguish themselves in some artistically irrelevant way such as selling a novel to the movies for more than the last novel brought, or marrying for the seventh time, but their opinions on questions of public concern are not recorded. There are, that is to say, no American Goethes. There is not even an American Sartre. (*A Continuing Journey: Essays and Addresses by Archibald MacLeish* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968], 181)

40. Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), xv. Immediately after noting this fact about modern American writing, Kazin goes on to explain (in the paragraph from which his book takes its title) the shape of his own project in *On Native Grounds*—one of seeking to highlight and characterize (what he takes to be) the distinctively American dimension of such writing:

There is a terrible estrangement in this writing, a nameless yearning for a world no one ever really possessed, that rises above the skills our writers have mastered and the famous repeated liberations they have won to speak out plainly about the life men lead in America. All modern writers, it may be, have known that alienation. . . . But what interested me here was our alienation *on* native grounds—the interwoven story of our need to take up our life on our own grounds, and the irony of our possession. To speak of modern American writing as a revolt against the Genteel Tradition alone, against Victorianism alone, against even the dominance of the state by special groups, does not explain why our liberations have often proved so empty. . . . To speak of it only as a struggle toward the modern emancipation—and it was that—does not even hint at the lean and shadowy tragic strain in our modern American writing. . . . Nor does it tell us why our modern writers have had to discover and rediscover and chart the country in every generation, rewriting Emerson’s *The American Scholar* in every generation . . . but still must cry America! America! As if we had never known America. As perhaps we have not. (ibid., xv–xvi)

For all of their differences, Kazin’s and Cavell’s accounts of American writing have this much (and this much of Emerson’s account) in common: they take America to name the (re)discovery of something that America’s great writers are compelled to write about as if it remained largely undiscovered.

41. To avoid confusion, it should be noted that in the remainder of this paragraph the expression “American intellectuals” is employed in its most minimal sense—involving the mere conjunction of the attributes *American* and *intellectual*—to refer to individuals who fancy themselves intellectuals while happening to live in and be citizens of the United States of America. Or to put the same point differently: in the remainder of this paragraph the expression “American intellectuals” is employed in its merely objective (as opposed to its weightier—Emersonian—subjective) sense.

42. Here we have a further reason that Cavell finds the greater achievements of Hollywood film and America’s relation to those achievements to epitomize a central feature of the problematic of American culture. The structure of this problematic is brought out beautifully in the following passage in which the relation between the mousefolk and their hero in Kafka’s story “Josephine the Singer” is taken to presage the relation between American culture and its public:

Its film prepared to satisfy the craving for thought, and its public thereby deprived of recognizing the economy of its satisfaction, American culture casts its film and its film’s public in the relation that is described in “Josephine the Singer” as existing between Josephine and her public. Each will think that it is the creator of the other: and film’s public, for all its periodic adoration of its art, will fall to doubting the specialness and beauty of its art, and its own need for it; it will even come to doubt that its art is an art—that it sings—at all. (CT, 72–73)

43. CT, 66. In his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence takes it to be almost a defining characteristic of an American literary classic that it possess “a duplicitous surface”—one that the reader must penetrate if he or she is to reach (what Lawrence calls) “its marvelous under-meaning.” See, for example, his essay “Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter*” (*Studies in Classic American Literature* [New York: Penguin, 1977], especially pp. 89, 106).

44. Thoreau is a master of prose structures with such false bottoms. My epigraph from Thoreau not only is an instance of a piece of writing that has such a false bottom but it is about what kind of bottom something called *Walden* has, how to measure its depth, and how to recognize the moment at which the effort to fathom it has struck bottom.

45. See, in this connection, Leo Steinberg’s discussion (in the title essay of *Other Criteria* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972], 57–59) of why “Thomas Eakins is the

type of the American artist,” and especially his discussion of Eakins’s *William Rush* (a painting of a painter painting a nude model) and how it “reverses all of the attitudes” of his French teacher Léon Gérôme’s *Pygmalion* (also of a painter painting a nude model)—and, in particular, how it furnishes an American reversal of the European relation between art and work, between painting a painting and doing one’s job.

46. MWM, 141.

47. MWM, 344.

48. Thus Garry Wills writes:

The American Revolution was more properly an act of secession than a real revolution. We did not remove King George from his throne or dissolve the Parliament in London. We did not replace them with a new government of our own creation. We simply took our colonies out of the empire—which continued its course without us. (*A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government* [New York: Simon Schuster, 2002], 179)

49. This raises questions about *who* falls under the scope of the variable “each” here and *how*—the initiating questions of what one might call the argument of America: Can America mean the words laid down in its founding documents if it also sanctions slavery? or if it refuses women the vote? or if it inters its citizens just for being of Japanese origin, or allows them to be stopped by the police just for being black? or allows a visitor to be detained just for having an Arabic-sounding last name?

50. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 55–56.

51. What Arendt means is, first, that its aftermath was a “triumphant success” if measured against the events succeeding the French Revolution, and, second, that it was a triumphant success, if measured in terms of many of the goals that the theorists and protagonists of the French Revolution and its aftermath set themselves for what a revolution is supposed to accomplish. No doubt. But that still leaves open the question what it would mean for it to be a triumphant success, if measured by the goals that the theorists and protagonists of the American Revolution and its aftermath set themselves.

52. SW, 7.

53. I am rehearsing themes touched on in “The Avoidance of Love”; see MWM, 344–45.

54. MWM, 345.

55. MWM, 345.