

## Cavell and Critique

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Stanley Cavell—my mentor and good friend—died on June 19, 2018, a week before I sat down to revise this tribute to him. I first presented these words in Cavell’s presence at a 2017 workshop at Tufts University on “Changing Politics: Conversations with Stanley Cavell.”<sup>1</sup> I was then concerned with a crucial political dimension of Cavell’s thought that even admiring readers of his work sometimes overlook. This topic strikes me as, if anything, even more pertinent now. Within a day of Cavell’s death, obituaries began to appear in the U.S. and abroad, and a common theme was Cavell’s astonishing breadth as a thinker. He was, different papers reported, as eloquent and engaging on topics as various as Emerson and Thoreau, movies from Hollywood’s “golden age,” Shakespeare, Wittgenstein and Austin, what he called “the fact of television,” Heidegger, Kleist, Kierkegaard, Hitchcock and Beckett. It is certainly true that Cavell had a great range. At the same time, as Nancy Bauer, Sandra Laugier and I observed in a post in the *New York Times* philosophy blog, *The Stone*,<sup>2</sup> there is an important political thread running through Cavell’s explorations of his many topics and questions, namely, a preoccupation with what it is to be a responsible participant in a democratic polis and, specifically, a democratic polis as brutally and profoundly imperfect as the United States of America. Cavell’s commitment to liberating, democratic politics was reflected in his actions beyond his writings, with some of his political endeavors described in his autobiographical tome *Little Did I Know* and others recorded in the work of his students and friends.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The conference was organized by Nancy Bauer and Naoko Saito and sponsored, not only by the Philosophy Department at Tufts but also by the Kyoto University Spirits Project.

2. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary and Sandra Laugier, “Stanley Cavell and the American Contradiction,” in *The Stone*, an online blog of the *New York Times*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/opinion/stanley-cavell-and-the-american-contradiction.html>.

3. Accounts of Cavell’s political activities are scattered throughout *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010). For a helpful addendum to these accounts, see Larry Jackson’s “Ordinary Faithfulness: Stanley Cavell 1926-2018” online at *n+1*, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/ordinary-faithfulness/>.

When I first encountered Cavell, during my undergraduate studies at Harvard in the late 1980s, he was a world-famous philosopher and cultural critic, massively learned, with an erudition that raised productively skeptical questions about familiar distinctions between “high” and “low” culture. He had a devilish and generous sense of humor and a—for me—rather alarming habit of attending seriously to even the most apparently trivial things that were said to him. It requires no special explanation to account either for the fact that, as a beginning student of philosophy, I took an interest in him or for the fact that, as a rather shy young person without an academic background, I found him quite intimidating. Although I enrolled in one of his lectures, I didn’t once speak in class or visit his office hours. My first substantive interaction with him occurred when he served as one of the examiners at the oral defense of my undergraduate honors thesis, which was partly devoted to his work. He encouraged me to go on in philosophy, and he supported my applications to PhD programs. Nevertheless, I only got to know him personally some years later when, after several semesters studying in the Philosophy Department at the University of Pittsburgh, I spent a year at Harvard (1993-1994), working as his research assistant and teaching fellow.

A large part of what attracted me to Cavell was his commitment to investigating the nature and demands of the sort of critical social thought that, he urges, is decisive for a functioning democratic community. Before finishing my undergraduate degree, I had taken an interest in theologies of liberation. During a year-long break from my studies, I had travelled to Guatemala with a friend with an eye to better understanding Christian base communities that, in the spirit of these theologies, used the Bible as a tool simultaneously for teaching reading skills and for political consciousness-raising. Around the same time, I started to become theoretically and practically engaged with feminism and the critical study of race. The first portion of Cavell’s thought that I studied closely was his writings on J.L. Austin and Wittgenstein, in particular, their images of the workings of language. When I first read Cavell on these topics, and listened to him lecture, it seemed to me that he was operating with a view of the workings of language that illuminated the kind of radical social thinking to which liberation theologians and critics of gender- and race-based injustices aspire. It was only somewhat later that this commitment to critical, non-con-

formist democratic thinking struck me as an organizing concern of his oeuvre, and that it came to seem fitting and important that his contributions be given a prominent place among the work of those we credit with teaching us about the nature and challenges of critique.

In developing his signature view of language, Cavell, as is well known, derives his inspiration in fundamental part from the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. It is reasonable to approach what is distinctive about Cavell's take on Wittgenstein by considering the significance Cavell attaches to the—in Cavell's argot—"scenes of instruction" that are regular features of Wittgenstein's writings, that is, the scenes or vignettes involving young children caught up in the types of interactions with their elders that result in the original acquisition of language.<sup>4</sup> An important point of these scenes—Cavell stresses—is to remind us that we don't make our initial way into language, in the manner of the child in the Augustinian allegory with which the *Investigations* open, as thinkers who are already capable of surveying the features of a complex world. There can be no question of our originally becoming linguistic simply by directing our attention toward and mentally hooking onto such features. Our path is rather one in which "learning" (that is, the sort of achievements that involve getting to know what things, or kinds of things, are and what they are called) is inextricably caught up with "maturation," understood as the development of an increasingly sophisticated conception of the world.<sup>5</sup> We mature in the relevant sense—in the sense of having the "light dawn" for us on the world to which our thought is responsible<sup>6</sup>—as we direct our attention to things that captivate speakers around us and get a feel for the importance of similarities among connections they make in their linguistic and other behavior. This is what Cavell has in mind when he says, in one of the most-cited passages of his work, that the fact that we emerge into language at all:

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4. In *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson and Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1985) Cavell talks about how in Wittgenstein's opening reflections on language in the *Investigations*, "the figure of the child is present... more prominently and decisively than in any other work of philosophy I think of (with the exception, if you grant that it is philosophy, of *Émile*)" (60). For his talk in this connection of "scenes of instruction," see especially *Conditions Hand-some and Unhandsome: the Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), *passim*.

5. Cavell introduces "learning" and "maturation" as terms of art in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 171.

6. The inset quote is taken from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), §141.

is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.”<sup>7</sup>

We go on from these beginnings in ways that essentially involve building on the sensibilities encoded in our early, not yet fully linguistic skirmishes. This means is that, according to the Wittgensteinian vision that Cavell wants to place before us, our linguistic endeavors are ineradicably marked by human subjectivity. Language is, in a quite straightforward sense, something for which we need to have a feel. To be sure, the history of twentieth and early twenty-first century philosophical reflection about language is replete with thinkers who treat it as an unquestionable axiom that any representation of our linguistic capacities on which they are ineluctably subjective is incapable of accommodating objectively or universally authoritative speech. Cavell’s presentation of his preferred image of language owes its majesty to a large degree to the originality of his use of Wittgenstein-influenced scenes of instruction to contest this well-worn posture and show that the indelible subjectivity of language is integral, and not a hindrance, to speaking “in a universal voice.”<sup>8</sup>

This picture of our predicament as language-users owes its prominence in Cavell’s thought to the light it sheds on what he sees as our duties as human beings and as citizens. It is a picture on which in speaking or thinking we cannot help but draw on our sensibilities, and Cavell wants us to see that a willingness to further develop our interests, our senses of what matters, is a condition of the kind of independent thinking that is necessary for healthy democratic conversation. In this portion of his work, Cavell presents an arresting conception the nature and difficulty of critical social thought. It is a conception that, although it certainly has notable forerunners in classic ideology critique, is distinctive and distinctively valuable.

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7. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 52.

8. For the idea of speaking in a universal voice, see Cavell, “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*. For Cavell’s introduction of what is arguably his own most significant “scene of instruction,” see the section of the *The Claim of Reason* entitled “Excursus on Wittgenstein’s Vision of Language.”

To see this it is helpful to notice that Cavell's preferred conception of language accommodates an intuitively appealing notion of value realism, making room for a view of value judgments as both universally authoritative and essentially world-guided. The conception upends philosophically more traditional accounts of empirical thought by suggesting that a complex sensibility is internal to—objectively authoritative—world-guided thinking. Indeed, Cavell's Wittgensteinian reflections on language open the door to disrupting familiar accounts of empirical thought even more than this last observation suggests. In pivotal parts of his work, Cavell invites us to regard the categories we use in thinking about aspects of mind as both essentially world-guided and irreducibly ethical,<sup>9</sup> with the result that we come to see empirical thought as encompassing, alongside thinking about morally neutral features of our lives, also thinking about worldly things—for instance, human beings—that are as such morally significant. The empirical world turns out to be a variegated, evaluatively rich domain, so there is no problem about making room for concepts that trace out patterns in this domain—concepts of value—to admit of objectively authoritative use. That is what it comes to say that Cavell equips us to embrace a quite natural understanding of value judgments as both objectively authoritative and essentially world-guided.<sup>10</sup>

This achievement is politically consequential. What might be called “the problem of value judgments” is a central problem of democratic political theory. Linda Zerilli brings this out forcefully in her 2016 book *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, starting from the observation that “in multicultural democracies the problem of how to adjudicate among combating points of view [is] paramount.”<sup>11</sup> This observation is worth accenting because, Zerilli explains, contemporary political theory is characterized by a pervasive skepticism about the idea of values that are in a straightforward sense open to view and available for authoritative adjudication. This is clear in the work of prominent neo-Kantian, liberal theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls and their followers. Because these thinkers take it for granted, in orthodox

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9. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, part IV. I defend a congenial conception of our categories for aspects of mind in *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), ch. 2.

10. Although these issues are guiding concerns of part III of the *Claim of Reason*, they also figure much earlier in the book. See, e.g., Cavell's declaration at *ibid.*, 14 that “statements of fact and judgments of value rest upon the same capacities of human nature.”

11. Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, Kindle edn. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 178.

Kantian fashion, that the observable world is in itself devoid of values, they have no recourse to world-guided judgments to address worries about “value differences run amok.”<sup>12</sup> They appeal instead to ideas of “public reason” that, Zerilli claims, are unattractively rationalistic or formalistic insofar as they are concerned exclusively with questions about whether maxims or practical principles are universalizable.

Despite her impatience with neo-Kantian notions of public reason, Zerilli is no more sympathetic to members of the currently influential group of “affect theorists” who agree with her that “public reason is a rationalist exercise in wishful thinking”<sup>13</sup> but who—because they share neo-Kantians’ skepticism about the availability of objectively authoritative and world-guided value judgments—conclude that we are obliged to dedicate ourselves to directing affects through merely “tactical work...with the aim of promoting new modes of affective responsiveness.”<sup>14</sup> Zerilli argues that it would be hazardous to abandon ourselves to affect theorists’ image of political discourse as at bottom an unreasoned power-struggle to control the direction of affective responses. Her point is especially salient right now in light of the dramatic recent rise in authoritarianism in the U.S. and elsewhere. She is in effect asking us to reject the idea that we are obliged to recognize the legitimacy of purveyors of propaganda, currently so prominent in our political culture, who run roughshod over the distinction between truth and falsity. She is urging us to resist the thought that our only recourse is equally truth-insensitive yet somehow supposedly superior propaganda of our own.

Zerilli wishes us to see that, in thinking about democratic politics, we are not obliged to choose between neo-Kantian rationalism and rationally unconstrained appeals to affect. She is convinced that the problem of value judgments that advocates of both of these strategies skirt around admits of a straight solution, and she works toward such a solution by appealing to the portions of Cavell’s work in which he makes room for value judgments that are both essentially world-directed and objectively authoritative. She in this way positions Cavell within a central debate in contemporary political theory, showing that he makes a singular contribution by leaving room for the authoritative adjudication of conflicting perspectives and values.

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12. *Ibid.*, 190.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 214.

The exercise of adjudication, as Cavell conceive it, requires an open-ended willingness and ability to examine and rework our own perspectives and responses. We could say that, by Cavell's lights, confronting the bald lies that now permeate the public sphere requires, among other things, mustering the practical and discursive resources to clear away distortions. His thinking here aligns with a core aspect of an understanding of ideology critique that reaches back as far as the early Marx. The idea is that, if we are to combat ideological formations, we need not merely intellectual tools but resources that mobilize practical attitudes and are in this respect materially potent.<sup>15</sup>

This familiar image of what resisting ideologies requires is, however, often accommodated within conceptions of critique very different from Cavell's and more reminiscent of the liberal political theories which Zerilli rightly contrasts with his thought. Consider in this connection the model of critique recommended by Jason Stanley in his recent high-profile book *How Propaganda Works*.<sup>16</sup> Stanley addresses the corrosive effects of propaganda, which he conceives as heterogeneous species of rationally corrupted public discourse. His goal is to show that some kinds of propagandistic speech buttress harmful ideologies in ways that hinder public debate, thereby placing at risk the very substance of liberal democracy.<sup>17</sup> He helps himself to what he calls the "resources...of the analytic philosopher,"<sup>18</sup> and, without specifying precisely what he takes this to amount to, he assumes that the empirical world is in itself value-neutral, thereby accepting the skepticism about essentially world-guided and authoritative value judgments that is one of the marks of liberal political theory.

Stanley takes propaganda to be "a kind of speech that fundamentally involves political, economic, aesthetic or rational ideals, mobilized for a political purpose" and that is "in the service of either *supporting* or *eroding* [these] ideals."<sup>19</sup> When he talks about propaganda of the *supporting* type, he means propaganda that is "presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those very ideals by either emotional or other non-rational means."<sup>20</sup> When he

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15. See Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998).

16. Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

17. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 11 and 27.

18. *Ibid.*, xix.

19. Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 52.

20. *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

talks about propaganda of the *undermining* type, he means propaganda that “is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals.”<sup>21</sup> Stanley illustrates his conception of supporting propaganda, for example, in reference to emotional appeals to “past wrongs against a group to strengthen ethnic pride and self-identification,” and he illustrates his conception of undermining propaganda in reference to the deployment of teams of “scientific experts” to falsely indicate that climate science is undeveloped and uncertain—thus undermining the ideal of scientific objectivity that the purported experts are supposedly advocating.<sup>22</sup> Stanley-style supporting and undermining propaganda are similar in that both can bolster worthy or unworthy ideals. Stanley’s term of art for propaganda that, whether of supporting or undermining varieties, boosts unworthy ideals is “demagoguery.” His main concern is with ‘undermining demagoguery’ that is wrongly presented as encoding liberal democratic ideals of “liberty, humanity, equality and objective reason.” He believes that this kind of demagogic speech figures centrally in fostering pernicious ideologies, thus polluting democratic culture.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Stanley takes an interest in supporting and undermining propaganda that is *non-demagogic* in that it funds worthy ideals.

Stanley’s attitude toward non-demagogic propaganda is characterized by the following nuance. Even though it falls short of rational legitimacy, this type of propaganda is sometimes a “necessary” counterweight to practices or institutions that corrupt democratic discourse.<sup>24</sup> Despite being imperative, these propagandistic gestures are “invariably democratically problematic” because they can’t help but erode democratic discourse.<sup>25</sup> Stanley operates with the assumption that the employment of ‘emotional means’ is a method for propagandistic discourse to undercut rational reflection.<sup>26</sup> He assumes, that is, not only that discursive gestures that direct affective responses or shape attitudes can as such be non-rational but that they are necessarily

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21. *Ibid.*

22. For these examples, see *ibid.*, 60.

23. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 68.

24. *Ibid.*, 57. Jason Stanley’s term for non-demagogic propaganda that is thus necessary is “civic rhetoric.”

25. The inset phrase is from *ibid.*, 58. See also 38 and 117.

26. Although Jason Stanley doesn’t mention “emotional means” in talking about what undermining propaganda amounts to, he is presumably assuming that these are among the non-rational tools of the purveyors of such propaganda. For a comment on the apparent disanalogy between his conceptions of the non-rational resources of supporting and undermining propaganda, see Ishani Maitri, “Propaganda, Non-rational Means and Civic Rhetoric,” *Theoria* 31, no.3 (2016): 313-27.

so. Hence he regards political interventions that invite us to look at aspects of social life from liberating evaluative or cultural perspectives as, at least insofar as they issue such invitations, rationally flawed and propagandistic. In this connection, he discusses at length, and with sincere admiration, W.E.B. Du Bois' 1926 essay "Criteria of Negro Art."<sup>27</sup> Stanley credits Du Bois with identifying non-demagogic and emancipatory rhetorical forms that are needed to expose racist distortions and create a space for cognitively authoritative democratic deliberation. Yet, as Stanley sees it, even though discursive exercises such as Du Bois' are sometimes necessary for returning us to the realm of rational democratic conversation, they are propadeutic to rather than integral elements of such conversation.

Here Stanley's project, with its hints of liberal political theory, starkly opposes Cavell's. Cavell represents us as obliged to continually take seriously the possibility that we might need to reshape our modes of responsiveness with an eye to a more just vision of the social world. In adopting this stance, Cavell is echoing a key claim of classic accounts of ideology critique. It is characteristic of such accounts to suggest that at least imaginatively exploring evaluatively loaded social perspectives that members of oppressed human groups are made to occupy is necessary for getting in view morally and politically important aspects of our lives that are subject to ideological distortion.<sup>28</sup> Cavell makes a similar suggestion, in effect denying that evaluatively charged resources are limited to the instrumental role in critique to which Stanley restricts them and representing these resources instead as capable of directly contributing to cognitively authoritative critical endeavors. This means that Cavell is in a position to welcome into rational democratic conversation, for instance, the sorts of liberating forms of artistic expression that Du Bois was discussing in 1926. Or, to mention but a few further examples, Cavell equips us to take seriously the possibility of finding rational power, for instance, in Ta-Nehisi Coates' efforts in *Between the World and Me* to get us to see American society through the eyes of Black men as well

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27. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32 (1926): 290-97.

28. For one influential defense of such a suggestion, see Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 149-222. For a discussion of how a suggestion along these lines is common to Marxist epistemologies and core feminist and Black epistemologies, see Charles Mills, "Alternative Epistemologies," in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 21-39.

as in Claudia Rankine's attempt in *Citizen* to reshape the way we look upon the lives of Black women.<sup>29</sup>

This brings me to an additional respect in which Cavell animates and motivates classic themes of ideology critique. Cavell in effect asks us to regard insistence on taking ethical neutrality as a regulative ideal for world-guided social thought as a hindrance to healthy democratic conversation. Influential accounts of ideology critique likewise call on us to regard this familiar tone of insistence as having a role in critical social thought that is not warranted by the apparent considerations in its favor, and therefore exhort us to reject it as itself perniciously ideological.<sup>30</sup>

There is a significant payoff to including Cavell's voice in discussions about ideological patterns of thought and practice and about strategies for combatting them. Nowhere does Cavell suggest that the task of distinguishing productive, rationally legitimate contributions to public discourse from corrosive propaganda is an easy one. There is, for him, no question of appealing to the fact that a discursive gesture is practically or affectively potent to determine that it cannot as such contribute to rationally responsible discourse, and there is also no question of appealing to the fact that such a gesture is practically or affectively potent to establish its rational credentials. Cavell is consistently concerned with impressing on us the difficulty of the task that responsible thought and democratic participation represent. He wants to lead us to the recognition that our condition is aptly captured by the outlook he calls "moral perfectionism," by which he means not the search for some supposed state of perfection but a never-ending project of working on ourselves with an eye to bringing society, with its horrors and injustices as well as its joys and comforts, more clearly into view—and to improving our individual abilities to join in a good-enough democratic conversation.

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29. See Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015) and Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014).

30. See esp. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). For a more recent argument about how a demand for ethical neutrality can have the force of ideology, see Charles Mills, "Ideal Theory as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no.3 (2005): 165-84.