

BOOK REVIEWS

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Cavell's Must We Mean What We Say? at 50,
edited by Greg Chase, Juliet Floyd and
Sandra Laugier

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Cavell's Must We Mean What We Say? at 50, ed. G. Chase, J. Floyd and S. Laugier. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022. 250 pp.

Fifty years after the publication of *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cavell 1969, *MWM* abbreviation), Cavell's thinking comes down to us today in the form of a philosophizing that seeks to bring the community into greater harmony with itself and the reality of its concepts. The book is structured in three parts. The first part is titled "Ordinary Language and Its Philosophy", and consists of four chapters: "*Must We Mean What We Say?* and Ordinary Language Philosophy" by Sandra Laugier; "Revolutionary Uses of Wittgenstein in *Must We Mean What We Say?*" by Juliet Floyd; "Actions and Their Elaboration" by Jean-Philippe Narboux; and "Faces of the Ordinary" by Eli Friedlander. This section gives insight into Cavell's thoughts regarding the defense of ordinary language philosophy.

The second part of the volume, titled "Aesthetics and the Modern", also contains four chapters: "'Language-Games' and 'Forms of Life': Cavell's Reading of Wittgenstein and Its Relevance to Literary" by Greg Chase; "Philosophic and Aesthetic Appeal: Stanley Cavell on the Irreducibility of the First Person in Aesthetics and in Philosophy" by Arata Hamawaki; "Reading Into It or Hearing It Out? Cavell on Modernism and the Art Critic's Hermeneutical Risk" by Robert Engelman; and "Must We Sing What We Mean?: 'Music Discomposed' and Philosophy Composed" by Vincent Colapietro. The main subject of this section is the thought of the importance of the first-person perspective from literature and Cavell's autobiographical writings.

In the third part, several subjects are discussed in order to provide understanding of Cavell's perspective on tragedy and formation of personal identity. The section, titled "Tragedy and the Self", includes five chapters: "Philosophy as Autobiography: From *Must We Mean What We Say?* to *Little Did I Know*" by Naoko Saito; "The Finer Weapon: Cavell, Philosophy, and Praise" by Victor J. Krebs; "On Cavell's Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation* – with Constant Reference to Austen" by Kelly Jolley; "Tragic Implication" by Sarah Beckwith; and "Gored States and Theatrical Guises" by Paul Standish.

This volume brings together the work of thirteen thinkers and philosophers who agree that *MWM* is a way of seeing things that philosophy now needs, emphasizing the revolutionary, and liberating character of the realism of the American philosopher's thought. "Who are we?" and "what is it to say something?" are the two defining questions of this volume dedicated to *MWM*. To ask "who are we?" is to ask whether what we say has sense and meaning, whether we really know ourselves, whether we are committed to our words, whether our voice is our own voice, and to ask when and how we recognize ourselves in others.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein helped us see that language is a social activity, but even with this understanding in place, the precise nature of *grammar* remains open. As Sandra Laugier claims in the first chapter of the volume, Cavell subverts the notion of a rule and replaces it with the notion

of forms of life (cf. p. 32). In this volume, we move away from rigid conceptions of rules and usage to a grammar in which words have life thanks to "the fabric of human existence" (p. 30). Laugier tells us that, for Cavell, the concept of agreement is responsible for our forms of life and is at the same time the reason for understanding. Greg Chase shows us this through the character dynamics of Ohioans in a literary text: Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (see Chapter 5). In this set of interlocking short stories, we see how Wash Williams is led into misogyny by the dissolution of his marriage, or how being abandoned by a lover in her youth makes Alice Hindman want to isolate herself and to grow old alone, and how, because of patriarchal gender norms, John Hardy misinterprets Louise Bentley's asking to be loved as a sexual overture (cf. p. 101). Chase explains that what prevents Bentley and Hardy from understanding each other is not a problem of linguistic precision, but a difference in their forms of life.

How do we translate this sort of thinking into our current situation? That is the purpose of the volume. Language now passes through digital media and is processed by Artificial Intelligence systems. This makes the approach in *MWM* more timely than ever. Algorithms can now write novels, compose music, artwork, and talk to us – are we losing our own voice as machines write and speak for us? The impact of *what we say* is beginning to be lost. Technology brings us closer but at the same time it distances us from each other. Nor are we surprised when in

the current debates about what our future will be the question of whether machines can make works of art and become as creative as humans are brought up. To think that "works" produced by AI can somehow display the passion, spontaneity, or human context involved in creating art is to fall into the same grammatical error that Wittgenstein warned us about in the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is the same problem reappearing in a new context.

This volume presents approaches to these problems seen from the perspective of Ordinary Language Philosophy, as developed and expanded by Cavell. Philosophy as it is often practiced today is full of abstract claims that fail to attend to the ordinary lives and the contexts from our pictures of the world emerge. This approach to philosophy has rejected passion, desire, and everything that makes it alive and human.

In Chapter 10, Victor J. Krebs calls this philosophy's "clinical turn", in which disagreement becomes a search for difference in meaning, evidence replaces proof, compromise replaces combat, and the ultimate goal of inquiry is achieving mutual recognition (cf. p. 175-176). Krebs pictures the analytic philosopher as someone obstinately clinging to the most rational a priori knowledge possible, falling into a state of "chronic boredom", becoming "lost in lovelessness" (Cavell 2010, cited in Chase et al. 2022, p. 175), because of the need to control his or her subjectivity. Cavell's philosophy appears as a therapeutic philosophy that

aims at the reconciliation between philosophy and the affective dimension. Those incapable of engaging with their subjectivity are alienated from themselves, which also implies that the meaning of their words have become alien to them.

In the sixth chapter of the volume, Arata Hamawaki deals with the concept of alienation that arises out of the judgments that constitute the ordinary, the judgments that Cavell relates to Kantian aesthetic judgments. These are rational judgments, free but indeterminate, that we express when we are moved by the beauty of something, and which may cause tension when we cannot attach them to a general representation. They are personal judgments, too, because they involve a person's aesthetic perception of the world. While acknowledging that they are subjective, we must also acknowledge their claim to universal agreement (cf. p.105). However, disagreements arise between ourselves and others if we experience an unbridgeable distance between our different worlds. Understanding this idea means understanding that the relationship between our demands and the world is not fundamentally a relationship of knowledge. Drawing on Søren Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*, Cavell tells us to "lose rationality" and surrender to the religious dimension, which relieves us from the need to seek certainty, and the forgetfulness of what we must say, returning us to the clarity of our words.

Cavell's idea that all philosophy is autobiographical, developed by Naoko Saito in the ninth chapter, is a resource

that may help us achieve this clarity. By keeping this in mind, we regain the tonality of our own voice, and throw off the chains that repress it, giving us an opportunity to return to our past, to reflect on it, to narrate it, and, as Saito says, “to create moments of birth” (p. 160).

The volume closes with the same theme that closes *MWM*: tragedy and the tragic. In Chapter 12, Sarah Beckwith shows how Shakespearean tragedy inaugurates a language in which we learn the implications of our speech and the responsibility for our words:

Tragic implication lines our dealings with each other; it can happen at any time. The fact of our attunement when we are attuned, the fact of our disharmony, our conflict, cannot be explained by any theory for nothing is deeper than the fact of agreement. (p. 200)

Our speech acts are irreversible and unlimited. We speak and act in anticipation of the future, failing and discovering ourselves in error: the tragic. We have made the commitment and cannot escape error and guilt. But it is through error self-questioning happens, and Cavell reminds us that “meaning what one says becomes a matter of making one’s sense present to oneself” (Cavell 1969, xix).

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