

# Stanley Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?*

By Anthony Coleman

**M**UST WE MEAN WHAT WE SAY?, STANLEY CAVELL'S FIRST BOOK, HAS been recently rereleased (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002) with a new preface by the author. The book is a collection of essays spanning a twelve-year period, ranging in topic from the 'ordinary language' procedures of Austin and Wittgenstein to interpretations of literary works by Beckett and Shakespeare. It was originally published in 1969, yet it contains much that is still relevant for contemporary philosophy. Indeed, it could be argued that there is as much to learn from it today as there was thirty years ago.

Although there are several recurring themes throughout, and the essays themselves cover a variety of seemingly unrelated topics, the book as a whole can be thought of as a sustained attempt to locate the relevance of ordinary language philosophy as embodied in the work of Austin and the later Wittgenstein. Cavell not only explores the purported authority that the ordinary use of words is supposed to have in philosophy (see, for example, the essays "Austin at Criticism" and "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy"); he also employs ordinary language procedures to help illuminate some difficult issues in aesthetics (such as whether poems are paraphrasable, or whether modern art is actually art; see "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy") and uses them as a tool for interpreting literary works (for example, "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*"). As Cavell says in the new preface, "[O]rdinary language is no less or more an object of interpretation than a means of interpretation" (pp. xxviii-xxix).

What I find most fruitful about the book is the conception of ordinary language philosophy presented in it. This conception is at odds with the portrayal of ordinary language philosophy as a dead philosophical movement designed (1) to point out discrepancies between ordinary and philosophical uses of certain words, invariably in favor of the ordinary uses so that philosophical problems that arise because of the philosophical use will be seen to be illusory and (2) to elucidate the semantic properties of certain terms by looking at the characteristic uses of those terms in ordinary contexts. Cavell, however, does not think that there are no genuine philosophi-

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cal problems, nor does he think that the appeal to ordinary use by itself repudiates traditional philosophy. For example, in the essay "Knowing and Acknowledging," Cavell argues both that insofar as appeals to ordinary use can be legitimately made at all, skepticism about other minds cannot be repudiated by those appeals, and that the skeptic about other minds is attempting to articulate a genuine fact about the separation that exists between ourselves and others.

The importance Cavell attaches to ordinary language procedures derives from his sense that those procedures provide routes for the attainment of self-knowledge. The appeal to ordinary language—to the kinds of characteristic statements we make in certain contexts—is made not so much to discover something about language, but instead to learn something about oneself by examining what one is inclined and tempted to say in those contexts. And insofar as that appeal is made by me to others, it is an attempt not to prove something to them about language, but an attempt to get them to see something in their relation to their own words that I see in my relation to my own words, in the way that art critics (the procedures of whom Cavell is fond of comparing to those of Austin) attempt to get others to see what they see in certain works of art. Furthermore, Cavell thinks that the fact that many philosophers have found ordinary language considerations irrelevant and have harbored suspicions about whether those procedures can even be legitimately called "philosophical" is an indication of both (a) the novelty of those procedures and of the terms of criticism that accompany them, and (b) that philosophy is a discipline that, like music and literature, has traditional forms of expression that have been called into question. This understanding seems to me to have been entirely ignored or forgotten in many quarters.

In the new preface, Cavell gives a brief history of the genesis of each essay, sometimes placing them in the context of social upheaval and demands for institutional reform at Harvard. He also offers his thoughts on his own literary style and how these early essays relate to his subsequent work. This is quite nice given that some of the essays, such as "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" and "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," have become rather influential and have acquired something of a life of their own. Overall, the book still deserves the attention of laymen and contemporary philosophers alike. ☐