

An Autobiography of Companions



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Of the contributors to this symposium, I am the newest to Stanley Cavell, both to the transformational power of his work and to the transformational power of his friendship. I thus want to start by saying how humbled I am to be a part of this occasion, which is the largest stage I have yet enjoyed as an aspiring philosopher. I first met Stanley Cavell in March 2009, in my first year of graduate school, when a friend and I invited him to join our first-year class at a performance of Beckett's *Endgame* in Cambridge. Knowing something of the Cavell voice from his essay on the play (which I had come upon accidentally in college), but as yet knowing nothing of his devotion to young philosophers, I was giddy for weeks when he not only accepted our invitation, but suggested that we meet for drinks both before *and after* the play. It was a beautiful evening, and the next day Stanley sent all of us an email announcing that he had woken up with a smile on his face, "as if the performance we attended was rather of something called Openings." Those openings widened sooner than I expected, when several months later (having spent much of the semester obsessively reading *The Claim of Reason* in a group organized by my teacher Richard Moran, whose role in my understanding of Stanley's work will become apparent) I learned that the Walter M. Cabot Professor, Emeritus, was looking for a research assistant. To borrow a phrase from *Little Did I Know*: I might as well have been asked if I would care to visit Paradise (137). It's a job I unhesitatingly (though very nervously) took up, and it's one that I have relished ever since. I cannot express how grateful I am now to this wonderful man and his wonderful family, particularly his wife Cathleen, for their support during this period (this period which has included the editing and publication of *Little Did I Know*).

But I do want to note (and here I think I speak representatively) how important visits to their home in Brookline, Massachusetts, can be for restoring sanity and humanity. My afternoons with Stanley and Cathleen Cavell have been the best kind of philosophical education, the best kind of personal education, the best kind of therapy, and the best kind of companionship.

It should thus not be surprising that today I want to say something about themes of companionship, especially as they appear in Stanley Cavell's earliest work (and the reception of ordinary language philosophy in that work) and as they appear in *Little Did I Know*. At the very beginning of his memoir, Cavell notes that he has been here before, not only in earlier autobiographical writing such as *A Pitch of Philosophy*, but also in his early understanding of the methods of J.L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein as autobiographical, specifically in their insistence that "I speak philosophically for others when they recognize what I say as what they would say, recognize that their language is mine," and he notes that this has produced in him an understanding of philosophical writing as "the autobiography of a species" (6). So Cavell is returning to one of the animating questions of his earliest work, namely what entitles one to say 'we', what entitles one to speak on behalf of others. This is the question that opens the essay "Must We Mean What We Say?", written in response to a paper by his then-Berkeley colleague Benson Mates disputing the entitlement of ordinary language philosophers (in this case, Austin and Ryle) to make claims about what we say (in this case, what we say is done "voluntarily") because they have not assembled the right kind of evidence. Cavell's response was to claim that such native speakers do not need evidence about "what we say": they are the source of that evidence (*Must* 4).

Connected with this is Cavell's insistence that the methods of Austin and Wittgenstein (including methods of asking "What should we say if . . .", or "In what circumstances would we call . . .") are methods for arriving at self-knowledge (*Must* 66). But philosophical writing on self-knowledge, particularly in analytic philosophy of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has focused almost entirely on knowledge of one's own mental states, such as one's own beliefs and pains; whereas Cavell's animating question is how private reflection can implicate not just oneself, but also *other people*. Nevertheless, the best of contemporary philosophical writing on self-knowledge shares with Cavell a concern for overcoming estrangement, whether an estrangement from one's own attitudes or an estrangement from

one's own words. Here I have in mind Richard Moran's 2001 book *Authority and Estrangement*, and its insistence upon the inadequacy of merely being told by my analyst that I resent my neighbor: until I can see something in that resentment, until I can look to the world and see my neighbor's snide jokes as warranting resentment, until I can *avow* that attitude, "there is still work to be done" (31). Similarly, I can be told by my teachers (as well as by bullies) *what we say* around here, but until I can look to the world and see someone's shooting a donkey as an accident rather than a mistake (as Austin asks us to do in his paper "A Plea for Excuses"), until I can avow the words of my community, I will find myself alone and confused. This is at least part of the significance I attach to Cavell's remarks that "the philosophy of ordinary language is not about language, anyway not in any sense in which it is not also about the world," and that "ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about" (*Must* 95).

So I am claiming that internal to Cavell's understanding of ordinary language philosophy as a method for arriving at self-knowledge is an understanding of it as a method for avowing one's words, for overcoming alienation from one's community. And we can now see part of the ordinary language philosopher's inheritance from Socrates. For at the end of "Must We Mean What We Say?" Cavell writes, "by searching definitions Socrates can coax the mind down from self-assertion . . . and lead it back, through the community, home" (43). But we know that Socratic questioning ("What do we call piety?" "In what circumstances do we call something just?") can leave us feeling estranged from our words (familiar as the *aporia* felt at the end of a Platonic dialogue, when we find that after all we didn't know, or couldn't articulate, what we call piety) and also of course feeling estranged from our *community* (despite Socrates' efforts to adhere to the laws of Athens even when put to death). But I think we can also now see what the ordinary language philosopher finds dissatisfying about Socrates' specific way of asking Socratic questions. For if it turns out that searching for definitions consistently leaves us feeling alone and confused, then perhaps we should not draw the conclusion that that feeling is always warranted, but rather that (and I think this is the conclusion characteristic of ordinary language philosophy) there's something wrong with always searching for definitions. Thus we have Austin and Wittgenstein's attention to particular stories, to particular contexts of assertion, eliciting judgments about "what we say" only about those specific cases. Home is a specific place, and we can't get there from any or every road. (Incidentally, in *Little Did I Know* Cavell

writes that it was in his days in Berkeley student theater that he both “found a home” and seriously began to fix his attention on the specific contexts in which something is said [214, 217].)

I think what so many of us find refreshing and important about Cavell’s early defense of ordinary language philosophy is its conceiving of knowledge of “what we say” not just in terms of entitlement (as Benson Mates had done), but also in terms of responsibility: knowing what we say, coming to avow our words, is something that’s expected of us. Unless I can speak representatively, I can’t mean what I say. Or as Cavell writes in *The Claim of Reason*: “The alternative to speaking for myself representatively . . . is not: speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute” (28). Here again it is illuminating to read Cavell together with contemporary philosophical writing on self-knowledge. In *Authority and Estrangement* Moran similarly conceives of one’s attitudes not just as things one is *entitled* to know, but also as things one is *responsible* for knowing, things one can *speak for*. This is why relying upon empirical evidence or another’s testimony to know one’s own beliefs, expectations, or desires strikes us as a kind of evasion. (“Do you intend to pay the money back?” Moran has someone ask in an imaginary dialogue. “As far as I can tell, yes.”¹) Whenever I take this kind of empirical stance upon myself, I refuse to make up my mind. Thus, *consistently* taking this kind of stance upon oneself is both unhealthy and unsustainable.

If something similar is true of knowledge of “what we say,” then that should account for what seems so dangerous and wrongheaded about an early critique of Cavell, Jerry Fodor and Jerrold Katz’s 1963 paper “The Availability of What We Say.” (In *Little Did I Know* Cavell registers the enormous hurt this paper caused him upon his return to the East Coast from Berkeley [442, 491].) Fodor and Katz argued that the mere possibility of being wrong about “what we say” (a possibility Cavell of course allowed for in his writing) showed that it is *always* a good idea to advert to empirical evidence (such as what a field linguist might gather about some community’s use of a word) to

¹“We do not only allow [someone’s] statement to stand without the benefit of evidence, we also expect and sometimes insist that he take himself to be in a position to *speak for* his feelings and convictions, and not simply offer his best opinion about them. (‘Do you intend to pay the money back?’ ‘As far as I can tell, yes.’) And it is part of this same demand that not only do we not expect the person to need to his base his statement on evidence, but we may regard his deferring to the behavioral evidence as a form of evasion, or else as suggesting that the state of mind he’s reporting on cannot be a fully rational one” (Moran 26).

know what we say.² But to know what we say by relying on empirical linguistic evidence (looking upon one's linguistic community rather than outward to the world) is as much an evasion of a responsibility as my relying upon behavioral evidence (looking upon *myself* rather than outward to the world) to know whether I intend to pay the money back. I can take the stance that Fodor and Katz advocate upon *any* linguistic community—not just one whose words I avow.

It may be harder for us to imagine someone waiting to speak—waiting to declare something 'an accident' rather than 'a mistake'—until the right kind of linguistic evidence has come in, and Fodor and Katz might take that (charitably) as showing the unavailability of the right evidence, or (uncharitably) as a sign of our intellectual laziness. But I think it shows that taking this kind of stance upon what we say is even more unmanageable than taking it upon one's own attitudes. Consistently deferring to linguistic evidence about what we say leaves a speaker without *anything* to say (at least with conviction). And if this stance *is* manageable, it at least seems (by asking us to shirk our responsibility to avow our words, by asking us to approach our own linguistic community as outsiders) unhealthy. (I think this was part of Cavell's insight to connect the inability to speak on behalf of others with certain pathologies. Fodor and Katz may have unwittingly painted themselves as Cavell's neurotic, who "has reason, and the strength, to keep what he means from himself" [*Must* 67]. The neurotic may be in fact correct, but—because he came to know what *we* say without meaning what *he* says—he is "in soul muddled" [*The Claim* 180].)

I now want to say a bit more about how these themes from Cavell's early writing get developed in *Little Did I Know* (and thus, I hope, something of their source in Cavell's life). In the opening chapters of the book Cavell registers his feeling of childhood homelessness (one result of his family's move from the South to the North Side of Atlanta, and of their frequent moves between Atlanta and Sacramento), and we begin to understand his later occupation with the Augustine passage that opens *Philosophical Investigations*, and in particular Wittgenstein's claim that "Augustine describes the learning of human language as if [he had come] into a strange country" (§32). Again and again Cavell finds himself in communities whosewhere there are words he does

² "[Cavell's mistake] is that of maintaining that, assuming it would be extraordinary if we were often wrong about what we say, it is not competent to request evidence for such statements. If we are only usually right, then we are sometimes wrong. But, then, it is *always* competent to request to show that *this* is not one of those times" (Fodor and Katz 65).

not understand and cannot avow. This of course forms the basis of bullying by older and better-settled kids in school, as when a boy in the cafeteria line at the junior high in Sacramento asks young Stanley (within others students' earshot), "Are you swaybacked?" (81). Rather than hurt by the meaning of this question, Stanley is hurt by being left out of its meaning, excluded from the community for whose amusement it was asked. He knows what it is for a horse to be swayback, but, he later asks himself, "What would it mean for a human being to be swayback?" (90).

And even more disturbingly, young Stanley's confusion about words also provokes bullying by his father. While working in his father's pawnshop Stanley fails to add tax to a customer's bill, prompting his father into an outburst of rage, "grabbing and shaking the bars of the [shop's] cage, shouting, 'I told you specifically!'" (122). It emerges that Stanley's father had earlier yelled out the Yiddish word 'Dus!', his code for the word 'Tax'. But his father never instructed him in that code: young Stanley is blamed for not knowing the words by the very person tasked with teaching those words to him.

But Cavell punctuates these stories with the knowledge that things get better. For by the end of the book Cavell comes to avow the words of, and comes to speak for, others who do not even share his superficial accoutrements (such as the band uniform and the ROTC uniform that temporarily relieve his anxieties about fitting in at school), and who do not even share his generation or race. And here I have in mind Cavell's joining the 1964 Freedom Summer project in Mississippi by teaching at Tougaloo College (an experience through which Cavell, whose bad ear denied him the defining experience of his biological generation, namely World War II, adopted the defining experience of a different, *younger* generation, namely the Civil Rights Movement) (429-32). And I also have in mind Cavell's efforts, together with John Rawls, to establish an African American Studies Department at Harvard (508-512). I don't think I could do justice to those extraordinary moments in *Little Did I Know*. But I want to note that in recounting his time at Tougaloo College Cavell again raises the issue of speaking for others, and he says that the matter is "never an epistemological certainty, but something like a moral claim, an arrogation of right" (432). And I want to insist that we read this passage together with the moment, early in the book, when Cavell finds his Uncle Meyer (the once promising musician) reduced to calling the black customers of his store by the n-word. Cavell asks, "Did he even know what he was saying?" (143). Behind Cavell's anguish at his Uncle Meyer's words is this rebuke, this arrogation of right: *we* don't say that.

I want to end by suggesting that, in characterizing judgments about “what we say” as moral claims, as arrogations of right, Cavell is returning in *Little Did I Know* to his earlier disputes with Benson Mates and Fodor and Katz (all of whom thought of these judgments as matters of epistemological certainty). And I want to suggest that, in doing this, Cavell does not mean to be retracting his earlier view that these judgments are matters of self-*knowledge*. Rather, the lesson we should draw is that: always to look for evidence or epistemological assurance (“Will others find themselves in what I say?” “Will they share my words?”) is to evade the responsibility to make a claim upon oneself and upon others. Indeed, much of the drama of *Little Did I Know* consists in Cavell’s putting aside his epistemological anxieties about whether he can speak for others and coming to stake himself upon the *moral claim* that he indeed can. Thus in his closing pages Cavell writes, “Sometimes you do not know what you have—even in a sense do not have it—until you are faced with claiming it” (543). Since reading this passage for the first time, I’ve wanted to make my own claim, my own arrogation of right. And now here I can: You *do* have it, Stanley. You *do* speak for us. So thank you for being our voice. And thank you for this great book.³

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