

# Knowledge of Language as Self-Knowledge\*

John Schwenkler

## I

My starting point in this paper is a trio of passages from three early essays of Stanley Cavell, each of which concerns the significance, within philosophy, of statements about when it is that we say certain things, and what we mean in saying them.

The first passage is from ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’, and in it Cavell draws attention to the ‘we’ of his essay’s title while implying that there is an important parallel between the knowledge of what we say and the knowledge of what we *do*:

The clue to understanding the sort of statement [a statement about ‘what we say’] is lies in appreciating the fact that ‘we,’ while plural, is first person. ... The claim that in general we do not require evidence for statements in the first person plural does not rest upon a claim that we cannot be wrong about what we are doing or about what we say, but only that it would be extraordinary if we were (often). My point about such statements, then, is that they are sensibly questioned only where there is some special reason for supposing what I say about what I (we) say to be wrong; only here is the request for evidence competent. If I am wrong about what he does (they do) that may be no great surprise; but if I am wrong about what I (we) do, that is liable, where it is not comic, to be tragic. (Cavell 1958/2002b, 14)

Next, in ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy’, Cavell writes the following:

If it is accepted that ‘a language’ (a natural language) is what the native speakers of a language speak, and that speaking a language is a matter of practical mastery, then

---

\* This paper grew out of conversations with Nat Hansen and then took shape during a Fall 2020 reading group on ordinary language philosophy, where Bob Bishop, Zac Odermatt, Spencer Smith, Robert Voelker, and Michael Zahorec made significant contributions. I then presented versions of it to the Rationality, Action, and Mind at King’s College London, at a workshop on ‘Describing Human Action’ at Florida State University, and as a colloquium talk to the Department of Philosophy at the University of York. My work on the paper was supported by an Academic Cross-Training Fellowship from the John F. Templeton Foundation, sabbatical leave from Florida State University, and a Visiting Faculty Fellowship at the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study. For feedback and discussion I thank Todd Cronan, Nat Hansen, Eric Marcus, Zac Odermatt, and Stephen Epherson especially, and also Samuel Baker, Tom Baldwin, Bob Bishop, Christopher Frey, Jennifer Frey, Michael Kremer, James Laing, Daniel Morgan, Paul Noordhof, David Papineau, Roope Ryymin, James Stazicker, and Justin Sytsma.

such questions as ‘What should we say if ...?’ or ‘In what circumstances would we call ...?’ asked of someone who has mastered the language (for example, oneself) is [*sic*] a request for the person to say something about himself, describe what he does. So the different methods are methods for acquiring self-knowledge ... (Cavell 1962/2002c, 66)

Finally, here is Cavell in ‘Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy’:

The philosopher appealing to ordinary language turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself. He is saying: Look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I wish to say. ... If we do not, then the philosopher’s remarks are irrelevant to us ... All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own. (Cavell 1965/2002d, 95-96)

There is more going on in these passages than I could hope to unpack fully here. My aim is only to work out an understanding of several things: first, what Cavell means when he describes philosophical reflection on language as a means of acquiring *self*-knowledge; second, what follows from this about how a philosopher’s claims about ‘what we say’ relate to what we can *observe* about how people use words; and third, what light it sheds on the philosophical *significance* of reflection on ordinary use.

## II

Cavell presented ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ at a December 1957 APA session held at Stanford University, as part of a symposium with Benson Mates, then Cavell’s colleague at the University of California, Berkeley, with the title ‘On Verifying Statements About Ordinary Language’.<sup>1</sup> Mates’s paper challenged the entitlement of philosophers like Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin to claims about ‘what we say when’—claims which Ryle and would draw on to argue that philosophers’ ways of using of certain ordinary words were ‘stretched’ and therefore illegitimate. My immediate concern will be, not with the cogency of this wider form of argument, but rather with the question of what is supposed to entitle philosophers like Ryle and Austin to their claims about how words are ordinarily used. Having done this, I’ll turn in Section VI to consider what lessons we can draw from claims of this kind.

Let us begin with the infamous passage in *The Concept of Mind* where Ryle describes what he takes to be the ordinary use of ‘voluntary’ and its cognates:

---

<sup>1</sup> See ‘Proceedings: Pacific Division’, in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 31: 101-103. Both Mates and Cavell published their contributions to this symposium in the inaugural issue of *Inquiry*, which advertised its mission in interdisciplinary terms: see ‘An Editorial Statement’, *Inquiry* 1: 1-4. For more on this history, see Cavell 2002a, xviii-xix; and Hansen 2017, 785-787.

In their most ordinary employment ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ are used, with a few minor elasticities, as adjectives applying to actions which ought not to be done. We discuss whether someone’s action was voluntary or not only when the action seems to have been his fault. He is accused of making a noise, and the guilt is his, if the action was voluntary, like laughing; he has successfully excused himself, if he satisfies us that it was involuntary, like a sneeze. ... In this ordinary use, then, it is absurd to discuss whether satisfactory, correct or admirable performances are voluntary or involuntary. Neither inculpation nor exculpation is in point. (Ryle 1949/2009, 56)

Ryle’s claim is that when words like ‘voluntary’ are used in ordinary speech, it is a condition on their proper application that the agent have acted, or might be taken to have acted, in a way they should not have—that is, that the person could potentially be blamed or excused for doing the thing in question. Because of this, he argues, it is a mistake to think that we could classify actions *in general* into the voluntary and the involuntary: for the ordinary use of these words does not permit this.

In order to undermine Ryle’s position, Mates’s paper highlights a subtle difference between what Ryle says here and the position of Austin in his October, 1956 Aristotelian Society address, ‘A Plea for Excuses’. One of Austin’s claims there is similar on its face to Ryle’s:

The natural economy of language dictates that for the *standard* case covered by any normal verb,—not, perhaps, a verb of omen such as ‘murder,’ but a verb like ‘eat’ or ‘kick’ or ‘croquet’—no modifying expression is required or even permissible. Only if we do the action named in some *special* way or circumstances, different from those in which such an act is naturally done ... is a modifying expression called for, or even in order. I sit in my chair, in the usual way—I am not in a daze or influenced by threats or the like: here, it will not do either to say that I sat in it intentionally or that I did not sit in it intentionally, nor yet that I sat in it automatically or from habit or what you will. It is bedtime, I am alone, I yawn: but I do not yawn involuntarily (or voluntarily!), nor yet deliberately. To yawn in any such peculiar way is just not to just yawn. (Austin 1956-1957, 16)

For Austin as for Ryle, the upshot of this observation is that philosophers’ uses of these modifying words are illicitly ‘stretched’ insofar as they treat them as general-purpose descriptors having to do with the psychological origins of bits of behavior, rather than words with more specific meanings that will not usually apply to garden-variety actions like (‘just’) yawning or sitting down in a chair. But Mates finds there to be this much difference in their descriptions of these uses: according to Ryle a word like ‘voluntary’ is useable (albeit ‘with a few minor elasticities’) *only* of ‘actions which ought not to be done’, whereas Austin seems comfortable applying it more widely, writing for example that ‘we may join the army or make a gift voluntarily, we may hiccough or make a small gesture involuntarily’ (Austin 1956-1957, 17). For Mates, this disagreement should cause us to question philosophers’ entitlement to such claims about ordinary use: ‘If agreement

about usage cannot be reached within so restricted a sample as the class of Oxford Professors of Philosophy, what are the prospects when the sample is enlarged?’ (Mates 1958, 165).

In fact Mates’s claim of a disagreement between Ryle and Austin is more than a little overstated, since a few pages later in *The Concept of Mind* Ryle adds that ‘Very often we oppose things done voluntarily to things suffered under compulsion’, and that in this context ‘questions of inculcation and exculpation need not arise’—as when, for example, we ask whether a soldier *volunteered* for the military or was rather conscripted (i.e., joined ‘because he had to do so’), or whether a yachtsman went voluntarily out to sea or was carried out by the wind.<sup>2</sup> There is, it seems, no obvious implication that a person who voluntarily joins the army, or involuntarily goes out to sea, thereby does something for which they could have been blamed. Therefore, with this passage in view the most that we can really say is that Ryle may have been careless in his original claim about the ‘most ordinary employment’ of the words in question, and not that he and Austin reached significantly different conclusions about this matter. But once we have noticed the force of Mates’s challenge, this exegetical point is not enough on its own to dissolve it. The questions remain: In virtue of what should a *philosopher* be in an especially good position to describe how words are used outside of the philosopher’s study or seminar room? And, further, what is the proper way to *justify* claims of this kind, and to settle real or potential disagreement over them?

For Mates, the answers to these two questions are, respectively: ‘In virtue of nothing at all’ and ‘Only by way of empirical investigation’. Though Ryle himself insists that a philosopher’s claims about ordinary use are not claims about the *prevalence* of speaking in one way rather than another, since the interest of a philosopher is in ‘the extraction of the logical rules implicitly governing a concept, i.e., a way of operating with an expression’, while practices corresponding to this may or may not be ‘widely current’ at a given place and time (Ryle 1953, 177), according to Mates as long as the philosopher’s claims are supposed to be a description of *actual* use it follows that they must have a ‘factual basis’, and therefore are ‘refutable by observation of the ordinary folk, magistrates, parents and teachers’ (Mates 1958, 164). Further, he continues, the mere fact that philosophers are themselves competent users of the words whose use they are trying to describe does not show that their descriptions of this use are necessarily or even presumptively accurate, as shown by the (supposed) disagreement between Ryle and Austin over the ordinary use of ‘voluntary’. According to Mates, *all* that ordinary language philosophy has to offer is an ‘armchair version’ of the way of studying language

---

<sup>2</sup> Ryle 1949, 60. Here is the entire passage: ‘Very often we oppose things done voluntarily to things suffered under compulsion. Some soldiers are volunteers, others are conscripts; some yachtsmen go out to sea voluntarily, others are carried out to sea by the wind and tide. Here questions of inculcation and exculpation need not arise. In asking whether the soldier volunteered or was conscripted, we are asking whether he joined up because he wanted to do so, or whether he joined up because he had to do so, where “had to” entails “no matter what he wanted”.’ Another point that is overlooked by Mates, which I and others called attention to in Zahorec et al., forthcoming, is that Austin’s remark about joining the army or making a gift says only that these things can be done *voluntarily*, while the allegedly contrasting passage from Ryle is only about how the adjectives ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ are used.

that is carried out more rigorously by linguists, in which ‘one observes a reasonably large class of cases in which [a] subject applies [a certain] word, and then one “sees” or “elicits” the meaning by finding what is common to all these cases’ (Mates 1958, 165). If this is what philosophers are trying to do, they would do well to recruit a more diverse pool of subjects—a pool, that is, including some people other than themselves.

### III

Against this background, Cavell’s aim in ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ was to show how philosophers’ claims about ordinary use not only did not require, but also could not be challenged or supported by, empirical observation of actual use. Of particular importance to his argument is a distinction Cavell draws between what I will call *S-type* statements, which are statements about what *we* can and cannot say, or what *we* mean or imply in saying such-and-such a thing, and what I’ll call *T-type* statements, which are statements about what can or cannot be said, or what is meant or implied by such-and-such an utterance, *in a given language*. Cavell’s central claim is that the philosopher’s special entitlement is to statements of the first type rather than the second. Thus he writes:

I am prepared to conclude that the philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language is entitled, without special empirical investigation, to assertions [...] like, ‘We do not say “I know ...” unless we mean that we have great confidence,’ and like ‘When we ask whether an action is voluntary we imply that the action is fishy’ (call this S). ... The feeling that S must be synthetic comes, of course, partly from the fact that it obviously is not (likely to be taken as) analytic. But it also comes from the ease with which S may be mistaken for the statement, “‘Is X voluntary?’ implies that X is fishy’ (T), which does seem obviously synthetic. But S and T, though they are true together and false together, are not everywhere interchangeable; the identical state of affairs is described by both, but a person who may be entitled to say T, may not be entitled to say S. Only a native speaker of English is entitled to the statement S, whereas a linguist describing English may, though he is not a native speaker of English, be entitled to T. What entitles him to T is his having gathered a certain amount and kind of evidence in its favor. But the person entitled to S is not entitled to *that* statement for the same reason. He needs no evidence for it. (Cavell 1958/2002b, 12-13)

Here, what distinguishes (S) from (T) is that only the former is couched in the first-person plural. But what exactly is supposed to hinge on this difference? In a recent paper that explores and develops Cavell’s response to Mates, Nat Hansen focuses on Cavell’s suggestion that S-type statements can have a normative or rule-expressing function. As Cavell puts it:

Whether remarks ... ‘about’ ordinary language ... are statements or rules depends on how they are taken: if they are taken to state facts and are supposed to be believed, they are statements; if they are taken as guides and supposed to be followed, they are rules. (Cavell 1958/2002b, 15)

Hansen illustrates the basic idea by considering how the statement that (1) *We send thank-you cards in this family* might be challenged by saying something like (2) *That’s not for you to say* rather than (3) *That isn’t true; we always talk about doing it and then forget because we’re too busy*. Here, the reply in (3) treats (1) as an empirical generalization and provides evidence to counter it. By contrast, the reply in (2) treats it quite differently, suggesting that the speaker’s (real or supposed) entitlement to what she says in (1) ‘does not stem from observation, but from occupying a certain position of authority in the group spoken for’ (Hansen 2017, 803). In brief, Hansen’s suggestion on behalf of Cavell is that if we read S-type statements as rule-expressing rather than as descriptive, we will be able to see how a speaker’s entitlement to them does not rest on inference or observation—and could not possibly be challenged by claims that do.

I am going to question both the accuracy of this interpretation and the philosophical cogency of the position it supplies. First, while Hansen reads Cavell as treating S-type statements as normative or rule-giving *rather than* descriptive, Cavell’s actual position seems to be that they are both at once. This much is implied directly in the crucial middle sentence from the long passage quoted in the last paragraph, where Cavell says that ‘the identical state of affairs is described by both’ (S) and (T), and that the crucial difference between them lies in what entitles a person to assert each one. But what could Cavell be saying when he says this? As a start, consider a related discussion in G. E. M. Anscombe’s *Intention*, in which she recalls the following story:

A certain soldier was court-martialled (or something of the sort) for insubordinate behaviour. He had, it seems, been ‘abusive’ at his medical examination. The examining doctor had told him to clench his teeth; whereupon he took them out, handed them to the doctor and said ‘You clench them’. (Anscombe 1963/2000, 55)

Anscombe goes on to say that in this episode, statements like (4) *My teeth are false* and (5) *This man isn’t going to clench his teeth, since they are false* are shown to stand in a different relation to the order (6) *Clench your teeth* than do statements like (7) *No I won’t* and (8) *That’s not for you to tell me what to do*. And the same point holds if instead of the prescription in (6) we consider a superficially ‘descriptive’ statement like (9) *When I say ‘Now’, you will clench your teeth* or (10) *You will clench your teeth when I tell you to*.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For (9) and (10), compare an example from earlier in the text, where Anscombe writes that ‘a single utterance may function’ as both an expression of intention and a prediction of what is going to happen: ‘E.g. when a doctor says to a patient in the presence of a nurse “Nurse will take you to the operating theatre”, this may function both as an expression of his intention (if it is in it that his decision as to what shall happen gets expressed) and as an order, as well as being information to the patient ... This example shows that the indicative (descriptive, informatory) character is not the distinctive mark of “predictions” as opposed to “expressions of intention”, as we might at first sight have been tempted to think’ (Anscombe 1963/2000, 3).

Crucially, however, Anscombe does *not* draw from this the conclusion that statements like (7), (9), and (10) don't describe what is going to happen—for surely they do that! The point is rather that these descriptions are unlike those in (4) and (5) in that they do not rest on observation or theoretical inference: they express what Anscombe calls 'practical', rather than 'speculative' or 'theoretical', knowledge *of what is going to be done*.<sup>4</sup> And something similar, I wish to suggest, is supposed to be true of statements like Cavell's (S).

Another place Hansen goes wrong is his account of the *authority* one would need to have in order to make S-type statements in the way that he envisions. For, first, Hansen's reading of Cavell invites the impression that this authority could be exercised almost arbitrarily in favor of a person's moral, political, or aesthetic ends. Second, since even the most influential among us are not really in the position of game-designers or heads of household with respect to the principles of our own language, a version of Mates's question will arise again in connection with this position: on what grounds can a *philosopher* assume the authority to dictate how we use our words? Hansen does try to head off these worries in his discussion of Cavell's 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy'.<sup>5</sup> As Hansen reads him, Cavell's claim there, as suggested in the second passage that I quoted at the start of Section I, is that entitlement to S-type statements is tied 'not to their accuracy in stating the facts, but to their ability to convince the audience to see and acknowledge the relevant fact' (Hansen 2017, 805). So far this is correct. But it raises the question, what *are* the facts that a philosopher is trying to convince her audience to see and acknowledge? While this matter is obscure, it's clearly central to Cavell's position that these facts are not *themselves* facts about observable patterns of ordinary usage, and indeed that *evidence* about 'what we say' will contribute nothing at all to the philosopher's task. In arguing for this conclusion, Cavell appeals to a passage from Hume's essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' (§15):

It is with good reason, says Sancho to the squire with the great nose, that I pretend to have a judgment in wine: this is a quality hereditary in our family. Two of my kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage. One of them tastes it, considers it; and after mature reflection pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather which he perceived in it. The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favor of the wine; but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom, an old key with a leathern thong tied to it. (Hume 1757/1965, 10-11)

---

<sup>4</sup> For further interpretation of Anscombe along these lines see Schwenkler 2019, 106-110; and Schwenkler forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> See also his further discussion in Hansen 2021, which broaches the possibility that ordinary language philosophers can perform multiple speech acts in a single utterance, which would allow for a statement to be both rule-giving and descriptive at the same time.

For Cavell, what's gone wrong in this tale is that the question 'Does the wine taste of iron and leather?' is treated as one to which *evidence* is relevant in the same way as evidence is relevant to a question like, 'Is the wine of such-and-such a vintage?'. By contrast, according to Cavell the role of the wine-taster, or the critic of food more generally, is like that of the critic of art or literature: it is to *get us to taste* what she does—and to the extent that we do not taste this, the question of evidence, whether of the convergence of popular opinion or the material composition of the substance under consideration, is entirely irrelevant.<sup>6</sup> Thus he writes in 'Aesthetic Problems':

[Hume's tale] dissociates the exercise of taste from the discipline of accounting for it: but *all* that makes the critic's expression of taste worth more than another man's is his ability to produce for himself the thong and key of his response; and his vindication comes not from his pointing out that it is, or was, in the barrel, but in getting us to taste it there. (Cavell 1965/2002d, 87)

And again:

It is essential to making an aesthetic judgment that at some point we be prepared to say in its support: 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. (ibid., 93)

And, once more:

... if we find we disagree about what we should say, it would make no obvious sense to attempt to confirm or disconfirm one or other of our responses by collecting data to show which of us is in fact right. What we should do is either (*a*) try to determine why we disagree (perhaps we are imagining the story differently)—just as, if we agree in response we will, when we start philosophizing about this fact, want to know why we agree, what it shows about our concepts; or (*b*) we will, if the disagreement cannot be explained, either find some explanation for *that*, or else discard the example. Disagreement is not disconfirming: it is as much a datum for philosophizing as agreement is. At this stage philosophizing has, hopefully, not yet begun. (ibid., 95)

This last point is connected to Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's project as attempting 'to undo the psychologizing of psychology, to show the necessity controlling our application of psychological and behavioral categories; even, one could say, show the necessities in human action and passion themselves' (ibid., 91). In light of this, evidence *that we agree* will do no more to support the Cavellian philosopher's project than evidence that we disagree will do to disconfirm her conclusions. What's needed is to get to the *source* of the agreement (or disagreement)—to show that it is not just a psychological (social,

---

<sup>6</sup> Cavell has more to say on this topic in his 1965/2002e.



anthropological) fact about certain human beings, but a part of our way of being connected to how *things* are.

All this is why, according to Cavell, the philosophy of ordinary language is not concerned ‘merely’ with language after all:

[This philosophy] 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. (ibid., 95)

Admittedly, we have yet to grasp just what Cavell means in this last remark or to see how what he says can be true.

#### IV

Let us return to the challenge from Mates that I discussed in Section II. What conclusions are we to draw from all of this about the entitlement of philosophers to claims about ‘what we say’, and about the relation of these claims to (what seems like it could be) empirical evidence for and against them?

The first point to emphasize, which runs somewhat contrary to Hansen’s reading of Cavell, is that on the reading I have offered here the knowledge that the philosopher expresses (or purports to express) in an S-type description of ‘what *we* say’ *is* (supposed to be) knowledge of how things observably are, and thus of an ‘empirical fact’ in a broad sense of that term.<sup>7</sup> (As Cavell says in the long passage that I quoted in Section II, his statements (S) and (T) ‘are true together and false together’, and ‘the identical state of affairs is described by both’.) Second, it follows quite directly from this that there *can* be real concord or conflict between the philosopher (or ordinary person) in her S-type claims about what *we* say, and the linguist or lexicographer in her T-type claims about what is said in L (which may be English, or French, or Swahili, or ...).

Indeed, both of these points are instances of a more general one, namely that the self-knowledge (purportedly) expressed in statements using ‘I’ and ‘my’ is epistemologically *substantial* in being knowledge of the same (purported) reality that also can be known, or known to be *merely* purported, on the basis of evidence by a third-person observer.<sup>8</sup> This point is somewhat obscured in the famous discussion of the use of ‘I’ in Wittgenstein’s

---

<sup>7</sup> For a related point see Bates and Cohen 1972, 3-4: ‘Cavell does not say that the dispute between Ryle and Austin is not empirical. Indeed, if empirical is taken as “concerned with a matter of fact” it is clear that he thinks the dispute is empirical and that Austin is correct and Ryle is wrong. What Cavell does claim is that it is not necessary to take a poll to discover who is right and who is wrong, and that the absence of a poll justifying our claims concerning correctness does not make those claims dogmatic or unempirical. Indeed, he says that Ryle could be expected to see that he was wrong, since he is a native speaker. What he is wrong about *is* a matter of fact—what it is that we mean when we say something. ... [Cavell’s] major claim is that there are areas which we think of as being about matters of fact—hence, empirical—for which we do not need evidence.’

<sup>8</sup> On the ‘substantiality’ of self-knowledge, see Moran 2001.

*Blue Book*—a passage which Rachael Wiseman (forthcoming) has made a persuasive case against reading as an expression of Wittgenstein’s own position:

There are two different cases in the use of the word ‘I’ (or ‘my’) which I might call ‘the use as object’ and ‘the use as subject.’ Examples of the first kind of use are these: ‘My arm is broken,’ ‘I have grown six inches,’ ‘I have a bump on my forehead,’ ‘The wind blows my hair about.’ Examples of the second kind are: ‘I see so-and-so,’ ‘I fear so-and-so,’ ‘I try to lift my arm,’ ‘I think it will rain,’ ‘I have toothache.’ One can point to the difference between the two cases by saying: The cases of the first category involve the recognition of a particular person, and there is in these cases the possibility of an error, or as I should rather put it: The possibility of an error has been provided for ... (Wittgenstein 1958, 66-67)

Two things are muddled here. First, the passage makes it seem as if in ‘the use of “I” as subject’ what one says should always be infallible; and second, it makes it seem as if these two uses of ‘I’ were always distinguished by their subject-matter, so that the *same* thing could never be described in both ways. The position of Anscombe’s *Intention* is an improvement in both respects, as she holds that ‘I’ is used ‘as subject’ not only in a statement like (11) *I try to lift my arm* but also in one like (12) *I am lifting my arm*—the latter of which describes a matter about which the speaker is not at all infallible, though mistakes in this domain are (as Cavell puts it in the first passage that I quoted) necessarily ‘extraordinary’.<sup>9</sup> Further, on Anscombe’s account a statement like (12) expresses knowledge of something that can also be observed, or be observed not to be happening, by a third party, whose assertion that (13) *No you aren’t—it’s tied down to your side* would therefore *contradict* what is said in (12), i.e., say that (12) is false. In short, the fact that a statement is an expression (purporting to be) of an agent’s self-knowledge, in which occurs the Wittgensteinian ‘use of “I” as subject’, does *not* itself show that this statement cannot be contradicted by what another party observes.

There is, however, also supposed to be a quite fundamental difference between what typically grounds the bodily self-knowledge that is expressed a statement like (12) and the evidence that would be supplied, via the testimony of an observer, in being told something like (13). This is that a person who asserts (12) in the ordinary way will express, or take herself to express, knowledge of what she is doing that is *not* grounded in testimony, inference, or observation of what happens: and so Anscombe contrasts this kind of case with one in which someone asks (14) *Why are you ringing that bell?* and I answer (15) *Good heavens! I didn’t know I was ringing it!*<sup>10</sup> For Anscombe, this last case does not display ‘the knowledge that a man has of his intentional actions’, precisely because what I do is known to me, not ‘in intention’, but rather through the observation

---

<sup>9</sup> As Anscombe says: ‘What is necessarily the rare exception is for a man’s performance in its more immediate descriptions not to be what he supposes (1963/2000, 87). There are some readings of *Intention* that have Anscombe flirting with an infallibilist view of these judgments; for a detailed critique of these readings see Schwenkler forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> For this example, see Anscombe 1963/2000, 51.

of what takes place.<sup>11</sup> And her emphasis on ‘I’ in (15) should signal to us that what we have here is not the Wittgensteinian ‘use of “I” as subject’, but a way of knowing something about myself that ‘involves the recognition of a particular person’. This is shown in the fact that, if it is only in this way that I know what I do, then the knowledge I could express in saying, e.g., that my arm is at my side is not of a matter to which Anscombe’s question ‘Why?’ has application: so if someone asks why my arm is where I say it is, my answer will describe a *cause* of its being down, rather than a *reason* I have for keeping it there. And things are quite different with my original statement in (12): for the explanation of why I was doing *that*, if I was, may have been that I was going to get something down from the shelf.<sup>12</sup>

A similar point seems to apply to the expression of self-conscious belief.<sup>13</sup> For example, my statement that (16) *I believe that I had a happy childhood*, even if it is intended as a claim about what I believe rather than as a hedged assertion about my childhood, usually won’t be made on the basis of evidence from introspection or the observation of my own behavior. But this statement can nevertheless be *contradicted* by your statement, made on the basis of just such evidence, that (17) *No, you don’t in fact believe that—I mean, look at the way you become so sensitive when the topic of someone’s unhappy childhood comes up; it’s clear that you believe your childhood was unhappy*. In this case, your statement in (17) is a way of bringing evidence to bear on whether my statement in (16) was true, just as (13) brought evidence to bear on the truth of (12). However, what I must do when you present me with the evidence described in (17) is not simply to come out with the statement that (18) *As it turns out, I believe that my childhood was unhappy*. This is because when I say something like (18) purely on the basis just suggested, the knowledge it expresses (which may be self-knowledge nevertheless—I am not going to quibble over words) is knowledge of myself ‘as other’; it is knowledge in which I am *alienated* from the attitude that I self-ascribe. (I myself would like to say, in the phrasing of Cavell’s from the first passage quoted in Section I, that my situation here is ‘tragic’.) And this is shown in the fact that, even if I were to assert (18) on the basis just imagined, I could not honestly assert just on this basis that (19) *My childhood was unhappy*—not in the way that, when I believed what I said in (16), I would also have said simply that (20) *I (seem to have) had a happy childhood*. (No more, that is, than I could really say, and mean, *that something is beautiful* if all I have is convincing evidence that it is.<sup>14</sup>)

Does this analysis apply in turn to the knowledge of language? On the view I have laid out, the point of saying that the knowledge of one’s language is self-knowledge, and so of emphasizing the *we* in ‘what we say’, is to remind us that the person who makes a Cavellian S-type claim, e.g. that (21) *We can use ‘voluntarily’ of an act that a person*

---

<sup>11</sup> Anscombe 1963/2000, 50-51 (‘the knowledge that a man has of his intentional actions’) and 57 (knowledge ‘in intention’).

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of Anscombe’s position in relation to that of the *Blue Book*, see Wiseman 2017 and Schwenkler 2019, 26-28.

<sup>13</sup> The argument of this paragraph mirrors that of Marcus and Schwenkler 2019.

<sup>14</sup> For a related argument concerning aesthetic appreciation see Gorodeisky and Marcus forthcoming.

*could not be blamed or excused for*, must herself be able *to say* the kind of thing that she thereby says ‘we say’, e.g. that (22) *Smith joined the army voluntarily*. Being able to say such a thing requires being able to *mean* it, which is not just a matter of producing the string of sounds, ‘smɪθ dʒɔɪnd ði ‘ɑ:mɪ ‘vɒləntərɪli’. And *that* ability is not supplied simply by turning up *evidence* that members of my linguistic community sometimes produce strings of sounds with this outward form: for even on the assumption that these uses have some meaning, until I can *recognize* this meaning and make it part of my own linguistic repertoire I will not be able to assert (22) with understanding of what I say, and so will not possess un-alienated *self-knowledge* of the fact that (21) describes. To say (22) and mean it, I need to be able to *grasp what is meant* by using these words, on this occasion—and that’s something that depends on attention to the world, in just the same way as the non-alienated expression of belief depends on attention to its subject-matter.<sup>15</sup> (‘Don’t you see, don’t you hear ...?’) And this ability, if it is of significance to philosophy, is not merely psychological: as Cavell says, what it shows is something *about our concepts*,<sup>16</sup> and thereby about whatever these are concepts of. In short, Cavell’s point is there is a mutual dependence between (i) *grasping*, in a first-personal way, what’s described in a statement like (21), (ii) being able to *say and mean* the kind of thing that is said in a statement like (22), and (iii) knowing what it is for things *to be* as the latter statement describes them. So it is that the topic of ordinary language philosophy is no different from the topic of ordinary language.

## V

Let us now take a closer look at Cavell’s original (S) and (T):

(S) When we ask whether an action is voluntary we imply that the action is fishy.

(T) [In ordinary English,] ‘Is X voluntary?’ implies that X is fishy.

In context it is clear that Cavell does not mean (S) and (T) to be read as pertaining to the use of ‘voluntary’ specifically and not to ‘involuntary’, ‘voluntarily’, and ‘involuntarily’ as well, nor as pertaining only to the use of these words in interrogatives: thus he treats Austin’s remark that ‘we may join the army or make a gift voluntarily, we may hiccough or make a small gesture involuntary’ as describing the ‘material mode’ counterparts to what is said in (S);<sup>17</sup> and elsewhere he puts the central idea by saying that ‘we only say or ask A (“X is voluntary,” or “Is X voluntary?”) where B is the case (something is, or

---

<sup>15</sup> Compare Austin’s description of his ‘linguistic phenomenology’: ‘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’ (Austin 1956-1957, 8).

<sup>16</sup> Cavell 1965/2002d, 95; as quoted toward the end of Section III.

<sup>17</sup> Cavell 1958/2002b, 19.

seems, fishy about X)'.<sup>18</sup> Finally, here is what Cavell provides by way of a gloss on 'fishy':

It is fundamental to Austin's account to emphasize that we cannot *always* say of actions that they were voluntary, even when they obviously were not involuntary either. Although we can (sometimes) say, 'The gift was made voluntarily,' it is specifically not something we can say about ordinary, unremarkable cases of making gifts. Only when the action (or circumstances) of making the gift is in some way unusual (instead of his usual Christmas bottle, you give the neighborhood policeman a check for \$1000), or extraordinary (you leave your heirs penniless and bequeath your house to your cat), or untoward (you give your rocking horse to your new friend, but the next morning you cry to have it back), can the question whether it was voluntary intelligibly arise. Ryle has not completely neglected this: his 'actions which ought not be done' and his 'action [which] seems to have been ... [someone's] fault' are clearly examples of actions which are abnormal, untoward, questionable; so he is right in saying that about these we (sometimes) raise the question whether they were voluntary. His error lies in characterizing those about which the question *cannot* arise. Normally, it is true, the question whether satisfactory, correct, or admirable performances are voluntary does not arise; but this is because there is usually nothing about such actions to question; nothing has gone wrong. (Cavell 1958/2002b, 6-7)

In sum, the force of (S) is to say that when we use 'voluntary', 'involuntary', etc. in speaking of an action, we necessarily imply that in this action something was abnormal or might have gone wrong, whether morally or otherwise; and (T) transforms this claim into a generalization about ordinary English. Yet a bit of investigation reveals that this position faces pressure from uses like the following, each drawn from the British National Corpus:<sup>19</sup>

- (23) But if you look around there is so much to do! And there's so much voluntary work to be done if people have got spare time to go and help but, I don't know whether it's the sign of the times that people only want to do jobs for monetary gain. That may be the idea, but there are so many things to be done by voluntary workers if people would only say well I've got half an hour an hour it could be so much of an advantage to whoever they're giving their services to because we're having to cut costs on this and costs on that an hour or two given voluntary [*sic*] would cover those jobs that we can't get the money to pay for.
- (24) Erm in the, in the civil war issue what was at stake here er was er the nature of the republic, the nature of the union. Erm these states had come together voluntarily in seventeen eighty seven er to secure common aims protection against foreigners, Indians er economic aims, and these aims bound them

---

<sup>18</sup> Cavell 1958/2002b, 8.

<sup>19</sup> For these uses and many others, see Zahorec et al. forthcoming.

together, common purposes and so on, but was the United States a permanent union? Or was it something like, you know, the Conservative Party? Something one could join and leave as one felt like it.

- (25) Shivering, a form of involuntary muscular action, raises the metabolic rate and elevates body temperature; in extreme cases it can quickly raise metabolic rate by a factor of four to five. To provide this energy, stores of blood sugar and fats are metabolized.
- (26) Beetles had fed on the pollen of cycads and they were among the first to transfer their attentions to the early flowers like those of magnolias and waterlilies. As they moved from one to another, they collected meals of pollen and paid for them by becoming covered in excess pollen which they involuntarily delivered to the next flower they visited.

These passages all show ‘voluntary’ and its derivatives being used, presumably by competent English speakers, in ways that are evidently meaningful but do not seem to imply that anything has, or may have, gone *wrong* with the acts that they describe, nor that there is or may have been anything ‘abnormal, untoward, questionable’ about these acts. In (23), the contrast with ‘voluntary work’ is work for which a person is *paid*, rather than work they are somehow compelled or required to undertake. In (24), the point of saying that the US states came together ‘voluntarily’ is to say that they *chose* to come together over remaining separate. In (25), ‘involuntary muscular action’ draws a contrast with muscular action that is subject to a person’s deliberate control, such as lifting one’s arm in the ordinary way. And, finally, in (26) the beetles will have delivered the pollen ‘involuntarily’ if they did this without knowing they were doing it, and not as a means in a goal-directed process. I will assume for the sake of argument that *we* can all appreciate that nothing in these sentences is out of order—save perhaps for the last use of ‘voluntary’ in (23), though even there we will know what is *meant* by the word even as we would prefer to use ‘voluntarily’ instead. Further, I will assume that we all can see that we ourselves could *use* the words in question in just the way that is displayed here, where they mark distinctions that have nothing at all to do with what may have gone wrong or been blameworthy, abnormal, or untoward. If indeed we see these things, then we see that Cavell’s (S) is mistaken in much the same way as the claim from Ryle that it is supposed to improve on.

What kind of insight is this? And what role does attention to the observable *facts* of ordinary use play in our coming to achieve it? If Cavell is right, not about the proper use of ‘voluntary’ but about the nature of linguistic self-knowledge, then the role of this attention should be, not to provide *evidence* for or against a generalization that we made on the basis of armchair introspection, but to provide a *reminder* of something that, in order to recognize its significance at all, we must in some way have understood already.<sup>20</sup> And this seems to be correct. When we encounter, for example, the use of ‘involuntary’

---

<sup>20</sup> Here I mean to use ‘reminder’ in the sense of *Philosophical Investigations* I, §127.

as it appears in (25), this is not a meaning we have to *learn* in the way that some of us once had to learn the novel use of ‘friend’ as a verb, nor is there any need for us to *question* what it means (that is, what distinction the word is being used to draw)—and all this reflects the fact that we ourselves might well have used this word in *just* this way should the occasion for doing so have arisen. That we have this ability is something about ourselves that we may have *forgotten*, perhaps because we never had called it explicitly to mind, in assenting too quickly to Cavell’s (S), just as Ryle himself seems to have forgotten, in that infamous passage, something he went on to demonstrate that he knew, namely that ‘Was it voluntary?’ can be asked about someone’s joining the army without thereby implying that this is something the person *should not* have done. And all this is to be expected if, as in Ryle’s great image, the job of the philosopher of ordinary language is to construct a ‘map’ of what we know only in a tacit or inexplicit way through our pre-philosophical command of our language:

Many people can talk sense with concepts but cannot talk sense about them; they know by practice how to operate with concepts, anyhow inside familiar fields, but they cannot state the logical regulations governing their use. They are like people who know their way about their own parish, but cannot construct or read a map of it, much less a map of the region or continent in which their parish lies. (Ryle 1949/2009, lix-lx)

What allows for the possibility of discovery, and of error, in claims about ‘what we say’ is that the competencies that govern this activity are practical and largely unconscious, and our exercise of them is usually unreflective. Because of this, in making and evaluating claims of this kind we should not suppose that we are guaranteed to have explicit mastery of the full range of relevant facts. That is the lesson of Ryle’s metaphor: our pre-reflective view of our language is a view from the ground, and our mastery of it is, in the first place, an ability to get things done. It takes real work to move ourselves from this position to the one in which we can describe in detail what Wittgenstein called the ‘maze of little streets and squares’ that fill out the ‘ancient city’ that is our language.<sup>21</sup> As such, the philosopher of ordinary language is neither required nor even permitted to ignore or disregard the observable facts about patterns of ordinary use, as if such considerations were strictly irrelevant to her concerns.<sup>22</sup> But this is not because such attention turns up *evidence* for and against the generalizations a philosopher is out to make. To ask, for example, ‘When do we say of someone that she did such-and-such

---

<sup>21</sup> Wittgenstein 1953/2009, §18.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Austin’s own commitment to a strictly a priori or ‘armchair’ methodology is not so straightforward, as in ‘A Plea for Excuses’ he recommends attention to ordinary language precisely as a superior *alternative* to what ‘you and I are likely to think up in our armchairs of an afternoon’ (Austin 1956-1957, 8; emphasis added); and later in that essay he proposes using the dictionary, the law, and the empirical science of psychology, anthropology, and animal behavior as ‘systematic aids’ or ‘source-books’ for linguistic reflection (ibid., 12-15). Ryle’s position in ‘Ordinary Language’ is more austere: for example, he writes that ‘Describing the mode of employment of an expression does not require *and is not usually helped* by information about the prevalence or unprevalence of this way of employment it’ (Ryle 1953, 177; emphasis added).

voluntarily?’ is not just to ask about the linguistic practices of a certain group of people—a group which we ourselves happen to belong to. It is to ask *ourselves* about what *we* are doing when we use this word, and thus about how we say things *to be* when we use it.

## VI

Suppose I have just now succeeded in showing that Cavell’s position on the use of ‘voluntary’ is subject to the same rebuttal as Ryle’s: there are ways *we* can use ‘voluntary’ and its derivatives that carry no implication of fishiness. What is the significance of this fact for the wider philosophical programme that Cavell was out to defend?

For Cavell, the deep insight driving both Ryle and Austin was that, in philosophy, the use of ordinary words like ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ often ‘stretches [the corresponding idea] out of shape, beyond recognition’, by requiring these words to be applicable in circumstances where they simply are not (Cavell 1958/2002b, 7). This is because philosophers often act as if a question like ‘Was it voluntary?’ can be asked about absolutely *any* human action, without reference to any ‘specific reason’ beyond the simple desire to bring things under concepts. And Cavell, like Ryle and Austin, believes on the contrary that this kind of question is very often senseless:

These antitheses [viz., those expressed in questions like ‘Voluntary or involuntary?’ and ‘Voluntary or not?’] miss exactly those actions about which the question ‘Voluntary or not?’ really has no sense, viz., those ordinary, unremarkable, natural things we do which make up most of our conduct and which are neither admirable nor contemptible; which, indeed, could only erroneously be said to go on, in general, in *any* special way. Lacking sureness here, it is not surprising that Ryle’s treatment leaves the subject a bit wobbly. Feeling how *enormously* wrong it is to remove ‘voluntary’ from a *specific* function, he fails to sense the slighter error of his own specification. (Cavell 1958/2002b, 7-8)

I have argued above that Cavell is also in error about what we are able to mean when we say ‘voluntary’, and that this error is not in itself any more surprising than the similar mistake that Cavell finds in Ryle. More importantly, I wish to argue now that this error does not impugn Cavell’s *central* insight about the conditions on the meaningful use of ‘voluntary’ any more than Ryle’s error impugns his. Indeed, we saw already that Ryle himself identifies several *specific* functions of ‘voluntary’ that involve no implication of possible blame: thus he writes that ‘sometimes the question “Voluntary or involuntary?” means “Did the person do it, or was it done to him?”; sometimes it presupposes that he did it, but means “Did he do it with or without heeding what he was doing?” or “Did he do it on purpose or inadvertently, mechanically, or instinctively, etc.?”’ (Ryle 1949/2009, 60). Ryle’s point, and Cavell’s too, is that outside their use in drawing specific distinctions like these ones, words like ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ have no meaningful use at all.



But *can't* we do just the thing that Cavell is saying we cannot? This morning I made breakfast, in the usual way—I was not in a daze or influenced by threats or the like.<sup>23</sup> Here, even if it would not be *usual* to say that 'This morning I made breakfast voluntarily', wouldn't I nevertheless say something *true* if I were for some reason to say this? Let us try to suppose that I would have. The question we have to answer is, *what* true thing would I thereby have said? And, crucially, it is not enough to answer that I would thereby have said *that I made breakfast voluntarily*, since the question posed to us by the ordinary language philosopher is precisely that of what *those* words, used on the occasion in question, could have meant. The aim of this question is to get us to see the gulf that exists between the meaning that words like these are (supposed to be) given in philosophy, and the meaning they have in ordinary speech.<sup>24</sup>

Let me try again: (27) *This morning I made breakfast voluntarily*. What have I just said? One thing I *can* have said is the kind of thing that Ryle and Austin both think can be said with these words: that when I made breakfast this morning it was not something I 'suffered under compulsion', something that I 'had to' do 'no matter what I wanted'.<sup>25</sup> To say this would be to draw a contrast between the way I made breakfast this morning and the way I would have made it if, say, I did so because someone was holding a gun to my head. Alternatively, I may have used the sentence in (27) to say that my efforts this morning were 'voluntary' in the sense of (23) above—that is, that making breakfast was not something for which I was paid or otherwise compensated.<sup>26</sup> In the first case, my statement in (27) would relate my breakfast-making to just the kind of background 'fishiness' that Cavell's official account requires, while the in the second it would be one of the uses that I have argued that he overlooks. Crucially, in arguing that a word like 'voluntarily' cannot be used of any action at all, Cavell is not committed to denying that we *could* describe my 'voluntarily' making breakfast in ways like these: his point is rather that in saying something like (27) I could only *mean* either that I did not act under coercion, or that I acted as I did out of good will and not to obtain some reward. Yet neither of these *specific* distinctions is what the philosopher uses 'voluntary' to mark. Is there, then, something else I could have meant in using this word, on this occasion, *other than* one of these things that we ordinarily use it to mean?

For a philosopher, the answer is likely to be that 'voluntary' in *her* sense is the contrary of 'involuntary' in a sentence like (25), so that to say I made breakfast voluntarily is to say that this is something I *willed* to do, and did because I *willed* to do it, where the relevant contrast is with physiological processes like shivering, and reflex actions like a startled jump. And the acceptability of (25) has shown us that we can, in fact, use 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' in just this way.<sup>27</sup> But this is not enough to ward

---

<sup>23</sup> Compare Austin 1956-1957, 16; as quoted in Section II.

<sup>24</sup> Here and in what follows I hope to have benefited from the argument of Travis 1991/2008.

<sup>25</sup> See Ryle 1949/2001, 60; as quoted in footnote 2 above.

<sup>26</sup> As an illustration of how we can use 'voluntarily' with this meaning, consider: 'Did you make breakfast this morning just to earn your allowance?'—'No, I did it voluntarily.'

<sup>27</sup> Likewise 'voluntarily', for example in another sentence from the BNC: 'These patients are unable to defecate voluntarily and must therefore rely upon stimulation of bowel reflexes with or without manual evacuation to complete defecation.'

off Cavell's challenge: for the question is whether we can use these words, with this meaning, in describing *any action at all*—or if instead we can so use them only of those actions, such as yawning, hiccoughing, sneezing, kicking out one's leg, and jumping up from a chair, that *can* be the result either of choice or of a reflexive or automatic process. And I submit that the second answer is correct. That is, I submit that, in ordinary ('non-philosophical') speech, the *only* meanings there can be for 'voluntarily' in a statement like (27) are the two described in the preceding paragraph. Were it detached from these specific meanings, the modifier 'voluntarily' would be semantically idle, as there would be nothing for us to mean in saying it. Unless 'voluntarily' has one of these specific meanings, the only thing that (27) can say is that *this morning I made breakfast*.

There are, of course, two competing explanations of why 'voluntarily' could be used in a sentence like (27) only with such a restricted range of meanings. One of these is Cavell's: it is that, in the context of this sentence, the word 'voluntarily' would *have* no meaning unless it were being used to mark one of these specific distinctions. The other is that of Paul Grice in 'Logic and Conversation' (Grice 1975/1989): that since it simply *goes without saying* that making breakfast is not a reflex action or a purely physiological process, in using 'voluntarily' to describe such an act a speaker conversationally *implies* that the act may have been coerced or compensated. And if Grice is correct then it should be possible, in saying (27), for *one* to have meant only that she didn't make breakfast in the manner of an involuntary sneeze, even as the hearer would inevitably draw a different conclusion. Speaking for myself I find this to be impossible: I find that the form of words in (27) cannot *seriously* be meant in this way, any more than I could mean by saying 'Rome' to refer to the city that is the capital of France. So much the worse, I suggest, for Grice. But the reader is invited to test this claim against herself.

## VII

Who are the 'we' of whom—for whom and to whom—Cavell's 'philosopher of ordinary language' speaks, when this philosopher speaks of 'what *we* should say'?

Drawing on work by Henry Jackman (2001), Hansen argues that anyone 'who wants to defend the idea that we have *a priori* entitlement to claims about what "we" mean' will face the following dilemma. First, on the assumption that speakers have *a priori* knowledge of what the expressions of their language mean, it follows that they aren't entitled to generalize from their own language to a language that is shared by anyone else. On the other hand, if we assume instead that the language that speakers know is shared, it follows that they cannot have *a priori* knowledge of the meaning of expressions of it. For Hansen, 'The upshot of the dilemma is that there cannot be *a priori* knowledge that one's language ... is shared—but that is just what it seems ordinary language philosophers need in order to respond to Mates' challenge' (Hansen 2017, 794).

At work here is a conception of language where the 'idiolect' of a given speaker is set against the de facto speech patterns of others: as John Searle writes, 'That my idiolect matches a given dialect group is indeed an empirical hypothesis (for which I have a lifetime of "evidence"), but the truth that in my idiolect "oculist" means eye doctor is not

refuted by evidence concerning the behavior of others' (Searle 1969, 13; quoted in Hansen 2017, 794). On the picture implied here, the 'we' in 'what we say' is equivalent to 'I and anyone who happens to be similar in this respect': and it is an empirical question whether any given person, or indeed, anyone at all, belongs to the latter category.

This picture goes wrong from the start in the way that it encourages us to think about linguistic expression. As Cavell emphasizes, human language finds its life in communication, which is a *shared* activity in which all parties are coequal:

The philosopher, understandably, often takes the isolated man bent silently over a book as his model for what using language is. But the primary fact of natural language is that it is something spoken, spoken together. Talking together is acting together, not making motions and noises at once another, nor transferring unspeakable messages or essences from the inside of one closed chamber to the inside of another. (Cavell 1958/2002b, 33-34)<sup>28</sup>

On this alternative picture, the 'we' of 'what we say' is not 'I and he and she and ...' but rather 'I and *you*'. (It does not entail the impossibility of 'private language', but only that such a language could not be used to *say* things in any significant sense of that word.) And it has the consequence that when I say something to you—when Ryle or Austin or Cavell says something *to us*—about 'what we would say', then if the communication is successful (that is to say, if it *is* an act of communication at all, as opposed to a mere attempt at one) what is said will *be* something that we both (or all) would say, or could say if we thought it true. (And, thus, it will also be something we both (all) could deny, question, challenge, seek to explore the consequences of, ...) The 'we' of 'what we say' is the 'we' who are part of the present conversation, the conversation whose implicit logic we are together trying to articulate.

It would go beyond the scope of the present inquiry to offer a general account of the nature of shared activity or the way that the parties to such activity can have a distinctively first-personal way of knowing what they do.<sup>29</sup> The essential point to emphasize here is the one that is suggested in the first sentence of the quotation above: that if the use of (ordinary) language is a shared activity, then the same must be true of ordinary language *philosophy*. This philosophy must be something that *we* do together, not as 'combat' by means of arguments or the presentation of evidence for and against opposing positions, but rather in the spirit of Cavell's 'Aesthetic Problems' (see the quotations from the end of Section III), where the goal of philosophical reflection is a shared consciousness of something that *we* must have understood already before the work of philosophy could have begun.

This does not mean that it is impossible to make mistakes in this endeavor, nor that any points of seeming disagreement can always be resolved, perhaps even in principle. What it means is rather that when we find ourselves in *irresolvable* disagreement over what we can or should say, that disagreement is 'tragic' in the sense of my opening quote

---

<sup>28</sup> For an important discussion of the intersubjectivity of speech and hearing, see Moran 2018.

<sup>29</sup> For a start, see the discussion in Laurence 2011, Rödl 2018, and Schwengerer forthcoming.

from Cavell, and not a mere disagreement over the description of the facts of our linguistic behavior. It is, therefore, not a disagreement that could ever be resolved simply by evidence that, as it happens, *we do in fact* say one thing or the other. What's required instead is our becoming able to understand one another—and thus becoming able to say (to ask, assert, question, understand, probe the implications of, ...) the very same things. And on the Cavellian account that I've defended here, our being able to do all of that depends in turn on our sharing a common viewpoint on the world, a common understanding of what it would be *for things to be* these ways that we might wish to say them to be.

## REFERENCES

- Anscombe, G. E. M. 1963/2000. *Intention*. Second edition. Harvard University Press.
- Austin, J. L. 1956-1957. 'A Plea for Excuses'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57: 1-30.
- Bates, S., and T. Cohen. 1972. 'More on What We Say'. *Metaphilosophy* 3: 1-24.
- Cavell, S. 2002a. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Updated edition. Cambridge University Press.
- Cavell, S. 1958/2002b. 'Must We Mean What We Say?'. In Cavell 2002a, 1-43.
- Cavell, S. 1962/2002c. 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy'. In Cavell 2002a, 44-72.
- Cavell, S. 1965/2002d. 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy'. In Cavell 2002a, 73-96.
- Cavell, S. 1965/2002e. 'Austin at Criticism'. In Cavell 2002a, 97-114.
- Gorodeisky, K., and E. Marcus. Forthcoming. 'Aesthetic Rationality'. *Journal of Philosophy*.
- Grice, H. P. 1975/1989. 'Logic and Conversation'. In Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, 22-40. Harvard University Press.
- Hansen, N. 2017. 'Must We Measure What We Mean?' *Inquiry* 60: 785-815.
- Hansen, N. 2021. 'Metalinguistic Proposals'. *Inquiry* 64: 1-19.
- Hume, D. 1757/1965. 'Of the Standard of Taste'. In J. W. Lenz, ed., *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, 3-24. Bobbs-Merrill.
- Jackman, H. 2001. 'Ordinary Language, Conventionalism, and *A Priori* Knowledge'. *Dialectica* 55: 315-325.
- Laurence, B. 2011. 'An Anscombian Approach to Collective Action'. In A. Ford., J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland, eds., *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, 270-294. Harvard University Press.
- Marcus, E., and J. Schwenkler. 2019. 'Assertion and Transparent Self-Knowledge'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49: 873-889.
- Mates, B. 1958. 'On the Verification of Statements About Ordinary Language'. *Inquiry* 1: 161-171.
- Moran, R. 2001. *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*. Princeton University Press.

- Moran, R. 2018. *The Exchange of Words: Speech, Testimony, and Intersubjectivity*. Oxford University Press.
- Rödl, S. 2018. Joint Action and Plural Self-Consciousness. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 49: 124-136.
- Ryle, G. 1949/2009. *The Concept of Mind*. 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. Routledge
- Ryle, G. 1953. 'Ordinary Language'. *The Philosophical Review* 62: 167-186
- Schwengerer, L. Forthcoming. 'Towards Collective Self-knowledge'. *Erkenntnis*.
- Schwenkler, J. 2019. *Anscombe's Intention: A Guide*. Oxford University Press.
- Schwenkler, J. Forthcoming. 'How to Contradict an Expression of Intention'.
- Searle, J. 1969. *Speech Acts*. Cambridge University Press.
- Travis, C. 1991/2008. 'Annals of Analysis'. In Travis, *Context-Sensitivity: Selected Essays*, 65-93. Oxford University Press.
- Wiseman, R. 2017. 'What Am I and What Am I Doing?'. *Journal of Philosophy* 114: 536-550.
- Wiseman, R. Forthcoming. 'The Misidentification of Immunity to Error Through Misidentification'. *Journal of Philosophy*.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *The Blue and Brown Books*. Harper.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953/2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. Revised 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Ed. P. M. S. Hacker and J. W. Schulte. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Zahorec, M., R. Bishop, N. Hansen, J. Schwenkler, and J. Sytsma. Forthcoming. 'Linguistic Corpora and Ordinary Language'.