Must We Mean What We Say? and Ordinary Language Philosophy

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Must We Mean What We Say?, Stanley Cavell's first and most important book, contains all the themes that Cavell continued to develop master-fully throughout his philosophy, but it stands out now as a crucial moment, and as a turning point, in philosophy of language. The particu-lar importance of *Must We Mean What We Say?* lies in bringing together essays that, simply by being brought together, reveal a radical, original problematic. It is a classic and a book that is not only of historical importance, but of actual importance. *Must We Mean What We Say?* is the first work of what is called "contemporary thought" to carry the project of ordinary language philosophy (OLP) through to its end. This philosophy of language is rooted in J.L. Austin's method and goes back to Wittgenstein's first question in the *Blue Book*, and to Austin's question in his first essays: "What is the meaning of a word?" What is it to say anything?

When Cavell published what he deliberately called a "book of essays" in 1969, he knew he was upsetting a well-established American philo-sophical tradition, namely, analytic philosophy as it had emerged out of the arrival of Vienna Circle philosophers, epistemologists, and logicians fleeing Nazism onto the American philosophical scene. In *Must We Mean What We Say?*, analytic philosophy was called into question from within and for the first time in America, where it had become dominant.

Cavell writes at a specific moment indeed. The late 1960s were pre-cisely the moment when "OLP bashing" began.[1] For the rest of the twentieth century, to call a thinker an "ordinary language philosopher" has been to insult them. Actually, the term itself began as a term of derision coined by detractors, and an accusation, not a claim nor an objective term of classification. Cavell's ambition was to reclaim the term and turn it around – a well-known political move today. His aim was to present and defend OLP at a moment when philosophy of language was

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[1] See Alice Crary and Joel de Lara, "Who's Afraid of Ordinary Language Philosophy?" Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal 39/2 (2019), 317–99.

at a crossroads. Attacks such as Gellner's *Words and Things: An Examination of, and an Attack on, Linguistic Philosophy* were so poorly argued that no real discussion followed. The book is nicely dismissed in *MWM* – in what may have been the first genuine response to it. But there never was an actual debate on what philosophy of language could and should become. Searle's and Grice's analytic interpretations of Austin became mainstream by simply replacing the original, and ignoring other readings.

So we need to keep in mind the historical context of *MWM*, and its deep engagements with American culture in the 1960s. The philosoph-ical culture was becoming deeply divided, with a new complexity added to the ever-caricatural division between "analytic" and "continental" philosophy, and an emergent internal divide within the analytic side: between the scientist reception of logical positivism, and the reception of Wittgenstein's later work, to which *MWM* explicitly adds, and at an equal level of importance, Austin's work. This first theoretical "coup de force" is the mission of the four first essays, all crucial to the further development of OLP and its emancipatory power. But *MWM* attempts a second "coup," just as crucial, but whose importance would appear only in the next century: to reveal the deep and multiple connections of OLP to the preoccupations of contemporary culture (way beyond philosoph-ical culture) – as they are expressed in modernism (the challenges of "new music," New Criticism, abstract expressionism), in modern theater and Shakespearean tragedy, and, in a less explicit way, in political and moral ruptures and wars.

MWM is thus a long-term empowerment of OLP, both as a philosoph-ical instrument of analysis, and as a cultural matter. Hence the import-ance of Cavell's claim of *MWM* as a book, not a collection of published essays: he mentions his

… conviction in the importance of Austin's practice of philosophizing out of a perpetual imagination of what is said when, why it is said, hence how, in what context. I note that my first extended readings of literary works that I felt warranted publication are devoted to two dramas, *Endgame* and *King Lear*, both included in, and in a sense provide a structure for my *Must We Mean What We Say?* and in that sense served to convince me that [it] *added up to a book*.(*LDIK*217, my emphasis)

All the essays *add up to* a book, because there is no hierarchy of subject. Cavell had fancied putting the book in a newspaper format, so that each essay could begin on the front page. Such an interweaving of thought, art, actuality, words, sounds … makes the book itself a modernist and democratic work.

Austin's Powers

For all these reasons, the essays on Austin and on Wittgenstein, which constitute the opening of *Must We Mean What We Say?*, are crucial to the book. They expressed a defense and illustration of the philosophy of ordinary language, to which Cavell had been converted during a series of lectures given by Austin at Harvard, in 1955. Cavell was teaching the new material and method he had discovered. I'd like to say he was an activist of OLP. As he recalls in *Little Did I Know*:

I had been invited the early spring of my first year of teaching at Berkeley – ordered was more like it – to participate in a panel some eight months later for that year's Christmas meetings of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, to be held at Stanford University. My insistence on the treasures I was finding Austin to have brought to philosophy was getting on the nerves of some accomplished teachers in and around my senior colleagues in the Berkeley department and it was their idea, whose point it was not hard for me to appreciate, even agree with, that it was time for me to justify my confidence before a public of professional colleagues. (*LDIK* 360)

The occasion was a reply to a paper to be prepared by his Berkeley colleague Benson Mates criticizing the procedures of the "philosophers of ordinary language" and "the appeal to ordinary language as such." Actually the presentation went very well, leading to a publication of the exchange in the then newly founded journal *Inquiry* and later to the publication of the essay "Must We Mean What We Say?" as the first chapter of *MWM*.

In the days after the papers were delivered, during the break between semesters, ideas for expanding the thoughts I had arrived at in the paper began coming at a greater pace than I had ever before experienced with any philosophical material. For some days it seemed that I could hardly sit still for ten minutes without beginning to scribble down further suggestions. Many came to nothing; some found their way into work years later; some went immediately into new or expanded paragraphs of the talk. (*LDIK* 360–61)

In Cavell's brief first summary of his life at the beginning of *Little Did I Know*, the meeting with Austin is mentioned as a founding event – which will take him away from his initial destiny, from his first talent, music. Cavell mentions "The crisis precipitated by Austin's appearance on the scene"; his work in philosophy "had yet again to begin again" (he had started, and discarded, a half dissertation). OLP appeared as a solution to the loss (or ending) of a career in music – as if it could fulfill the aspiration to finding the right tone, or pitch, or to having a real "ear" – "to what is said when, why it is said, hence how, in what context."

The examination of ordinary language is close to an aesthetics and this makes it a kind of criticism (cf. the title "Austin at criticism").

The aim, for Cavell and Austin, is to get free from an aesthetics of "an obsession with the beautiful and the sublime" and to attend to "the dainty and the dumpy." The attention to the ordinary detail of words and world becomes a new, revolutionary method. In this Cavell is methodologically faithful to Austin, who calls philosophy of language "a promising site for field work" and surveys, taking an anthropological view of the human speaking practice. The main concepts in Austin's work, performative utterances and excuses, are as early as *MWM* seen not only in terms of propositions and meanings, but "ways we encounter each other".[2]

So Cavell in his teaching at Berkeley was trying to communicate his own experience of Austin's method, in the way it had communicated itself to him. *MWM* is a development and expression of this encounter with OLP. It starts a reflection on ordinary language as voice, a theme that appears throughout his later works as well (such as *In Quest of the Ordinary* and *A Pitch of Philosophy*[3]); and the original aesthetic approach that defines Cavell's work, through his objects – which range from William Shakespeare to Samuel Beckett and later, Hollywood comedies and melodrama, as well as opera. But everything starts from this passionate expression of the *importance* and *power* of Austin. *MWM* puts together essays that, simply by being brought together, as *a book, a singular expression*, reveal a radical, original stance that has been thematically developed in the later work. It is a method.

To claim *MWM* as a book meant also, for Cavell, claiming the necessity to write and to publish books in philosophy at a moment when analytic philosophy was establishing itself as a conversation and polemics between articles and arguments. Cavell meant to prove that inheriting analytic philosophy (the works of Frege and Wittgenstein, and the power of logic, which were his first discovery in philosophy and played an important role in his formation) could be something else.

Or rather: to demonstrate that the project of analytical philosophy, to come closer to the world by examining language, could only be accomplished if we could find the conditions of truth or validity of ethical or aesthetic statements, statements of value, conversations; about *all that we*

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[2] J.L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (Oxford University Press, 1979; 1st edn 1961). See also Austin, "How to Talk: Some Simple Ways," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 53 (1953), 227–46.
[3] See Naoko Saito (Chapter 9) and Paul Standish (Chapter 13).

say about what actually matters to us (or matters to us because we say it). This reality is what Cavell calls in *MWM the ordinary world*:

I mean, of course, the ordinary world. That may not be all there is, but it is important enough: morality is that world, and so are force and love; so is art and a part of knowledge (the part which is about the world); and so is religion (wherever God is). (*MWM* 40)

The ordinary world is not *everything* there is in the world, "but it is important enough": it is the world of what matters. So the necessity of exploring importance becomes the key to OLP.

Early Cavell

MWM can be integrated into a first part of Cavell's work, which we may see now as the "Early Cavell." It is a specific emotion to study it, because even if many later works are remarkable (of course *The Claim of Reason*, but also *Pursuits of Happiness*, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, *A Pitch of Philosophy*), this early period is certainly the most exciting, because it expresses the moment when Cavell begins to make his philo-sophical voice heard within violent doubts (almost worries of fraudulence) about his ability to continue and the validity of his approach, completely new in fact. The following works may be seen as founded on this first work – and on the comfort of an early tenured position at Harvard acquired through these early papers and the disser-tation that grew from them. But this first work, as well as the other parallel early works (*The Senses of Walden*, 1972, and *The World Viewed*, 1971), were exploring new territory. The two articles that constitute the point of discussion, Austinian and Wittgensteinian, of *MWM* were writ-ten in uncertainty and controversy, and in an intellectual outburst motiv-ated first by the defense of Austin and his method in philosophy, then by the irritation caused by conformist readings of Wittgenstein.

In the months before I showed up to teach in Emerson Hall, the philosophers J. Fodor and J. Katz attacked the two articles I had submitted (in addition to my dissertation) as evidence in the case for my tenure appointment to Harvard, asserting (I believe I recall the exact words) that the articles were "deleterious to the future of philosophy." When two years after *MWM The World Viewed* appeared, one of the two reviews that came my way declared that the book was sickening, the other granted that my friends might like talking with me about movies but that this should not be grounds for publishing what was said privately.(*LDIK,* 442)

This is where OLP really comes into being. Still, "ordinary language philosophy" is a term that has never been claimed centrally by

Wittgenstein or even Austin; Cavell himself uses the term with caution, well aware that his work is not part of Oxford's school of "conceptual analysis" either. It is significant that his exchanges with Austin took place entirely in the USA and that he was seldom in contact with the British – who very quickly buried Austin, a philosopher who is nowadays very little discussed or studied or used in England, while Wittgenstein's studies are flourishing there.

At the outset, extending the scope of ordinary language philosophy is Cavell's philosophical project. Cavell embraces Austin's procedures, but extends them to the limit of their applicability by bringing them to an explicit self-consciousness. As William Rothman says illuminatingly in comparing *MWM* to *The World Viewed*: "The essays that comprise *Must We Mean What We Say?* not only embrace the procedures of ordinary language philosophy, they also investigate, philosophically, the very procedures they embrace."[4] The title essay, "Must We Mean What We Say?", which develops a theory of meaning in opposition to propositional sense and to psychological intention, as well as "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," are articles of historical importance that revived OLP and determined many current readings of Wittgenstein. These two essays, symmetrically, contain the seed of all of *The Claim of Reason*, and exhibit the radicality and simplicity that characterize Cavell's approach. This approach reflects an important displacement in philosophy of language: one must not only attend to meaning as an entity, analyzing the empirical content and logical structure of statements; one must also look at *what we say* – explaining who "we" are and what "saying" is. That is, we must ask ourselves what we do with our language, and how what we do in a situation is part of what we say. And this is not merely "contextualism." *MWM* was the first work to ask questions about the *relevance* of our statements *to ourselves*, by drawing from various domains and by turning to unexpected sources, such as Beckett, Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, or the discourse of music or art criticism.[5] Since then, this notion of relevance has been more or less absorbed into a mentalist philosophy of communication, but we must not let that prevent us from seeing the importance of the model that Cavell, with great fidelity to the Austinian method, proposes here. The central

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[4] William Rothman, in "Cavell's Philosophical Procedures and *Must We Mean*," 262, the Appendix to Rothman and Marian Keane, *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 261–77, confronts *MWM*'s and *WV*'s methods and provides a masterful analysis of this point.

[5] I have discussed this in my introduction to the French translation of *MWM*, *Dire et vouloir dire* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2009). See Sandra Laugier, "Introduction to the French edition of *Must We Mean What We Say?*," *Critical Inquiry* 37/4 (2011), 627–51.

question of *MWM* is not the question of a proposition's objective, semantic, or empirical content, but rather of the fortunes and misfortunes of ordinary expression. The issue is no longer what propositions *mean* or even what they *do*. Cavell changes the subject. To understand what it is to mean, you have to give up meaning (what is said) as an entity[6] and to proceed from "the fact *that* a thing is said; that it is (or can be) said (in certain circumstances) is as significant as what it says; its being said then and there is as determinative of what it says as the meanings of its individual words are" (*MWM* 167). The point is not "to provide some new sense to be attached to a word," but "to clarify what the word does mean, as we use it in our lives." It is Wittgenstein's lesson in the *Blue Book*, and Cavell also follows him whan he describes bringing words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary use: to *bring them home*. But... "there's no place like home" (as Dorothy knows all too well).

Cavell maintains in *MWM* that we know neither what we think nor what we mean, and that the task of philosophy is to bring us back to ourselves, that is, to bring words back to their everyday use and to bring knowledge of the world back to our ordinary knowledge of or proximity to ourselves. This is a response to the threat of skepticism, that loss of or distancing from the world that film also explores, as shown by *The World Viewed*. The goal, in both contexts, is clarity, and it is achieved, Cavell puts it, by "mapping the fields of consciousness lit by the occasions of a word, not through analyzing it or replacing a given word by others" (*MWM* 103).

New Realism

The appeal to the ordinary and to "our" uses of words is not obvious; it is shot through with this skepticism, with what Cavell defines as the "uncanniness of the ordinary." Thus, the ordinary is neither the common sense that empiricist philosophy sometimes claims for itself, nor does it have anything to do with a rationalized and descriptive version of ordinary language philosophy, or a semantics of ordinary language. For Cavell, as early as *MWM*, the ordinary is lost or distant.

Cavell's originality in *MWM* thus lies in defining the ordinary on the basis of a redefinition of ordinary language. It is his reading of Austin that makes such an approach possible – Cavell was the first to bring out Austin's realism. To talk about language is to talk about what language talks about.

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[6] Here there is a weird convergence with Quine; see Laugier, *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*, trans. Daniela Ginsburg (University of Chicago Press, 2013), e.g., Chapter 6.

As Cavell says: "The philosophy of ordinary language is not about language, anyway not in any sense in which it is not also about the world. Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about" (*MWM* 95). Examining ordinary language offers us a "sharpened perception of phenomena" (Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 29). It is this sharpening of visual and auditory perception that Cavell seeks in *MWM*. What is at stake in OLP is "the internality of words and world to one another" (*PH* 204). This is an intimacy that cannot be demonstrated, or posited by a metaphysical thesis, but can only be brought out by attending to the differences traced by language.

In exploring the uses of words, Austin is searching for a natural, or as he calls it, "boring," relation between words and the world. He rejects arguments that would validate this relation in terms of a structure common to language and the world: "If it is admitted (*if*) that the rather *boring* yet satisfactory relation between words and world which has here been discussed does genuinely occur, why should the phrase 'is true' not be our way of describing it?" (*Philosophical Papers*, 133). Hence Austin's mention of "linguistic phenomenology" (182) as "some less misleading name than those given above" for "this way of doing philosophy." As he puts it:

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not *merely* at words (or 'meanings' whatever they may be) but also *at the realities we use the words to talk about*: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. (182)

The relationship between language and the world is characterized by Austin in terms of a *given*. The problem is not agreeing on an opinion, but on a point of departure, a *given*, data. This given is *language* – conceived of not as a body of statements or words, but as *agreement* on "what we should say when" to make us conscious of differences of which we had not been conscious, to render them *perspicuous* (*MWM* 103). As Austin explains:

For me, it is essential at the beginning to come to an agreement on the question of "what we should say when." To my mind, experience proves amply that we do come to agreement on "what we should say when" such or such a thing, though I grant you it is often long and difficult. No matter how long it may take, one can nevertheless succeed, and on the basis of this agreement, this given, this established knowledge, we can begin to clear our little part of the garden. I should add that too often this is what is missing in philosophy: a preliminary *datum* on which one might agree at the outset.[7]

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[7] J.L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford University Press, 1962), 5.

The aesthetic perspective of *MWM* starts from the method of OLP. The philosopher's purpose in comparing and contrasting our uses of words "resembles the art critic's purpose in comparing and distinguishing works of art." It is a matter of attention. "Namely, that in this cross-light the capacities and salience of an individual object in question are brought to attention and focus." In making critical claims about art works, we mean: "Don't you see, don't you hear, don't you dig? The best critic will know the best points. Because if you do not see something, without explanation, then there is nothing further to discuss" (*MWM* 93).

Here, the agreement Austin is talking about concerning what we should say and what we mean is normative. This *normativity of the ordinary* is also a main theme by which *MWM* reformulates OLP[8]. It is normative because ordinary language "embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing and the connections they have found worth marking in the lifetimes of many generations" (Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 182). This capacity to mark differences is Cavell's obsession; in order for us to have something to say and mean, there must be differences that hook onto us and are important to us, differences that matter. As he puts it: "Further, the world must exhibit (we must observe) similarities and dissimilarities … if everything were either absolutely indistinguishable from anything else or completely unlike anything else, there would be *nothing to say*" (Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 121). Austin's realism consists in this conception of differences and resemblances. In the chapter "Austin at Criticism" Cavell insists on the reality of the distinctions in Austin, in contrast with the distinctions usually established by philosophers.

One of Austin's most furious perceptions is of the slovenliness, grotesque crudity, and fatuousness of the usual distinctions philosophers have traditionally thrown up. Consequently, one form his investigations take is that of repudiating the distinctions lying around philosophy – dispossessing them, as it were, by revealing better ones. These are better not merely because they are finer, but because they are more solid, having, so to speak, a greater natural weight. They appear normal, even inevitable, while the others are luridly arbitrary; they are useful where the others seem twisted; they are real where the others are academic; they are fruitful where the others stop cold. (*MWM* 102–3)

In "Austin at Criticism" Cavell spells out *differences* between philosophical appeals to ordinary language and empirical investigations of

[8] Cf. Sandra Laugier, "The Vulnerability of Reality – Austin, Normativity, and Excuses," in *Interpreting Austin*, ed. Savas L. Tsohatzidis (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 119–42.

language. For Austin, "true" designates one of the possible ways of expressing the harmony between language and the world. "Fitting" designates a concept not of correspondence or even of correctness, but rather of the appropriateness of a statement within the circumstances – the fact that it is proper. "The statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions" (*Philosophical Papers*, 130). Wittgenstein also has a say in formulating what proved to be Cavell's obsession throughout his work: the search for the right, fitting tone – conceptually, morally, and perceptually – that Cavell mentions in his autobiographical writings with regard to his mother's musical talent and his father's jokes. This search gives ordinary language realism its musical dimension. For Austin, "true" designates one of the possible ways of expressing the harmony between language and the world.

It is a matter of finding a fine (musical) sensitivity to things and the fit of words at the heart of ordinary uses. In this agreement between (what is) "achieved through mapping the fields of consciousness lit by the occasions of a word" (*MWM* 100), Austin registers the possibility of finding an ordinary adequacy to the world. This possibility is founded on the reality of language as the social activity of maintaining the world. Ordinary language is a (refined) tool; it represents experience and inherited perspicacity – a tool to mark differentiations. Consider, for example, the classification of actions in "Excuses" or the distinction at work in "Three Ways of Spilling Ink" between spilling intentionally, deliberately, or purposely – the minute detail of human action in its capacity for disaster, for *casualty* (a term coined later by Cavell, bringing together disaster, the casual, the ordinary).

What Cavell introduces in *MWM*, and expands on later as the object of his reflection on voice, is the connection of rightness of tone, of the adequacy of expression to knowledge of self (already a form of self-reliance). This is what he will call perfect *pitch*. He navigates adroitly between the Austinian critique of psychologism on one hand, and, on the other hand, caricature forms of emotivism that separate the content of our words from the emotion associated with them: "It is what human beings say that is true or false."[9]

Cavell answers the need expressed by Wittgenstein and Austin to take into account *what is said* and *the fact* that it is said when determining meaning. What pertains to expression and what pertains to description cannot be separated within a statement, as if one could break statements

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[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, rev. 4th edn, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, ed. Hacker (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009; 1st edn 1953), §241; hereafter abbreviated parenthetically as *PI*.

down into stabilized propositions and some "additional" force – some psychological stand-in, as pitiful to Cavell as striking a table or one's chest to legitimate or reinforce a contestable or insincere affirmation. Turning to literature and to the stage, where ordinary language is brought to life, goes directly against this approach. The problem is semantic, ethical, and also political; in one of the very rare mentions of politics in *MWM*, Cavell denounces a "moral philosophy which distinguishes between the assessment of individual actions and of social practices" (*MWM* 47). This is a transparent critique of John Rawls' 1955 article "Two Concepts of Rules," very influential at the moment Cavell composed these essays included in *MWM*. Rawls aimed at distinguishing between agreeing to, or following, a rule or principle internal to a practice and general agreement to a practice. Committing to a practice leads to learning the rules that define it and to recognizing that "its rules define it." For Rawls, "it doesn't make sense for a person to raise the question of whether or not a rule of a practice applies correctly"; as long as "the action he contemplates is a form of action defined by a practice … the only legitimate question concerns the nature of the practice itself."[10] Cavell's point is not only, first, that not all practices are governed by rules (*MWM* 52) but also, furthermore, that agreement to a practice, such as language, is never given but always under discussion. We have not agreed to everything, in language use and in political practice. This makes *MWM* a work, and OLP a method, of political philosophy – an early heterodox criticism of analytical political thought.

Relevance and Voice

Cavell has made it his goal to "reinsert … the human voice in philosophical thinking." The goal of ordinary language philosophy is indeed to make it understood that language is spoken, pronounced by a human voice within a "form of life," a concept made central in *MWM* (84). It then becomes a matter of shifting away from the question of the common use of language – central to the *Philosophical Investigations* – to the new question of the relation between an individual speaker and the language community. For Cavell, this leads to a reintroduction of the voice into philosophy, and to a redefinition of subjectivity in language precisely on the basis of the relationship of the individual voice to the linguistic community: the relation of voice to voices. The philosopher's task, to bring our words back to earth, is neither easy nor obvious, and the quest

[10] John Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," *Philosophical Review* 64/1 (1955), 3–32 (at 26).

for the ordinary is the most difficult of all, even if (and precisely because) it is available to anyone.

> No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man – unless wanting to know is a special position. And this discovery about himself is the same as the discovery of philosophy, when it is the effort to find answers, and permit questions, which nobody knows the way to nor the answer to any better than you yourself. (*MWM* xlii)

Ordinary language philosophy responds to skepticism not with new knowledge or beliefs, but by acknowledging our condition, which, to quote one of Cavell's puns, is also our diction together. Skepticism, far from dissolving in this community of language, takes on its most radical sense here: What allows me to speak in the name of others? How do I know what we mean by a word or world, to take another of Cavell's puns? *MWM* explores our form of life in language in all its diversity; "language is everywhere we find ourselves, which means everywhere in philosophy (like sexuality in psychoanalysis)" (*TNYUA* 118).

The philosophical interest of turning to *what we say* appears when we ask ourselves not only what it is to say but what this *we* is. For Cavell, this is the question at the opening of the *Philosophical Investigations*. But it is also Thoreau (and later Emerson), through his attention to the ordinary and the common, who underwrites the practices of Wittgenstein and Austin. *The Senses of Walden* (1972) is contemporary to *MWM*; without Thoreau, there would not be this passage from the Austinian ordinary to the Wittgensteinian criteria; there would not be this need for a change in how we hear language, a change in our sensitivity to what is said.

This was the task Thoreau set for himself in *Walden*: "Our reading, our conversation and thinking, are all on a very low level, worthy only of pygmies and manikins."[11]

The falsity, the hopeless inadequacy of our tone and our language, are left unexplained both by the analytic notion of truth and by the correspondence to reality that semantic approaches, continued by contemporary representationalism, emphasize. Against these approaches Cavell proposes his version of realism, which is *realistic* (in Cora Diamond's sense), and grounded in attention to the adequacy or inadequacy of our expressions to ourselves. "Yet no intervention in philosophy more clearly than Austin's prompted an awareness of our apparent failures to mean what we say" (*LDIK* 360). Cavell takes up the discovery of one's own relevance and one's relation to the real, again with regard to the ontology

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[11] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey Cramer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 104.

of cinema, in "What Becomes of Things on Film" (1978). There, he says that the *given* is made up of "the appearance and significance of just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us" (*Themes Out of School*, 183).

For Cavell, there can be no definition of relevance without an examination of what is important. Here, the risk of subjectivism arises: what is relevant for one is not, or is not always, relevant for others. But this is the whole combined argument of *MWM*, *The Senses of Walden*, and *The World Viewed*: the point in Early Cavell is to show how importance for me and importance for others are logically connected; how what is important for me is important for others and vice versa. We also find here, once again (in this volume see Arata Hamawaki and Eli Friedlander from a more Kantian perspective), a parallel between ordinary language (sensitivity to what we should say when) and aesthetic judgment. No relevance without importance, without an investment in what counts. *MWM* suggests the path to replacing or refining truth with relevance, with our perception of what is relevant to us, of what counts. As Cavell puts it in his original Foreword:

But relevance and worth may not be the point. The effort is irrelevant and worthless until it becomes necessary to you to know such things. There is the audience of philosophy; but there also, while it lasts, is its performance. (*MWM* xlii)

This is why modern criticism is an enterprise in self-knowledge. According to Cavell, this is a defining characteristic of "writing the modern": "The exercise of criticism is not to determine whether the thing is good that way but why you want it that way" (*CR* 95). He proposes a conception of criticism and objectivity according to which "these questions are always together." By radically associating "the scrupulous exactitude" of artistic desire with "a moral and intellectual imperative," Cavell redefines meaning through the conjunction of desire, importance, and value.

When in earlier writing of mine [*MWM*] I broach the topic of the modern, I am broaching the topic of art as one in which the connection between expression and desire is purified. In the modern neither the producer nor the consumer has anything to go on (history, convention, genre, form, medium, physiognomy, composition …) that secures the value or the significance of an object apart from one's wanting the thing to be as it is. (*CR* 94–95)

The Universal Voice

So what then are the criteria for what is important or significant? Our words and concepts are *dead* without their criteria for use. Wittgenstein

and Austin look for these criteria on the basis of their perception of uses. Cavell asks: how can one claim to accomplish this? It is this question – of the essential lack of foundation to this claim – that defines the sense of criteria and the task of criticism.

Cavell asks in "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy": "The question is: Why are some claims about myself expressed in the form 'We …'? About what can I speak for others on the basis of what I have learned about myself? Then suppose it is asked: 'But how do I know others speak as I do?'" (*MWM* 67). OLP thus consists in searching for means to recognize and find one's voice, to find agreement in language and the right, fitting expression – but also to find means of expressing inadequacy and disagreement. On what is the appeal to ordinary language based? All that we have is *what we say* and our agreements in language. Cavell recollects this discovery in his autobiography.

At the same time it showed me that this "we" is essentially open to shifts and moreover that the matter of "speaking for" is never an epistemological certainty but something like a moral claim, an arrogation of right, which others may grant or refuse. That Austin's and Wittgenstein's ways of appealing to what we say demonstrate the practicality and power of such appeals has been essential to my exhilaration in discovering their modes of philosophizing. The beginnings of this exhilaration are evident even in my first published philosophical paper of continuing significance for me, "Must We Mean What We Say?" (*LDIK* 432)

Ordinary language philosophy thus consists in searching for means to recognize and find one's voice, to find agreement in language and the right, fitting expression – but also to find means of expressing inadequacy and disagreement. On what is the appeal to ordinary language based? All that we have is *what we say* and our agreements in language. The agreement Austin and Wittgenstein speak of is in no way an intersubjective agreement. It is as objective as an agreement can be. But where does this agreement come from? In "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" Cavell makes the following remark about Wittgenstein, which would go on to have great resonance for other philosophers, including Hilary Putnam, John McDowell, Cora Diamond, and Veena Das:

We learn and we teach certain words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response … of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life.' Human speech and activity, sanity

and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. (*MWM* 52)

Cavell shows at once the fragility and the depth of our agreements, and focuses on the nature of the necessities that emerge from our forms of life. That our ordinary language is founded on nothing but itself is not only a source of disquiet about the validity of what we do and say, but also the revelation of a truth about ourselves. The fact is that I am the only source of such validity. This is not an "existential" interpretation of Wittgenstein, but an understanding of the fact that language is a form of life. The acceptance of this fact – which Cavell defines as "the absence of foundation or guarantee for creatures endowed with language and subject to its powers and weaknesses, subject to their mortal condition" – is an acknowledgment of finitude and of the everyday.

The realism of *MWM*[12] lies in the connection it establishes between the nature of language and *human nature*. In this sense, the question of agreement in language reformulates ad infinitum the question of the human condition, and acceptance of the latter goes hand-in-hand with acknowledgment of the former.

The philosophical problem raised by the philosophy of ordinary language is hence double. First, by what right do we base ourselves on what we say ordinarily? Next, on what or on whom do we base our determination of what we ordinarily say? But – and here lies the genius of Cavell's questioning in *MWM* – these two questions are but one. The central enigma of rationality and the community is whether it is possible for me to speak *in the name of others*. This furthers the shift in Wittgenstein from the paradigm of description to that of confession, and the particular autobiographical tone of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In *MWM* and in its method, the idea that all philosophy is autobiographical was born, and it is here that Cavell's later project to realize this idea by writing an autobiography began. In *The Senses of Walden* he reclaims this tone of confidence:

The writer has secrets to tell which can only be told to strangers. The secrets are not his, and they are not the confidences of others. They are secrets because few are anxious to know them. Only those who recognize themselves as strangers can be told them, because those who think themselves familiars will think they have already heard what the writer is saying. They will not understand his speaking in confidence. (92)

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[12] This section of the chapter partly relies on Laugier, *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*, chap. 7.

This remark brings us back to the notion of voice and the question of the foundations of agreement – the I as the ability to speak in my own name (cf. Hamawaki and Saito in this volume). It is important for the early Cavell that Wittgenstein says we agree *in* language and not *on* language. This means that we are not agents of the agreement; language precedes this agreement just as much as it is produced by it, and this very circularity constitutes an element of skepticism. The answer will not be found in convention, for convention is not an explanation of language's functioning, but rather a difficulty within it. The idea of convention cannot account for the practice of language. Our agreement – with others, with myself – is an agreement of voices; for Wittgenstein our *Übereinstimmung* is a "harmonic" agreement. Cavell defines an agreement that is neither logical, nor semantic, nor psychological, nor intersubjective. Instead, it is founded on nothing more than the validity of a voice. My individual voice claims to be a "universal voice"; this is what a voice does when it bases itself on itself alone, instead of on any condition of reason, in order to establish universal agreement. "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" puts the question of the foundation of language in these Kantian terms, showing the proximity of Wittgenstein's and Austin's methods to a paradox inherent in aesthetic judgment: basing oneself on I in order to say what we say. In aesthetic judgment, Kant leads us to discover "a property of our faculty of cognition that without this analysis would have remained unknown": the "claim to universality" proper to judgments of taste.[13] Kant distinguishes the agreeable from the beautiful, which claims universal agreement, in terms of private versus public judgment. How can a judgment that has all the characteristics of being private claim to be public, to be valid for all? Kant noted the strange, "disconcerting" nature of this fact, whose *Unheimlichkeit* Wittgenstein took to the limit. It is what Kant calls the universal voice that supports such a claim; it is the *Stimme* heard in *übereinstimmen* – the very verb Wittgenstein uses when speaking of agreeing. The question of the universal voice is in *MWM* the question of the voice itself and of its arrogation. And this question becomes also the point of criticism.[14]

There is an unhappy dimension, a dimension of failure, in OLP, an obsession with cases where language fails us, where it is inadequate, inexpressive, inarticulate. Austin's classification of "infelicities" in his account of performatives in *How to Do Things with Words* is the

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[13] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 99.
[14] On this point, see the developments in Laugier, "Introduction to the French Edition."

background for Cavell's analyses. The ever-possible failure of performatives defines language as a human activity. One of the goals of OLP will be, then, to determine the ordinary ways in which an utterance can be infelicitous. The ever-present and sometimes tragic possibility of the failure of language and action is at the center of Austin's concerns.[15] Cavell takes it further in *MWM*. Skepticism runs throughout our ordinary use of language. I am constantly tempted and threatened by inexpressiveness. In *MWM* Cavell brings together Freud and Wittgenstein in their shared awareness of the impossibility of controlling what we say (reinforced by our will to master).

Because the breaking of such control is a constant purpose of the later Wittgenstein, his writing is deeply practical and negative, the way Freud's is. And like Freud's therapy, it wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change. In both, such misfortune is betrayed in the incongruence between what is said and what is meant or expressed; for both, the self is concealed in assertion and action and revealed in temptation and wish. (*MWM* 72)

Whether it is through ordinary language philosophy or psychoanalysis, the examination of our statements does not give us any greater mastery over our lives or words. This is the radical shift Cavell makes in *MWM*. In asking how *to mean* what I say, Cavell, far from reestablishing subjectivity by defining it as voice, turns the question of private language around. The problem lies not in being able to express what I have inside me – thinking or feeling something without being able to say it – but rather the opposite; it is to *mean what I say*. To say, as *How to Do Things with Words* demonstrated, that language is also action, does not mean I control language (for, as is clear from the central role excuses play in our lives, I do not control my actions any better). This summarizes an intuition expressed in *MWM*: the impossibility of speaking the world masks a refusal to know oneself and to *mean or be meaningful*. "What they had not realized was what they were saying, or, what they were really saying, and so had not known *what they meant*. To this extent, they had not known themselves, and not known the world" (*MWM* 40). Cavell adds here interestingly the definition, quoted before, of the ordinary world. The ordinary world is not everything there is in the world, "but it is important enough": it is the world of what matters – Cavell's world, the world we inherit from him, the world of *MWM*.

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[15] On this, see Sandra Laugier, "The Vulnerability of the Ordinary: Goffman, Reader of Austin," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 39/2 (2019), 367–401.

Revolutions

However, a new reading of Wittgenstein – the presentation of which is the purpose of "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" – is necessary to bring out the way in which the voice is part of our human form of life. To do this, Cavell proposes that we redefine what we understand by grammar. There is a certain reading of Wittgenstein that leads to focusing on the rules that would constitute grammar, a grammar of the norms of language's functioning and its "normal" uses, that is acquired like any other form of knowledge. In contrast, Cavell proposes a reading of Wittgenstein in which learning is initiation into the "relevant forms of life." "In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the 'forms of life' which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do" (*CR* 177–78).

With his first systematic study of Wittgenstein, first published in a collection dedicated to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Cavell found the tone for his reading of Wittgenstein, which would go on revolutionize the field of Wittgenstein studies (see Floyd's contribution to this volume). In "The Availability" he tells us how Wittgenstein's later philosophy teaches us things we know but do not want to know. Cavell subverts the recourse to the notion of a rule, replacing it with the notion of forms of life – the fabric/texture/whirl of human existence. We agree in forms of life, but this agreement neither explains nor justifies anything. All that we have is *what we say*, nothing else. In "The Availability" we see clearly Cavell's transition from the question of common language to that of shared forms of life, in which not only social structures are shared, but also everything that makes up the fabric of human lives and activities. Cavell shows both the fragility and the depth of our agreements, and focuses on the very nature of the necessities that emerge out of our forms of life. To agree in language means that language – our form of life – produces our understanding just as much as it is the product of an agreement. In this sense, it is natural to us, and the idea of convention is there to at once mimic and mask this necessity. Cavell's insistence on reading the concept of forms of life as *life*-forms, not simply *forms* of life, turns the given of Austin's datum into the given of life-forms – a second vertical dimension of form of life, coordinated to the first, horizontal, social agreement. Discussions of conventionalism have occluded the force of the "natural" sense of life-forms in Wittgenstein, the casual/fatal character of the ordinary that Wittgenstein evokes in his mention of "the natural history of humanity" – realities and structures of life, to which the beautiful epigraph from Jean Giraudoux also refers (*MWM* 44).

This allows us to understand – beyond banalities about a Wittgensteinian "therapeutic" – how reading Wittgenstein can transform

us (how it is revolutionary). "When [Wittgenstein or the ordinary language philosopher] asks 'What would we say (what would we call) … ?' … he is asking something which can be answered by remembering *what is said and meant*" (*MWM* 64).

This sheds light on the relationship between grammar and "transcendental" knowledge. Grammar is not a philosophical method – unless it consists in asking, "what would we say if … ?" or, "but would someone call … ?" These are questions that ask one to say something about herself.

So the different methods are methods for acquiring self-knowledge … perhaps more shocking, and certainly more important, than any of Freud or Wittgenstein's particular conclusions is their discovery that knowing oneself is something for which there are methods – something, therefore, that can be taught (though not in obvious ways) and practiced. (*MWM* 66–67)

Cavell's first reading of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* shows that "the nature of self-knowledge – and therewith the nature of the self – is one of the great subjects of the *Investigations* as a whole" (*MWM* 68). *The Claim of Reason* develops this line of thinking masterfully. But it is nevertheless the case that "The Availability" on its own established the principles of an unorthodox reading of Wittgenstein that continues to inspire us. By exploring our relevance to ourselves, *MWM* reveals the connection between the words we pronounce and hear, the truth we search for, and the life we want to lead – which was revolutionary in the philosophy, and in the culture, and in the politics of the late 1960s, and remains so today.

In fact, "revolutionary" is the word Cavell uses in his Foreword to describe "Wittgenstein's and Austin's sense of their … tasks [as] … a recognizable version of the wish 'to establish the truth of this world'":

Wherever there really is a love of wisdom – or call it the passion for truth – it is inherently, if usually ineffectively, revolutionary; because it is the same as a hatred of the falseness in one's character and of the needless and unnatural compromises in one's institutions. (*MWM* xxxix)

This revolutionary character, which Cavell attributes to Wittgenstein and Austin, to their capacity to transform us, is that of *MWM*. Thus, already in *MWM*, finding the real conditions of truth in politics and in ethics is the most urgent question. And that is what makes this book of essays the starting point of any inheritance of philosophy of language. This is, in a sense, all there is to understand in order to understand why and how it still matters.