

Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy

Volume 9, Number 9

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ISSN: 2159-0303

jhaponline.org

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Cavell's Method: Pursuing and Subverting the Analytic Tradition

Sandra Laugier

It may be time to question analytic philosophy's structural ignorance of the methods of ordinary language philosophy. Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?* upsets the analytic tradition to this end, pursuing a "linguistic phenomenology" that focuses on ordinary language use as a resource for describing the world. Cavell thereby entrusts the tradition with a more ambitious and concrete philosophical task.

*Special Issue: Recovering the History of Analytic Philosophy
with Stanley Cavell*

Edited by Edward Guetti and G. Anthony Bruno

Cavell's Method: Pursuing and Subverting the Analytic Tradition

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1. Early Cavell

Since the ascendancy of Viennese logical positivism following the immigration of its central figures during the 1930s, it has been customary to identify analytic philosophy with the legacy of the Vienna Circle, which was taken up by naturalism and then by a philosophy of mind influenced by the cognitive sciences. Cavell brought recognition, within and beyond “standard” analytic philosophy as it developed in the English-speaking world, to the legacy of ordinary language philosophy as an alternative method of analysis.

Must We Mean What We Say (1969) and *The Claim of Reason* (1979) are dedicated to Austin and Wittgenstein, and, when they appeared, they signaled the arrival of a new voice, unclassifiable within analytic philosophy yet inextricably bound up with it, demanding above all that we pay attention to language as we ordinarily speak and mean it. It is somewhat surprising that this interest in language as it is actually spoken—and not in logical or mentalist reformulations of it—is interpreted by many analytical philosophers as a departure from analytic philosophy, and not as a way of staying within it, of getting back to a form of realism. Such an interpretation is misleading, for Cavell's work and many of his subjects are demonstrably part of analytic philosophy. Cavell is often considered “post-analytic”, but I would like to show his place within the tradition of analytic philoso-

phy and discuss the shifts he made within it, which profoundly transformed its project and created an alternative within it.

At first glance, Cavell's methods are hardly analytic, if for no other reason than, for him, philosophy deals with texts and not with problems or arguments. For example, *Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The Claim of Reason* explore the writings of Austin, Wittgenstein, and Shakespeare; *Senses of Walden* (1972), of Thoreau; and *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (1989) and *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1993), of Emerson. And yet Cavell's work is not exegetical, it is analytical. Its guiding theme is that philosophy has always posited the ordinary (ordinary language, ordinary life) as its other, as that from which it must separate or distinguish itself. The “first” analytic philosophy, represented by Frege's and Russell's linguistic turn, was no different from classical philosophy in this respect: the majority of analytic philosophers sought to present philosophy as an extension of “common sense”, or in any case as starting off from it (i.e., Quine), but in general saw it as *going beyond* ordinary thought, taking “science” as a model.

Cavell, on the other hand, sought to bring the human voice back into analytic philosophy and to carry the linguistic turn through to its culmination. He did this through his powerful rehabilitation of ordinary language philosophy, which he understood not as merely an interesting, bygone moment in the philosophy of language but as its very heart. His first, and no doubt most important work, *Must We Mean What We Say?* lays out this argument. In it, Cavell proposes a renewed application of Austin's theory of speech acts, outlines the bases of his radical reading of Wittgenstein, and begins a reflection on the ordinary and tragedy that would run through his later works (*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* 1990, *In Quest of the Ordinary* 1988, and *A Pitch of Philosophy* 1994) combined with the aesthetic approach that defines his work and anchors it in modernism—all starting from the simple question of what it is to *mean*.

Cavell defends and brings to completion the project of ordinary language philosophy, which is to be distinguished from what has been called “linguistic philosophy”. Ordinary language philosophy goes back to Wittgenstein’s first questions in *The Blue Book* and to Austin’s in his first essays: what is the meaning of a word? How to talk? In both content and method, *Must We Mean What We Say?* gave expression to a crucial challenge for analytic philosophy, at the very moment when the existence and value of a philosophy of *language* as its own domain was being called into question, as well as its data and method.

Cavell broke into a philosophical tradition that came out of the integration of Viennese philosophers into the American philosophical milieu during the 1930s.¹ This entry was particularly significant because it occurred within the tradition of analytic philosophy itself—contrary to what a certain “post-analytic” view of his work claims. Cavell undertook the first *internal* interrogation of analytic philosophy on the basis of the work of Austin and Wittgenstein. To take an interest in our ordinary statements, in what we *say* and *mean*, offends both the “classical” philosophical tradition, which most often seeks to go beyond ordinary meaning, and the analytic tradition, which seeks to analyze and correct ordinary propositions. The relevance of ordinary language philosophy has since been confirmed by a number of other important philosophers (Hilary Putnam, Charles Travis, Veena Das), and more generally by challenges to the efficacy of the mainstream analytic paradigm. However, Cavell was certainly the first to undermine analytic philosophy from within.

The earliest essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* proposed innovative and influential analyses, which sparked important discussions in analytic philosophy when they appeared. Cavell developed a theory of meaning in opposition both to propositional meaning and to psychological intention, and he was the first to

¹For a historical overview, see Laugier (1999, 2013). For a recent analysis, see Cray and DeLara (2019).

reverse the standard reading of Wittgenstein and the dominance of the paradigm connecting meaning and truth, proposing instead to go back to the letter of Wittgenstein’s text and to notice the priority of forms of life over rules. The stakes of ordinary language philosophy do not represent a bygone historical moment, but rather a true alternative to, or a shift *within*, the philosophy of language. The fact that the philosophy of language cannot be reduced to analysis, to examination, and, in particular, to the distinction between (empirical) content and the (logical) structure of statements has been amply demonstrated within analytic philosophy, especially by Quine, as well as by Putnam, Davidson, and Rorty. But for Cavell, this is not the issue. We must pay attention to what we say: to “we” and to “say”. We must ask how what we do in a given real situation *is part of* what we say. Thus, *Must We Mean What We Say?* was the first work to raise the question of the *relevance* of our statements (which is not the same as determining their meaning or non-meaning), across various domains and by drawing on unexpected resources, *as relevance in relation to ourselves*. Since then, the notion of relevance has been absorbed by mentalist philosophy, but this must not obscure the importance of the method Cavell proposed. The question is no longer the meaning of propositions, nor what propositions *do*, but rather *meaning what we say*, a question that exceeds the stakes of contemporary pragmatics.

Cavell uses an expression borrowed from Wittgenstein: *to bring words back* from their metaphysical usage to their ordinary usage, to bring them back home (Wittgenstein 1958, §116). This return to ordinary uses is *critical*. One of Cavell’s earliest claims was that we *do not know* what we think or what we mean, and that the task of philosophy is to bring us back to ourselves—to bring our words back to their everyday uses and to bring knowledge of the world back to knowledge of or proximity to the self. This “voice of the ordinary” only takes on meaning in response to skepticism—in response to that loss or distancing of the world, a loss of words that is a subject of cinema, as Cavell discusses in *The*

World Viewed (1971), and also of politics. From the outset, skepticism is the context of reflection on ordinary language. However, skepticism took on such a role in readings and interpretations of Cavell that it ultimately obscured his contribution to the theoretical movement he wanted to both defend and exemplify in *Must We Mean What We Say?*

As William Rothman notes, “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” (Rothman 2000, 262). For Rothman, “Extending the medium of ordinary language philosophy to an explicit self-consciousness is Cavell’s own philosophical project” (2000, 262). Cavell embraces Austin’s procedures, but extends them to the larger realm of *what we say*.

Must We Mean What We Say? can be seen as belonging to the first part of Cavell’s work, “early Cavell”, which also includes *The World Viewed* (1971) and *Senses of Walden* (1972). It is striking to study, because even if many later works are also remarkable for how they take up Austin’s work—not just *The Claim of Reason* (1979) but also *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981) and *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1994)—this early period is certainly the most philosophically groundbreaking. Here, Cavell begins to make his philosophical voice heard alongside doubts about his ability to continue and the validity of his completely new approach.

Ordinary language philosophy (OLP) is a minority current, marginalized both in mainstream language philosophy and in the field of pragmatics, which one might be tempted to think has taken over for OLP. The widespread analytic philosophy that emerged from the “linguistic turn”, now linked to the cognitive sciences and to so-called “philosophy of mind”, is certainly fertile, but it systematically neglects contemporary approaches to language that cannot be reduced to cognitivist models. By taking ordinary uses of language as the starting point for philosophical analysis, OLP manages to avoid the “scholastic illusion” that Austin denounced in the 1950s, and against which Bourdieu

later warned as well, describing the danger of taking “the things of logic for the logic of things”. The thought produced by such logic-bound thinking, Austin and Bourdieu understood, would inevitably be sterile—vain scholasticism without any connection to the problems we face in our ordinary lives. OLP, meanwhile, is oriented toward social matters and attention to neglected reality. Its primary methodological ambition is a conceptual analysis that allows us to recognize the importance of *context* in our uses of language, thought, and perception—that is, in our different ways of engaging in the real—while at the same time defending a certain form of realism anchored in these practices: our words, expressions, and thoughts.

With the Austinian notion of linguistic phenomenology, OLP assesses its reflection on language on the basis of an adequacy or description no longer measured by “correspondence”, but instead by the fineness of fit. OLP does not encourage us to define the meaning of a term as the set of situations where this term is appropriate, nor as a bundle of established uses, but rather to examine how meaning is made, is improvised through its integration into practice and self-expressivity. OLP sees language as affecting us, allowing us to affect others, and constantly transforming our meanings: as part of the reality it has to describe and account for.

Cavell’s particularity lies in how he defines the ordinary itself on the basis of ordinary language, and thus constructs the thought of the ordinary on the basis of ordinary language philosophy. Such an approach to the ordinary is made possible by a rigorous reading of Austin that seeks to demonstrate Austin’s “realism”. The goal for both Austin and Cavell is *clarity*, and it is achieved, as 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” (Cavell 1969, 103).

But this new mapping and elucidation is ambitious and radical, for it also deals with the *fact* that we say something, which is clearly part of the reality that must be described. To analyze

using the method pioneered by Wittgenstein and Austin is 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” (Cavell 1969, 167).

2. Descriptions, Data, Details

Cavell’s reading of Austin is the foundation for this method, and Cavell was the first to bring out Austin’s inherent realism. 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 (Cavell 1969, 95).

To talk about language is to talk about what language talks about, and this analysis is rooted in *attention* to language as it is commonly used. Cavell’s method aims to combine realist aspirations— a conception of language as a fine, precise tool for describing reality—with a *realistic* (see Diamond 1991) conception of language as a continuous practice of adjusting, fitting, perceiving differences and resemblances. OLP recognizes that language is part of our everyday interactions and conversations, and is necessarily spoken by a human voice. It is this more holistic sense of language that the later Wittgenstein means by a “form of life”: the philosopher no longer conceives of language as representing the world, but rather aims to “come back to earth” and see the practices in which language is *caught*, which collect around our words.

The problem of realism, then, is less a (cognitive) matter of being able to suppose or posit the real, but rather the (ordinary) matter of accepting it, accepting *being part of it*.² The exploration

²This passivity of expression is the subject of my book *Wittgenstein, Le mythe de l’inexpressivité* (Laugier 2010).

of uses is an inventory of our forms of life: for Austin, we examine “what we would say when”, “which words to employ in which situations”, what fits the circumstances or allows one to act on them. Austin makes it clear that “we are not looking merely at words, but also at the realities we use the words to talk about. We are using our sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception, though not as the final arbiter of the phenomena” (Austin 1961, 182). The language of description is a tool for focusing and paying attention, and is associated with agreement and with the perception of important details.

Crucial here is the transition Cavell makes from the question of common language to that of the form of life in language: the sharing not only of social structures but of all that constitutes the fabric of human existences and activities. The theme of the ordinary introduces skepticism into practice: certainty, or trust in what we do (play, argue, value, promise), is modeled on the trust we have in our shared uses of language and our capacity to use it appropriately. The enigma of speaking the same ordinary language—the uncanniness of the use of ordinary language—is the possibility for me to speak in the name of others, and vice versa. It is not enough to invoke commonness; we still must discover what authorizes me to speak, what is the strength of our agreement. “It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life” (Wittgenstein 1958, §241).

It is crucial for Cavell that we agree *in* and not on language. That means that language precedes this agreement as much as it is produced by it.

We learn and teach 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). . . It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying (Cavell 1969, 52).

Examining ordinary language offers us a “sharpened perception of phenomena” (Austin 1961, 29). It is this sharpening of visual and aural perception that Cavell seeks in *Must We Mean What We Say?* What is at stake in OLP is “the internality of words and world to one another” (Cavell 1981, 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 even, 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, as Wittgenstein posited in the *Tractatus*: “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?” (Austin 1961, 133)

Austin uses the concrete examination of usages (what he calls “fieldwork”) as a method for locating the naturalness of language’s relation to the world in agreement in language rather than in an *a priori* correspondence between words and the world.

The relationship between language and the world is characterized by Austin, *analytically*, 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 not as a body of statements or words, but as *agreement* on “what we should say when” that can make us conscious of differences of which we had not been aware, that can render differences *perspicuous* (Cavell 1969, 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.”. . . I should add that too often this is what is missing in philosophy: a preliminary *datum* on which one might agree at the outset (Austin 1961, 182).

Austin was not the first to look for a ground for agreement that would allow philosophy a new starting point. However, it is

clear (for Austin) that philosophers have failed to find a point of agreement and have lost themselves in interminable and above all, in Austin’s opinion, “boring” discussions. Contrary to what is often believed, the problem is not even that philosophers “do not manage to agree” on an opinion or a thesis; the problem is instead managing to agree on a starting point—that is, Austin says, on a *given*. For him, this given is language: not as a body of statements or words, but as the place of agreement on what we should say when. It is indeed, for him, a matter of an empirical given or, as he sometimes says, experimental data.

Agreement is possible, and the given exists just like any other empirical given, because ordinary language is a compendium of differences, and “embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing in the lifetimes of many generations,” which are certainly more subtle and solid than “any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon—the most favored alternative method” (Austin 1961, 182). It is this capacity to mark differences that interests Cavell: in order for us to have something to say and to mean, there must be differences that “grab” us and are important to us, differences that matter. These differences are what motivate both “the fact” that we speak and the meaning of what we say.

Cavell’s method is striking in its *generality*. The aesthetic perspective contained in *Must We Mean What We Say?* starts off by analyzing 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,” for it is a matter of attention: “Namely, that in this crosslight the capacities and salience of an individual object in question are brought to attention and focus” (Cavell 1969, 103). 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. . . At some point, the critic will have to say: This is what I see” (Cavell 1969, 93). When an ordi-

nary language philosopher distinguishes between what we can and cannot say or mean in particular circumstances, the thrust is not “to provide labels for differences previously, somehow, noticed”, but “to compare and (as it were) to elicit differences” (Cavell 1969, 103): to make us *clear* about differences of which we had not been conscious.

The agreement Austin invokes concerning what we *should* say and what we mean is *normative*. This *normativity of ordinary* language is a central theme through which *Must We Mean What We Say?* reformulates OLP and reiterates the *Tractatus* (see Laugier 2017). It is indeed the capacity of ordinary language preoccupations to mark differences that makes language such an adequate instrument, and thus it is indeed in language that we must look for the foundation if not of truth, at least of the “true.” To cite from “Truth”: “if everything were either absolutely indistinguishable from anything else or completely unlike anything else, there would be *nothing to say*” (Austin 1961, 121).

Austin’s realism consists in this conception of differences and resemblances. Perceiving differences in language allows us to better perceive things. In the wonderful essay “Austin at Criticism”, Cavell insists on the reality of the distinctions made by OLP, in contrast with those usually established by philosophers.

Too obviously, Austin is continuously concerned to draw distinctions, and the finer the merrier, just as he often explains and justifies what he is doing by praising the virtues of natural distinctions over homemade ones. . . One of Austin’s most furious perceptions is of the slovenliness, the 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 showing better ones. 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. (Cavell 1969, 102–3).

3. Fit

In “Austin at Criticism”, Cavell spells out the differences between philosophical appeals to ordinary language and empirical investigations of language. The aim of studying ordinary language is realistic. For Austin, “true” designates one of the possible ways of expressing the harmony between language and the world. “Fitting” refers not to correspondence or even correctness, but rather 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” (Austin 1961, 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—the right word, “*das treffende Wort*” (Wittgenstein 1958, IIxi, 215). In his autobiographical writings, Cavell connects this search to his mother’s musical talent and his father’s jokes.

The connection between language and the world is seen and made in cataloguing the differences that language traces in the real. It is in this sense that analytic philosophy can become fieldwork, by approaching the real in a concrete way. Cavell follows Austin’s fundamental intuition that it is this type of precise fit between language and the real that will give us back the world—not the quest for metaphysical adequation.

Fit is a matter of finding a fine (musical-like) sensitivity to words and things at the heart of ordinary uses. In the agreement that is “achieved through mapping the fields of consciousness *lit by the occasions of a word*” (Cavell 1969, 100), Austin registers the possibility of finding an ordinary adequacy to 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 Austin’s essay “A Plea for Excuses”, or the distinction at work in his “Three Ways of Spilling Ink” between spilling intentionally, deliberately, or

purposely (Austin 1961). Austin's philosophy seeks to establish the connection between language and the world not in the traditional terms of realism or correspondence but as a function of our adequacy to our words. It will remain for Cavell to show that there is nothing obvious about this adequacy—or rather, that the moments of obviousness in linguistic agreement that give Austin such joy are inseparable from (or are the other side of) an anxiety proper to the use of language and from the risk of radical inadequacy.

Cavell saw early on that the theory of speech acts cannot be understood independently from Austin's other writings, and he relies in particular on his essays "Truth", "Pretending", and "A Plea for Excuses" (in Austin 1961). Austin created not just a theory of speech acts, but a theory of what it is to say something: a theory of *what is said*. This inquiry into what is said is a new articulation of the relation between language and the state of things. The discovery of performatives allows us to call into question, for all of our declarations, the idea of a one-to-one relationship between words and the world. Austin claims to be the author of an empirical discovery, of a natural phenomenon that in some sense has always been there—like ordinary language, something that we have always had beneath our eyes, but to which we have never paid attention.

Austin begins *How To Do Things with Words* by isolating a category of statements and acknowledging a phenomenon *to which philosophy has not paid sufficient attention*—even, and especially, analytic philosophy of language, which has, since Frege, identified language's essential function as representational. Austin disputes the idea, which he calls the "descriptive fallacy", that the primary function of language is to represent or depict (accurately or not) states of affairs or situations.

The innovation introduced by Cavell in *Must We Mean What We Say?* is to connect the rightness of tone and the fit of expression to knowledge of oneself. He must thus carefully navigate between the Austinian critique of expression (which Austin says belongs

to psychology and thus is not relevant) and caricatural forms of non-cognitivism, which separate the content of our words from the emotion associated with them. Whence Cavell's interest in "aesthetic problems" (see Cavell 1969, 73–86): the classic question of analyzing statements of taste and value.

It is important to understand that Cavell's goal is not to emphasize emotions and affects as if they escape analysis, but rather to insist that they must be integrated into "what we say". He was the first to have explicitly used OLP to question non-cognitivism and what we may call the "two-component theory", which breaks statements down into a factual component and a second component, either emotive, evaluative, or expressive. This kind of non-cognitivist analysis can be found in various forms in contemporary philosophy of language—in Carnap, Ayer, Ogden and Richards, Stevenson, and Hare. In his early work, Cavell proposed a theory of meaning that connects ethics and aesthetics and avoids both propositionalism (which posits a correspondence between propositions and states of things) and non-cognitivism. In fact, the two are connected, as Cavell realized: the problem with non-cognitivism is its semantics, which reconstructs moral and aesthetic judgments as statement + tone/affect (a feeling or expression of indignation, approbation, etc.). But such a philosophy of language is untenable, and is exactly what Wittgenstein and Austin challenged when they showed that it is necessary to take into account all of what is "said", the entirety of the circumstances of statement: in other words, "It is what human beings *say* that is true and false" (Wittgenstein 1958, §241). Wittgenstein himself had strong misgivings about Ogden and Richards's book *The Meaning of Meaning*, which proposed an "emotive theory of ethics" (Ogden and Richards 1989), later taken up by Ayer and Stevenson. This theory is based on a distinction between two competing functions in language, the symbolic function and the emotive function. The semantic error is to separate, within a statement, what is of the order of expression and what is description, as if a statement could be analyzed

as a stable proposition plus an “additional” force—a psychological *ersatz*, which Cavell found to be as hollow as banging one’s fist on the table, or on one’s chest, to legitimize or reinforce a contestable or insincere declaration. When Cavell criticizes non-cognitivism, it is on this point: the idea that ethics or aesthetics could be either contained in or emptied out of the expressive function, and that one must give up on integrating them into *analysis*. His goal is to extend analysis to all that we say. From this point of view, OLP affects a veritable methodological break from emotivism, although some have tried to align the two (see [Recanati 1991](#)). The problem of modern philosophy is aesthetic, semantic, ethical, and political: in *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell denounces a “Manichean conception” ([Cavell 1969](#), 47) that uses a pseudo-separation between meaning and context to express a refusal to pay attention to ordinary language. This gave rise to his slogan “mean what we say”, which is not so much a call to (truly) express what we say but rather to analyze *all* that we say and mean.

4. “Be Your Size”

Cavell thus takes up the question of the description of the world that is at the root of OLP and lies at the intersection of the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. If, to speak like Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, the questions that matter to us have not even been “touched” by analysis ([Wittgenstein 1922](#), 6.52), this is because the relationship between language and the real has not been elucidated either by the picture theory of meaning, or by the semantic definition of truth, or by contemporary representationism. In place of these approaches, all of which are based on the idea of “relation” and correspondence, Cavell proposes his realism (in the sense of “realistic”, and thus in line with the *Tractatus*), anchored in attention to the adequacy (or inadequacy) of our ordinary expressions—this is the idea, present throughout the *Blue Book*, of returning to earth, coming back to the “rough

ground”. Here again, Cavell’s method is analytic, for it consists in taking the refusal of metaphysics further, by refusing to invoke the logical “isomorphism” of the *Tractatus* (as standard interpretations of it do) to “explain” or express the adequacy of language to the world. And here again, it is by going back to this crucial period in the philosophy of language (the 1960s) that we can glimpse both the connection between ordinary language philosophers and their analytic predecessors, and the meaning of the break that seems to have arisen between the two currents. Undoubtedly this was due to the establishment of a certain dominant institutional and political model of analytic philosophy in America, and the denial of a different path (see [Laugier 1999, 2013](#); see also the forthcoming book *Cavell’s Must We Mean What We Say? at Fifty* 2021).

The (logical) point of OLP is that words are *part of the world*—not through the miracle of semantics or reference, which would leave them outside the world, but simply by themselves. Here is how Austin resolves the question of language’s “relation” to reality:

There must be a stock of symbols... These may be called “words”. . . There must also be something other than the words, which the words are to be used to communicate about: this may be called “the world”. There is no reason why the world should not include the words, in every sense. ([Austin 1961](#), 121)

Words, says Austin, are typically “medium sized dry goods”—our typical ordinary objects (Quine would call words “standard sized goods found at market” in [Beck and Wahl 1962](#), 343), but there is nothing physicalist or naturalistic about Austin’s affirmation here.

It is the closeness in size and scale between words and ordinary objects that makes this claim possible. We know how important the concept of “size” is for Austin: he writes, for example, that before wondering if Truth is a substance, a quality, or a relation, philosophers should “take something more nearly their own size

to strain at" (Austin 1961, 117). This, as Urmson reminds us, was the goal Austin set for his method: "Be your size. Small men" (Fann 1969, 83). Austin was undoubtedly the first to systematically apply such a method of analysis—a method based both on the handiness and familiarity of the objects concerned and on the shared agreement this *method* brings about at every stage.

A new reading of Wittgenstein is required to bring out the reality of "what is said", the inscription of voice within the human form of life. Standard readings of the later Wittgenstein lead to focusing on the *rules* that would constitute grammar, a grammar of the norms of language's functioning and its "normal" uses, 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". When Wittgenstein speaks of *rules* or of language, he gives neither an argument nor an explanation; rather, he *describes*. We learn to use words in certain contexts, from our elders, and throughout our lives, without a net, without a guarantee, without universals, we must use them in new contexts, project them, create new meaning—this is what constitutes the texture of the form of life that is language.

Such a reading of Wittgenstein makes it possible to reread the *Tractatus* as a first theory of usage; this is the "New Wittgenstein" illustrated by the work of Cora Diamond, James Conant, and Charles Travis. This reading of the *Tractatus* also makes it possible to understand the anti-metaphysical radicalization of the *Investigations* and how it continued the descriptive project of the *Tractatus*. But it is Cavell's critical innovation that is the source of all the others. He subverts recourse to the notion of a rule and replaces it with that of criteria, agreement, and form of life. We agree *in* forms of life, but this agreement neither explains nor justifies anything. Agreeing *in* language means that language—our form of life—produces our understanding just as much as it is the result of an agreement, and it is in this sense that it is natural. The idea of convention both mimics and masks this necessity. This sums up the critique famously made by Cavell

and radicalized by Veena Das of usual interpretations of "forms of life" through the expression "*lifeforms*," and not merely "*forms of life*" (see Laugier 2015, 2018c). Forms of life are not only social structures, various cultural habits, but that which has to do with "the specific strength and scale of the human body and of the human senses and of the human voice" (Cavell 1989, 42). Here we may raise the issue—suggested by Cavell and pursued brilliantly by Veena Das—of these two senses of form of life, one social and one biological, and the different orders of normativity they involve. The expression "*life forms*" (that is, the form of life not only in its social dimension but in its biological dimension, the form life takes) emphasizes this second (Cavell calls it vertical) axis of form of life, while recognizing the importance of the first (horizontal) axis, social agreement. Discussions of this first meaning (conventions, rituals, rules) have occluded the force of the "natural" and biological sense of forms of life in Wittgenstein, which he also defines in his mention of "the natural history of human beings" (Wittgenstein 1958, §415). What is *given* in forms of life are not just our social structures and different cultural habits (see Das 2019). These two senses of *Lebensform* are at stake in the dichotomy between perlocutionary acts and illocutionary acts.

Wittgenstein wants to show *both* the fragility and the depth of our agreements, the necessities that emerge from our forms of life; the alternative reading of Wittgenstein that Cavell proposes is that of the *ordinary*. In contrast to a focus on the rules that constitute a grammar—a grammar of the norms of language and its "normal" usage, acquired like any other form of knowledge—Cavell focuses on learning as initiation into 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" (Cavell 1979, 177–78).

In "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" (Cavell 1969, 44–72), Cavell makes the 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 texture of human lives and activities, that calls for description:

How could human behavior be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans as they are all mixed up together. Not what *one* man is doing *now*, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action (Wittgenstein 1980, §629).

Cavell's insistence on reading the concept of forms of life as *lifeforms* turns the given of Austin's *datum* into the given of *lifeforms*: a second, vertical dimension of form of life, coordinated with the first, horizontal dimension, the dimension of social agreement.

For Austin, ordinary language use, agreement on "what we should say when", is *the given* of philosophy. As I have noted, for Austin, the problem is not that philosophers "do not manage to agree" on an opinion or a thesis, it is that they do not manage to agree on a starting point—that is, Austin says, on a given. It is indeed, for Austin, a matter of an empirical given or even "experimental data". He adds that agreement (on "what we should say when") is "an agreement on how to determine a certain given," and thus an agreement "on a certain manner, one manner, of *describing* and grasping facts" (Austin in Beck and Wahl 1962, 334). There is more than one way to describe the facts, and this was one of Austin's arguments against a simplistic form of correspondence truth; but if we can "agree on a certain manner of describing facts", we do indeed also discover something.

"A Plea for Excuses" constitutes an explicit manifesto for the method of ordinary language as a method of analysis. Agreement is possible for Austin because ordinary language is a compendium of differences, but Cavell considers this method insufficiently developed and goes further: if language accounts for differences, language use must be studied in every detail of our "complicated" form of life—in our expressions of love and suffering and admiration and outrage; hence Cavell's later interest in

the perlocutionary, which he seeks to analyze using the criteria of validation and a series of truth conditions, inspired by Austin's analyses of the illocutionary (see Cavell 2005 and Laugier 2020).

Cavell's rehabilitation of the perlocutionary, its inclusion in the realm of performativity, "affords a portrait, or scan, of the interactions which constitute a society that is at variance with Austin's portrait of a constitution rationally dominated by established rituals and shared rules" (Cavell 2005, 185). The interactions or *encounters* named by perlocutionary verbs are ones that, reversing the conditions of the illocutionary, in effect occasionally challenge the rationality of the reign of rules. How can Cavell propose conditions of felicity for the perlocutionary effects of passionate utterances if there are no conventional procedures, predetermined rules, or rationality involved? Cavell boldly parallels Austin's conditions for illocutionary utterances (procedure, appropriate person, etc.) with a series of his own analogous conditions for the perlocutionary. For example, in the case of the illocutionary, failures have to do with not identifying the correct procedure and the right person, either as performer or addressee ("securing of uptake", Austin 1962, 118). In the perlocutionary, failure "puts the future of our relationship, as part of my sense of my identity, or of my existence, more radically at stake" (Cavell 2005, 194); "Appropriateness is to be decided in each case" (2005, 192). Analyzing the *conditions of felicity* of the perlocutionary would call for a "deduction" of each situation and relationship, just as for Cavell each word would require a transcendental deduction of its uses to account for its capacity of description.

Here the speech act is not enough to account for ordinary language's capacity of expression *and* description. The validity of the performative (the illocutionary act) is, for Austin, granted by words and institutions. But ordinary language is not only about rules and conventions. It is about what matters to us. In *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell connects this to what he calls *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) (Cavell 1969, 40).

The ordinary world is not everything there is in the world, “but it is important enough”. If OLP is defined as an analysis of what we should say when, and in what context, then it must become a claim by philosophy to analyze the whole of human language that matters.

5. Importance

Cavell 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* (Cavell 2010, 217).

All the subjects addressed in the essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, from Austin and Wittgenstein to Beckett, *add up to a book*, because there is no *hierarchy of subject* in ordinary language philosophy. Cavell had fancied putting the book in a newspaper format, so that “each essay could begin on the front page and end on the back page, with connections in between” (Cavell 1994, 78). This is intended, following Wittgenstein, to subvert the categories of philosophy (see Laugier 2018b):

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems to destroy everything great and interesting? (Wittgenstein 1958, §118)

–What feels like destruction, what expresses itself here in the idea of destruction, is really a shift in what we are asked to let interest us,

in the tumbling of our ideas of the great and the important (Cavell 1979, XXI).

Must We Mean What We Say? can nowadays be considered an empowerment of ordinary language philosophy as a philosophical instrument of analysis that goes far beyond “language” as defined by analytic philosophy. With *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell opens the possibility, beyond the all-too-comfortable division between “analytic” and “continental” philosophy, of a critical divide *within* the analytic side. The early essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* were crucial because they expressed a defense and illustration of the philosophy of ordinary language *as method*. The occasion for the essay “Must We Mean What We Say?” was a response to a paper by Cavell’s Berkeley colleague, Benson Mates, criticizing the procedures of the “philosophers of ordinary language” and “the appeal to ordinary language as such.” The methodological was essential to both philosophers, and the presentation went very well, leading to a publication of the exchange in the then newly founded journal *Inquiry*. OLP appeared to Cavell as a substitute for the loss (or ending) of a career in music—as if it could fulfill the aspiration to find the right tone, or pitch, to have a real “ear,” an ear for “what is said when, why it is said, hence how, in what context.” Attention to the ordinary detail of words becomes a new, revolutionary method—common to criticism and to philosophy. But this first work, as well as the other early works that parallel it (?1971), was exploring new territory. The Austinian and Wittgensteinian articles that constitute the points of focus of *Must We Mean What We Say?* were written in uncertainty and controversy, and in an intellectual outburst motivated first by a defense of Austin and his method in philosophy, and then by the annoyance caused by conformist readings of Wittgenstein. These chapters were immediately rejected by the analytical community, as if they were the most subversive in the book, probably because they could rightly claim an inheritance of analytic philosophy.

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 *Must We Mean What We Say? 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 (Cavell 2010, 442).

Must We Mean What We Say? thus reveals the strong connection between Cavell’s work and analytic philosophy: through his rigorous attention to moral texture, perception, and detail, as well as to singular expression and voice, Cavell is radically pressing the analytic tradition forward into life. *Must We Mean What We Say?* grapples with the fact that we *mean*, however incompletely and partially, sometimes perfectly clearly and painfully, sometimes obfuscating ourselves and reality. This is the *given* of human life in language, but it is not a static or “natural” given, like the sense data of the 20th-century epistemologist: the given is *ordinary language*. Attention to the ordinary detail of words and world becomes a method and in this Cavell is faithful to Austin, who sees philosophy of language a promising site for “fieldwork” (Austin 1961, 183) and for surveys, taking an anthropological view of human speaking practices.

Cavell set out to demonstrate that the project of analytical philosophy—to get closer to the world by examining and analyzing language—can only be accomplished if we can find the conditions of validity or rightness of ethical or aesthetic statements, and of real conversations and encounters; conditions of validity or rightness for everything that we say about *what actually matters* (or else we wouldn’t talk about it, see Laugier 2018b). Cavell thus raised, following Frege and Wittgenstein, the question of our capacity for thought as constantly related to what we say and to our judgment of what counts, and as something that

can never be outsourced to others; as being our responsibility. For Cavell, it was in this way that analytic philosophy, the works of Frege and Wittgenstein, and the power of logic—his first discoveries in philosophy and important in his formation—could be inherited.

In this respect, Cavell connects philosophy to anthropology in a novel way, through the very concept of description, and hence operates a break from Austin’s category of the *constative* (which Austin himself had in fact already subverted). Wittgenstein proposes conceptual attention to the detail of ordinary human forms of life, similar to the practice of ethnography: attention to the details of language pursues an elucidation of the everyday, and of the various *shapes* that the ordinary takes. This ordinary realism brings together philosophy, anthropology, and ethnography in an innovative way.

The connection between anthropology and philosophy is made through the concept of form of life/life form—which the anthropologist Veena Das has powerfully explicated, drawing on Cavell’s work (Das 2019) (see also Da Col and Palmié 2018)—and through the power of ethnographic description. Describing ordinary language and (agreement in) forms of life turns out to be an anthropological quest:

Agreement in forms of life, in Wittgenstein, is never a matter of shared opinions. It thus requires an excess of description to capture the entanglements of customs, habits, rules, and examples. It provides the context in which we could see how we are to trace words back to their original homes when we do not know our way about: The anthropological quest takes us to the point at which Wittgenstein takes up his grammatical investigation (Das 2019, 39–40).

For Das, the task of anthropology is to delineate “what one might characterize as a human form of life woven into distinct forms of life” (Das 2019, 247–48). And this is the question of description, in the basic sense of telling (in detail) “what is the case” (Wittgenstein 1922, 1).

What is at stake here is the status of description in relation to the object of description: Is that object an opinion that might be expressed in the form of a proposition? Is it a thing with identifiable characteristics? Or is the object of description a form of life? If the last, then a surplus of description is essential to the task at hand (Das 2019, 365).

Veena Das's *Textures of the Ordinary* (Das 2019) is the best presentation of anthropology as philosophy's companion in the exploration of ordinary life and its details. The perpetual attention to human forms of life as illustrated in this book is a way to pursue and accomplish Wittgenstein's ambition to undermine philosophy's privilege and to bring it back down to the "rough ground" of ordinary life.

It can also be seen as a project to rearrange the conceptual and the empirical, and to explore the limits of thought, following Diamond's study of the "the difficulty of reality". Anthropology is as much a matter of vocabulary, description, and accuracy (telling/ recounting/detailing) as it is of *descent* into everyday life (Das 2006). Cavell takes the availability of Wittgenstein's philosophy to be conditioned by recognition of forms of life and lifeforms as the objects of philosophical and anthropological description.

Description, understood as an anthropological task, becomes a moral question: "How we see and describe the world is morals too" (Murdoch 1996, 250).

By empowering us with OLP to explore our relevance to ourselves, *Must We Mean What We Say?* reveals the connection between the words we pronounce and hear, the truth we search for, and the life we want to lead. This was revolutionary to the philosophy, culture, and 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'" (Cavell 1969, xxxvii). This revolutionary character, which Cavell attributes to Wittgenstein and Austin because

of their capacity to transform us, is still, now more than ever, that of *Must We Mean What We Say?*. And this is what makes Cavell's work the starting point for any inheritance of philosophy of language, but also for a movement whose importance would only appear in the next century: a movement to reveal the deep and multiple connections of OLP to the preoccupations of contemporary culture, far beyond philosophy.

It is this ambition that allows the philosophy of language to move to other territories, including those of moral reflection and anthropology. It is clear that OLP, open as it is to other fields of contemporary thought, is an increasingly important site of conceptual innovation. OLP may well enable us to overcome the limitations of core strands in philosophy that have proven incapable of shedding light on forms of life, or transforming them. Veena Das's reading of OLP *with* Cavell is a remarkable expression of the willingness of anthropology, as it stands today, to work with philosophy in exploring and repairing the texture of ordinary life. Das's *Textures of the Ordinary* brings together anthropology and OLP as the major common resource available in the 21st century for a continued subversion of metaphysics, and for the pursuit of the radicalness of early analytic philosophy, thus allowing us to rewrite the narrative about OLP that has held sway more than 50 years and has marginalized this powerful philosophical method. And to acknowledge OLP as an actual and groundbreaking inheritor of the realistic ambitions of early analytic philosophy.

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