

The “War,” the “Troops,” and the Grammar of “Support”

ROBERT W. TATE

Not too long ago, at a lighthearted social gathering, I stumbled into a conversation on the United States’ martial presence in the Middle East. The person with whom I spoke is a friend of a friend, a young man with a military background. I do not share these ties. We were struggling to find our feet with one another. And despite our best efforts at civility, our talk was taking a turn for the tense.

When we sensed that a skirmish was about to ensue, the young man moved for a preemptive termination: “Don’t you support our troops?” he asked. It is difficult to tell whether his question sought my agreement or my capture. The latter possibility of seizure and subjection registers the customary force and effect of the locution, “Support our troops.” Often, to use this expression is to refuse to participate in certain discussions (if not to prevent a dialogue from even getting off the ground). In these cases, the phrase works to intimidate, threatening discredit or worse to those who pursue particular topics.¹ The former possibility of parley and accord points to a more charitable reading. In this light, the young man’s question becomes a diplomatic gesture — an attempt to bridge the gap or, at least, to keep the peace. A suitable translation might be, “Very well, you do not support our government’s foreign policy; do you at least support the soldiers who serve our country, the men and women who labor to protect you, the U.S. civilian?” This could be the starting point for an exchange, one to be continued in perhaps a more appropriate arena. Of course, the criteria of appropriateness for the circumstances and parties of such an exchange remain flexible, open to projection and to debate.²

1. I am grateful to the anonymous reader of my initial submission to *Conversations*, who pointed out that “to pose the question ‘Do you support our troops?’ is a not an invitation to conversation, but an express denial of conversation.” I have worked in my revisions to expand on this distinction, exploring the possibility of sustaining a dialogue after this question has been posed.

2. Cf. Cavell, “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 180-2.

Regardless of whether it was a denial or an invitation, his question at that moment laid several options before me. Decorum pressed me to say, “Yes.” My younger, more careless self might have tagged on a mocking “Sir” to this “Yes” — might have even thrown down an emphatic “No.” My older, humbler self might have rested on candor, electing to pause, look the man in the eye, turn up my palms, and say, “I don’t know.” What I in fact did — as I often do when I lose my social bearings — was attempt to be clever: “How exactly does one oppose the troops?” I asked in return.

The military man smiled. This appeared to be the end of the matter. The more I think about his reaction, the more it strikes me as a merciful one. He rightly could have dismissed my reply for what it was: an evasion of a question that was asked seriously. And even if I could not have refrained from responding to his question with another question, I could have reoriented our conversation with the right question: “What do you mean by ‘support?’” — or, better still, “What do *you* mean by ‘support?’” But each of us could feel the discomfort of the audience that was gathering around our discussion. To prolong it, we knew, would be indecorous.³

The substance of our exchange lodged in my mind like a splinter. I kept revisiting it, turning it over, playing out alternative endings, trying to soothe its irritations. To be sure, the expression “support our troops” has never sat well with me. But my conversation with this man revealed linguistic and ethical entanglements that I had not yet recognized. I recalled Noam Chomsky’s criticism of the phrase. It fell short of untying these knots. Even so, testing Chomsky’s position may be a productive gambit: [...] the point of public relations slogans like “support our troops” is that they don’t mean anything [...] that’s the whole point of good propaganda: you want to create a slogan that nobody is going to be against and I suppose everybody will be for because nobody knows what it means because it doesn’t mean anything, but its crucial value is it diverts your attention from a question that does mean something — “Do you support our policy?” — and that’s the one you’re not allowed to talk about.⁴

3. As above, I want to bracket the questions of convenience and appropriateness. One may very well say that a difficult conversation such as this one is seldom if ever harmonious with the niceties of a polite gathering — and that we have a (civic) responsibility to have it out anyway. Still, I think it fair to admit that if we insist on fulfilling this responsibility at every opportunity, we may find ourselves no longer attending many parties.

4. Noam Chomsky, “On Propaganda: Noam Chomsky Interviewed by Unidentified Interviewer, *WBAI*, January 1992,” *Chomsky.Info: The Noam Chomsky Website*, accessed July 5, 2014,

There is little doubt that people have used the utterance “support our troops” propagandistically. It can distract its audience from grave and crucial details. It can confuse the details themselves. But to say that it doesn’t mean anything rings false. When we resist polemics and listen to people such as that young man, other uses of the phrase — applications that exceed the conceptual boundaries of propaganda — may show themselves. Even if they do not, our willingness to continue speaking, to go on with one another, depends upon our abilities to attend thoroughly and precisely to why someone has been tempted to take language “on holiday.”⁵

These uses mark the coordinates for an important inquiry. What can the statement “I support the troops” accomplish, even when it proves to be senseless? Under what circumstances can one say, “I support the troops, but not the war,” and mean it? What must any of us mean in saying that we support the soldiers who fight our country’s wars?

In asking what the expression “support our troops” not only means, but also does in concrete situations, I call for the methods of ordinary language philosophy. These methods moor our understanding of a word or concept to the context of its application and the history of its use. What I referred to above as the right question — “What do *you* mean by ‘support?’” — similarly summons the approaches of ordinary language philosophy: this query arises from the sort of entanglements that occur when we employ or analyze a sign without a clear view of its history in situated speech-acts. Cavell describes the nature of this confusion with a vital distinction:

[Wittgenstein] undertook, as I read him, to trace [...] the ways in which [...] we are led to speak “outside language games,” consider expressions apart from, and in opposition to, the natural forms of life which give those expressions the force they have [...]. What is left out of an expression if it is used “outside its ordinary language game” is not necessarily what the *words* mean (they may mean what

<http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/199201--.htm>. For the sake of clarity, I have altered this transcript’s punctuation.

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Rev. 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §38: “philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*.” Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 56e: “Don’t *for heaven’s sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.”

they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost.⁶

Talking nonsense has less to do with an utterance's semantic content, less even to do with an utterance's pragmatic implications, and more to do with "our confused relation to the words" we are uttering.⁷ Cavell sheds light on what most disturbed me when recalling my conversation with the military man. In response to his question of whether I support the troops, I could have answered in the affirmative without entirely feigning conviction. Still, I would have done so with puzzlement and unease — not because I do not know what "support" means, but because I do not know what I would mean in saying it there and then. I would be lost with my words.

Thus, in order to survey the grammar of "support," we need to review not only its denotations, but also the everyday circumstances in which we say that we support someone.⁸ We say that we support people when we espouse their actions or enterprises. In this sense, to say, "I support the troops, but not the war," is to contradict oneself. This contradiction becomes less obvious when we speak of supporting people in terms of their principles. We can embrace certain aspects of a military ethos — the virtues of honor, courage, and loyalty, for instance — but here we are not supporting the troops so much as supporting the values that they strive to embody. We say that we support people when we provide sustenance or the means to an end. These resources can be psychological — a boost of morale or a show of solidarity. Generating this form of support is arguably the basic purpose of the "Support Our Troops" slogan with its color-coded ribbons. (For those who use the motto with this intent — say, people whose loved ones are soldiers — it is difficult to see this function as propagandistic.) The resources we supply can also be physical or financial. In this sense, every taxpayer in the United States supports the troops. However, as recent events have shown, even this support may be mislaid once "our troops" become "our veterans."⁹

6. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 207.

7. James Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," in *Philosophical Investigations* 21:3 (1998), 247-8.

8. I acknowledge, in the contexts of "Drone Warfare" and the so-called "War on Terror," grammatical investigations of "troops" and "war" are likewise in order. But in the interests of brevity, I limit my remarks to "support."

9. The fiscal realities of "supporting the troops" call to mind the issues of "tacit consent" that Cavell discusses in relation to theories of the social contract à la Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (Cf. Stan-

Let us summarize. We can support people by standing beside their words and their deeds, although standing beside someone does not entail our agreement. We can support people by providing resources, mental or material, with or without stipulations. And is there not a larger range of diverse, yet interrelated examples? Our interpersonal lives show us that support can come in countless forms: listening to someone and offering advice; listening to someone and refraining from offering advice; helping someone to avoid an error; allowing someone to commit an error and to learn from it; forgiving someone for an error when s/he acknowledges it; forgiving someone even in the absence of confession and contrition.

Admittedly, these latter significations do not constitute the conventional use of the expression “support our troops.” They are not yet part of its history. For those who would like to see the phrase deployed in these ways, it falls to those language-users to make it so, to justify new applications to a language-community, to extend the expression’s history with a new story. In following Wittgenstein’s guidance, we would initiate this process by locating the *heimat* — the home, native land, or homeland — of the phrase “support our troops” and of the word “support”: “When philosophers use a word [...] and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever used this way in the language in which it is at home [*Heimat*]? What *we* do is bring [*führen*, “lead”] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”¹⁰ The phrase “support our troops” may be at home in its use to silence dissent, but this use hinges on employing the word “support” in a way that is conceptually confused and, to some extent, exiled from its *heimat*. This sort of exile or expatriation can occur with remarkable ease — indeed, disquietingly so, as the ease of estrangement is often proportional to the difficulty of returning. To rediscover the native lands of our words, we must practice what Cavell characterizes as a kind of “shepherding”:

ley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 49-69; Cf. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 22-8). Fittingly, Cavell recalls a similarly questionable slogan, “Love it [America], or Leave it,” to illustrate the (also questionable) idea “that when you express dissent from some action of your government you are withdrawing from membership in society and the protection of its laws” (64). There is far more to be said here with respect to civic engagement and civil disobedience. For instance, even citizens who vehemently protest their government’s policies can be seen as consenting to those policies inasmuch as they participate in and benefit from public services. Whether they *should* be seen as such—in what way, to what degree, under what circumstances, and so on—are inherently disputable concerns. Suffice it to say that we need not conflate “support” with “consent,” however much one may overlap with the other in particular cases.

10. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116.

It would a little better express my sense of Wittgenstein's practice if we translate the idea of bringing words back as leading them back, shepherding them; which suggests not only that we have to find them, to go to where they have wandered, but that they will return only if we attract and command them, which will require listening to them. But the translation is only a little better, because the behavior of words is not something separate from our lives, those of us who are native to them, in mastery of them. The lives themselves have to return.¹¹

To shepherd our words back home, we have to "attract and command them," and we do this by "listening to them," allowing them to show us where and how and why they have alienated themselves from reality. And since our words are inextricable from our lives, we therein shepherd ourselves back to reality, back down to earth, "back to the rough ground."¹² The roughness is at once our source of mobility and of difficulty — of traction and of drag, as it were. It is, at bottom, the only livable habitation we have. So think of the person who urges his or her fellow citizens to "support the troops." This person may be a U.S. soldier. S/he may be a relative or friend of a U.S. soldier. (And s/he may even nurse a fair amount of ambivalence regarding the U.S. military's customs and operations.) If one opposes this institution and its activities, how does one begin to respond to this person — begin to be responsive to this person — without a bad-faith affirmation? It is unlikely that any productive conversation would ensue if one were to begin by castigating this person for using an inane expression with a propagandistic history. (Yet it has to be said, when someone uses this phrase to avoid or deny genuine dialogue, exposing it as such a move may be just the right place to begin.) The ordinary language philosopher as shepherd would first have to attend to the grammar of support in this person's life — would thus have to attend to *this person* (a form of acknowledgment).¹³ S/he may even find that this person is using "support" to mean something like love or forgiveness. The ordinary language

11. Stanley Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 34-5. Cf. Stanley Cavell, "The Wittgensteinian Event," in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 194-9.

12. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107.

13. My emphases on attention are indebted to the teaching of Toril Moi in her Fall 2014 seminar on ordinary language philosophy and literary theory. Her forthcoming book on the subject should stimulate conversation for years to come.

shepherd would have to start there, in a particular zone of exile, before leading the flock back to a shared home — back to a common ground where the dangers of using “support” are recognized and where “love” and “forgiveness” are seen as more salutary alternatives. Leading language back to its homeland can thus be a crucial means of recreating the homeland itself. There will be cases when we want to use “support” and bring its full sweep of meaning into play. And there will be cases in which these meanings begin to muddle and mislead us, such that it is preferable to employ different words and concepts altogether. Despite my efforts to renovate “support,” I am inclined to take the latter course of action in the context of the U.S. military. For if I am asked again, “Do you support our troops?” I feel I could only say, “I am a United States citizen,” which is to say, “With our troops, I share citizenship.” My life as a civilian is constitutively connected to their lives as soldiers. We are accountable to and responsible for one another.