1. A Gift of Common Words: The World Working Out in Cavell's Inheritance of Austin

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The inclusion in *Here and There* of "Notes After Austin" — Cavell's brief memoir of his short but transformative relationship with J.L. Austin — provides an opportunity to reconsider the place of Austin in Cavell's work. Other figures (e.g., Wittgenstein, Emerson, and Shakespeare) bulk larger and appear more continuously, but arguably none is more philosophically decisive than Austin; the only figure Cavell calls his "teacher." Cavell adopted or adapted a range of specific Austinian results, concepts, and procedures that figure importantly in his work: he adopts Austin's attention to "the jump of words" in philosophy; adapts Austin's implicit account of the function of criteria in judgment for his reading of Wittgenstein; employs Austin's description of ordinary epistemic inquiry to frame his diagnosis of traditional epistemology; and, to mention only one further instance, extends Austin's account of the performative to articulate an order of speech he names passionate utterance. However, Austin's importance for Cavell lies deeper than any such specific points of influence — vital as they certainly are — and is measured by the fact that it was through encountering Austin that Cavell "began finding [his] intellectual voice."[1] This is more than discovering his particular academic niche or professional métier. Encountering Austin allowed Cavell to move beyond a condition he describes as "wild with muteness" — filled with impressions and desires but unable to find, or to believe in, his capacity to express them intelligibly (to himself or others) — and granted him an access to his own language in which he could, for the first time, begin to discover and

1. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6.

express himself philosophically.[2] Hence, he tells us, "Austin's philosophizing allowed me — demanded of me — the use of myself as the source of [philosophy's] evidence and as an instance of its conclusions. Whatever philosophy's pertinence to me, I felt for the first time my pertinence to philosophy."[3]

At one level, these remarks report a personal breakthrough. Cavell faced autobiographical/clinical impediments to conviction in his own intelligibility and pertinence to philosophy (or anything else), and Austin's philosophizing helped him overcome them. At another level, however, they must (also) be read more generally. Not only are Cavell's autobiographical considerations philosophically informed (presenting moments of his life through the lens of the philosophical understandings they helped inspire), they are also explicitly directed toward re-shaping our views of philosophy and autobiography and challenging the opposition between them.[4] But further, there is clearly nothing about Cavell that makes him, as an individual person, especially or distinctively pertinent to philosophy. Indeed, recognizing the equal pertinence of all to philosophy is a linchpin of "Must We Mean What We Say?" — the earliest philosophical fruit of Cavell's encounter with Austin.

In this essay, I explore what Cavell found in Austin that allowed him to discover his philosophical voice and pertinence to philosophy. I begin from the autobiographical crises of expression and intelligibility that, in his recounting, the encounter with Austin resolved (or began to resolve). However, my interest is not speculative biography and my focus is not, ultimately, simply on Cavell himself. My aim, rather, is to follow Cavell's own suggestion that Austin's work allowed him to discover his philosophical voice precisely because it represented a wholly general return of the human voice to philosophy.[5] Accordingly, in considering what Cavell found in Austin I will also be considering the Austinian roots of his understanding of

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2. Ibid., 49.
3. Cavell, "Notes After Austin" in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Saundra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 102.
4. See, for example, his remark early in *A Pitch of Philosophy*: "If the following autobiographical experiments are philosophically pertinent, they must confront the critical with the clinical, which means distrust both as they stand, I mean distrust their opposition" (8).
5. In *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Cavell's puts the thought this way: "In practice, [...] the moment I felt that something about ordinary language philosophy was giving me a voice in philosophy, I knew that the something was the idea of a return of voice to philosophy, that asking myself what I say when, letting that matter, presented itself as a defiance of philosophy's interest in language, as if what philosophy meant by logic demanded, in the name of rationality, the repression of voice (hence of confession, hence of autobiography)," 69.

the nature and power of ordinary language, of how it enables a recovery of the ordinary human voice, and of their pertinence to philosophy.

1.

Cavell regards the child in Augustine's account of acquiring language that opens Wittgenstein's *Investigations* as profoundly isolated; adrift among elders who neither evince interest in its presence nor provide encouraging responses to its efforts and from whom it must, in effect, steal the language with which it will endeavor to make itself understood. The tales of his own childhood in *A Pitch of Philosophy* and *Little Did I Know* reveal the autobiographical underpinnings of this interpretive perspective. They too depict an isolated child, repeatedly uprooted by cross-country moves, who is blessed with a wild intelligence that, however, sets him apart both intellectually and physically since he skips several grades and is noticeably younger than his classmates. But the deeper isolation is at home, where he is left alone for much of most days and evenings and where pervasive hostilities between his parents produce what Cavell calls "periods of locked speechlessness with each other, and with me"; leaving him the impossible task of acquiring/stealing language from alternately antagonistic or mute elders. In these recurrent periods, Cavell says, he not only thought his parents were mad but "wondered the same about [himself]." In his "absorption of their opposite griefs," he continues, he became "as unintelligible to [himself] as if [he] had not learned speech."[6] Hence, as with the "figure of the mad child" in Augustine, Cavell presents himself too as "lacking language, lacking the means of making himself intelligible or [...] expressing his desires."[7]

Throughout much of his early life, what relieved Cavell's isolation and suspicions of madness was music; whether listening, performing, or later composing. Music provided intelligibility and community. It formed the substance of his relationship with his mother (a glamorous professional pianist with perfect pitch), provided an identity as a band leader in high school, and allowed him to build

6. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 22.
7. Ibid., 36.

enduring relationships with individuals that, given his times and his circumstances, he would not otherwise have known (e.g., as the only white member of a black jazz band). Further, music provided an arena for Cavell's powerful ambition and a vehicle for his exceptional virtuosity as a performer; even if the magnitude of that virtuosity sometimes also isolated him.[8] Accordingly, Cavell's realization, shortly after beginning to study composition at Juilliard, that music was not his path represented a crescendo to the ongoing crises of identity and intelligibility that had constituted much of his life.

In Cavell's telling, two kinds of reasons underlay his decision to abandon a life in music. First, he did not reliably believe in his capacity to express himself musically. He did not doubt his technical proficiency or, in one sense, his creativity. Rather, he judged the music he had composed for his successful Juilliard application to be "without consequence. It had its moments," he allows, but "said next to nothing I could, or wished to, believe."[9] Cavell came to see that his exceptional talent had allowed him to skirt the question of whether he was, or wished to be, invested in a life of music. He had not, he realized, "chosen [his] life or suffered it to choose [him]" but had merely "accepted the tow of a certain talent."[10] For this reason, he did not feel himself staked in or expressed by his music and the successes he achieved – the significance of which were attested to by leading composers of the time – struck him as "accidental" and, therefore, "fraudulent."[11] Second, Cavell recoils from the exclusivity of the realm of intelligibility he finds in music. During his sophomore year at Berkeley, in Ernest Bloch's music theory class, Cavell tells us he first experienced a kind of rapture that would drive him from class "into the adjacent hills for an hour or

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8. This is epitomized in Cavell's story of a party during his second-year teaching at Berkeley at which he and a new acquaintance are playing a four-hand Schubert quartet. This was Cavell's first time playing the piece and, as they move into the development section of the first movement, he notices that his partner "was somehow restive on the bench." "Without stopping playing," Cavell says, "he rather shouted at me: 'Are you *reading?*' meaning reading this at sight for the first time." Cavell is flushed, stops playing, and makes an excuse to leave the gathering. Reflecting on this moment, Cavell remarks that "instead of connection [he] felt an estrangement from his display of some talent." Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 190.
Interestingly, virtuosity in sight-reading links Cavell with his mother about whom he remarks that what "was truly legendary about her playing [...] was he uncanny ability to sight-read." Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 18.
9. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 223.
10. Ibid., 187.
11. Ibid., 224 and 246.

so of solitude, as if [he] had become too consecrated to touch."[12] But it was in these same moments of rapture and "feeling for the first time intelligible," that Cavell realized the world of music was "not quite to be [his]."[13] The exclusivity of music arose for Cavell in connection with the critical issue of having an ear and was exemplified for him by Bloch's asking his students whether they could hear the difference between an original Bach four-part chorale and a rendering with one note altered by a half-step. Cavell reports that he heard the difference and so possessed the key to music's intelligible world. However, he says:

> The assigned question of hearing, or an ear, produced a private triumph, and spoke decisively, unforgettably, of a world of culture beyond the standing construction of the world. Yet I did not want this transcendence of culture to require a comparatively rare talent, even a competition of talents, in order to participate.[14]

Hence, while Cavell was ecstatic at the promise of intelligibility he experienced in music, he sought a realm of intelligibility and a world of culture accessible to all.

Since music had provided Cavell's most palpable experiences of intelligibility and community, the trauma of discovering that it was not to be his life will be plain. Cavell reports asking himself "quite explicitly whether [he] might be going to pieces and [that he] seemed to decide that [he] didn't know how"; a thought, he continues, "that sounds quite compatible with having gone to pieces."[15] One measure of his trauma and sense of going to pieces is that it was as a musician that Cavell gave himself his name. Born Stanley Goldstein, at 16 he changed his name to Cavell; first experimentally adopting it as a stage name during a summer performing with a travelling band and then making the change legally upon returning home. In one quite literal sense then, Cavell's giving up his vision of a life in music was giving up the thing that made him who he was or, at least, that made him what he was called. And, indeed, his Austin-informed appreciation that there is a more intimate and

12. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 49.
13. Ibid., 49.
14. Ibid., 50.
15. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 226.

essential relation than we might imagine between what a thing is *called* and what a thing *is* leads him to speak of his "experience of the unfathomableness of the consequences for identity in adopting a name."[16]

2.

Following what ultimately proved to be a productive breakdown in New York City (occupied primarily with reading and watching movies) and a three-year sojourn as a graduate student at UCLA, Cavell entered the graduate program in philosophy at Harvard where, in the spring of 1955, he encountered Austin who had been invited to deliver the William James Lectures and to lead a seminar on the subject of excuses. The immediate "practical result" of this encounter, Cavell tells us, was that he abandoned "beginnings and plans for a perfectly good Ph.D. dissertation" on the concept of an action in Kant and Spinoza.[17] This echoed his abandonment of composition at Juilliard and, again, his decision turned on judging that the work he had begun did not implicate or express *him*. The dissertation, he says, was "good enough to have earned the degree but not good enough to have given me what I variously imagined as a voice, a way, a subject, a work of my own."[18] However, in this case, abandoning the dissertation was not simply an ending but the beginning of a new path forward in which Cavell abandoned himself to the philosophical promise he was discovering in Austin.[19]

Cavell's abandonment to Austin's philosophical practice is ultimately tied to his conviction that it will allow him to discover and draw upon his own philosophical voice. However, he is also drawn by the fact that it provides forms of pleasure and gratification he had found in music. For him, he remarks, it is "as if philosophy occurs [...] as some form of compensation for, or perhaps continuation of, the life of

16. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 43. There is, of course, a further sense in which Cavell's identity is formed in relation to music; for it is arguable that his life in music fundamentally conditioned the kind of philosopher he became.
17. Ibid., 55.
18. Ibid.
19. See Cavell's remark: "The depression in this decision to stop what I was doing [i.e. his beginning dissertation] was less magnified than it might have been in repeating that of my decision almost ten years earlier to put away my beginnings as a composer, because this time there was an associated exhilaration in clearing the ground" (*A Pitch of Philosophy*, 55).

music."[20] This is an extraordinary claim, inviting us to consider Cavell's work as a whole as, in various ways, representing a continuation of the life of music. While I cannot here accept that invitation, I will note several aspects of Austin's practice that are quite clearly related to some of what Cavell had found in music.

Most immediately, Cavell remarks that "[w]orking in Austin's classes was the time for me in philosophy when the common rigors of exercise acquired the seriousness and playfulness — the continuous mutuality — that I had counted on in musical performance."[21] However, while he was filled with delight at the time, he later came to suspect that the reliable availability of this mutuality in seriousness and playfulness meant "that what was happening in Austin's classes was not, as it lay, quite philosophy."[22] Cavell does not elaborate this judgment, but the thought seems to be that charting structures of our agreement in words without also examining our propensity to violate that agreement (a propensity Austin's work reveals as clearly as it reveals the structures of our agreement) is to miss the philosophical moment. The pleasure of Austin's practice, it seems, may tempt us to treat philosophy too much like the life of music; a life in which musicians do not endlessly fall afoul of the musical structures that enable their mutuality.

Cavell also explicitly links the appeal of Austin's practice for him with the important matter of having an ear. "That Austin's practice had to do, in its own way, with the possession of an ear," he tells us, "was surely part of its authority for me."[23] This is a way of understanding Cavell's praise of Austin's "constant fastidiousness of mind" as expressed in his (sometimes theatrically British) insistence on correct usage, his clear delight in drawing distinctions ("the finer the merrier"), and in what Austin himself speaks of as the "pleasure and instruction" of "drawing the coverts of the microglot" and "hounding down the minutiae."[24] For Austin's endless appetite for minutiae and his constant challenge to recognize the philosophical significance of what we may have thought *mere* minutiae, places similar kinds of demands on the ability to

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20. Ibid., 11.
21. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 102-103.
24. See Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102; Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 102, and J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in *Philosophical Papers,* 3rd ed., ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175.

hear differences as Cavell had encountered in Bloch's music classes. Cavell's rediscovery of these kinds of demands in Austin's work — and his clear ability to meet them — must have produced a similar breath-taking rapture. However, while he clearly delights in Austin's exercises of the ear — evincing evident pleasure in reports of Austin devoting an entire meeting of a recurring discussion group to the distinction between signing "Yours sincerely" and "Yours truly" — he also insists that the philosophical power of Austin's work did not lie in drawing fine distinctions. Rather, Cavell remarks, Austin's purpose in drawing distinctions "resembles the art critic's purpose in comparing and distinguishing works of art, namely, that in this crosslight the capacities and salience of an individual object in question are brought to attention and focus."[25] The power of Austin's distinctions, then, lay not in their being "fine" but in their being "natural" and "penetrat[ing] the phenomena they record."[26] Accordingly, the Austinian test of the ear is not a matter of discriminating fine differences — matters, say, of a half step — but of recognizing what is *natural* and what not.

Connected to the issue of ear, Austin's procedures also afforded Cavell a forum for a kind of virtuosity. In one sense, the idea of virtuosity is at odds with ordinary language procedures since their coherence demands that, given a well-described situation of ordinary speech, all native speakers of a language are equally competent regarding what we can say and mean in that situation. There are, then, no virtuosi of ordinary language. However, some are more adept at producing examples of speech that illuminate our ordinary language, and this is where Cavell discovered a kind of virtuosity. This was surely tied to his powers of imagination and his ability to create compelling contexts of speech. But it was also, and more importantly, tied to his capacities for hearing the tunes of ordinary use; something we might regard as a linguistic kin to perfect pitch. In the realms of musical performance, Cavell's virtuosity frequently isolated and embarrassed him. However, his virtuosity in the realm of ordinary language enhanced and extended the scope of mutual intelligibility. It also clearly mattered to him that his abilities attracted a measure of personal favor with Austin and that, as he tells us, he had gained "some credit with [Austin] for [his] knack at producing examples he found pertinent."[27]

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25. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 103.
26. Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," 102-103.
27. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 103.

3.

From these individual/biographical respects in which Austin's work represented continuations of Cavell's life in music, I now begin exploring more representative dimensions of his response to Austin. In that regard, the most immediate and important starting point is Cavell's explicitly tying his discoveries of his (philosophical) voice and pertinence to philosophy to his experience of Austin's "inexhaustible faith in the philosophical yield of the details of the language we share and that shares us."[28] For this link suggests that coming to claim our capacity for (representative or philosophical) speech rests upon achieving a particular understanding of, and relation to, our ordinary language. But in order to appreciate how Cavell's experience of Austin's "inexhaustible faith" could have had its transformative power, we need to gather some sense of the vision of ordinary language underlying that faith. To this end, I will consider three central claims Austin advances in recommending his ways of attending to our language.[29]

First, Austin claims that "our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetime of many generations" and, he continues, since these distinctions and connections have "stood the long test of survival of the fittest," they are likely to be not only more numerous but "more sound [...] and more subtle [...] than any that you or I are likely to think up."[30] Considering these remarks, we may be tempted to focus critical attention on Austin's "all" and to probe his basis for claiming that our common stock of words embodies *all* the distinctions and connections we have found worth making. However, the importance — and interest — of Austin's claim falls more heavily on "worth." Although he does not elaborate the point — moving past it quite quickly in order to emphasize the soundness and subtlety of our distinctions and connections — his claim is that all of the distinctions and

28. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102.
29. I draw exclusively from "A Plea for Excuses" since it contains Austin's most continuous discussion of his methods. I should emphasize that this manner of gathering a sense of Austin's vision is a decided second-best. He regarded it as sufficiently evident that "there is gold in them thar hills" that he was largely unconcerned to offer abstract theoretical justifications of his practices (Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 181). The best way of coming to appreciate Austin's vision is to follow the concrete details of his investigations. However, that is not possible here.
30. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 182.

connections embodied in our common stock of words reflect judgments of value or significance. This marks a radical departure from the passivity and value-neutrality of classical empiricists views of language according to which "ideas" and relations among "ideas" are determined by the "impressions" we receive from the world as it impinges upon our senses and the blank slate of our minds. For classical empiricists, the importance, value, or significance of ideas and relations among ideas is simply a function of the intensity, frequency, and regularity of the sensory impacts we receive. For Austin, however, rather than reflecting value-neutral impressions of the world upon us, our common stock of words and the distinctions and connections they embody express what we speakers find impressive. They express what in our social and material worlds we judge worth calling out or worth remarking (remarkable), what attracts or draws our attention, excites, awakens, or holds our attention; in short, what matters to us. The order of our common words, then, expresses and reveals an order of shared human value.[31]

Second, Austin insists that 'linguistic' philosophy cannot be charged with ignoring the world (reality, phenomena) and concerning itself "simply" with language. Rather, he contends, "[w]hen we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking [...] not *merely* at words (or at 'meanings', whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about."[32] In considering, for example, how we use 'voluntary' and 'involuntary,' when we would *say* that an action was done voluntarily or involuntarily, we are considering what voluntary and involuntary actions *are*. Hence, Austin suggests, it may be more accurate to call his philosophical methods "linguistic phenomenology" in order to highlight the fact that "we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of [...] the phenomena."[33]

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31. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell develops these same kinds of ideas in claiming that Wittgensteinian criteria express what counts; a claim that blossoms into full-flower as he elaborates a two-page weave of relations among counting and accounting and telling and tallying and that culminates in the judgment that "valuing underwrites asserting." See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 94-95. In *Little Did I Know*, 497-98, Cavell offers a brief but delightful reflection on relations between ideas of impression and of being impressed. I discuss that reflection and some of its implications in my essay "Impression, Influence, Appreciation," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. David LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 243-60.
32. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 182.
33. Ibid., 182.

The idea that our uses of words reveal the nature of phenomena is fundamental to Austin's vision of, and work with, ordinary language. It is not always explicitly thematized or theoretically justified, but it is relied upon whenever he moves seamlessly from speaking of words to speaking of things. It also, however, aroused deep suspicion among his positivist critics who accused him of proceeding as though philosophy could dispense with the difficult empirical work of investigating the world and, instead, reveal its structure from the comfort of our armchairs. Austin is clearly alive to this kind of concern, but his concessive allowance that our uses of words are not the "final arbiter" of phenomena seems to be beside the point; for the question is how words can be any arbiter of phenomena at all.[34] In this regard, Cavell's defense of Austin in "Must We Mean What We Say?" is more helpful by drawing out a crucial idea implicit in Austin's insistence that our language expresses our values. Cavell, emphasizes that language is an embodied human phenomenon that we grow into or acquire along with growing into our world. If our ability to discover "something about the world by hunting in the dictionary [...] seems surprising," he remarks, "perhaps it is because we forget that we learn language and learn the world *together*, that they become elaborated and distorted together, and in the same places."[35] Of course some kinds of things can only be learned by investigating the world — Cavell mentions a person's name and address, the contents of a will or of a bottle, and whether frogs eat butterflies. However, there is much else that we can learn about "what kind of object anything is," as Wittgenstein puts it, by examining how we use our words.[36] To take Cavell's example, we can learn what an umiak *is* by learning what the word "umiak"*means* — "a large open boat made of skins stretched on a wooden frame, used by Eskimos."[37] We can do so, Cavell explains, because "[w]hen we turned to the dictionary for "umiak" we already knew everything about the word, as it were, but its combination; we knew what a noun is and how to name an object and how to look up a word and what boats are and what

34. Cavell makes a similar point: Austin's "repeated disclaimer that ordinary language is certainly not the last word, 'only it is the *first* word', [...] is reassuring only during polemical enthusiasm. For the issue is why the first, or *any*, word can have the kind of power Austin attributes to it" (Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," 102).
35. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 19.
36. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. and trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968), §373.
37. *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, deluxe 2nd ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

an Eskimo is. We were," he continues, "all prepared for that umiak. What seemed like finding the world in a dictionary was really a case of bringing the world to the dictionary."[38]

The final Austinian point I will mention involves the nature of our agreement in language. This point emerges indirectly through his addressing one of the supposed "snags in 'linguistic' philosophy, which those not very familiar with it find, sometimes not without glee or relief, daunting."[39] He calls this the "snag of Loose (or Divergent or Alternative) Usage" and imagines it being expressed in the (knowing/ gleeful) questions: "Do we all say the same, and only the same, things in the same situations? Don't usages differ?".[40] The intended force of this supposed snag is that we cannot meaningfully rely on ordinary language in philosophy — or in any other serious endeavor — because we do not agree in how we ordinarily speak; our ordinary uses of words are too varied, inconsistent, and haphazard for any conclusions to be based upon them. In response, Austin allows that "people's usages do vary, and we do talk loosely, and we do say different things apparently indifferently."[41] However, he continues, our usages do not vary "nearly as much as one would think."[42] In the "great majority" of cases in which we had thought we wanted "to say different things of and in *the same* situation," closer examination reveals that "we had simply imagined the situation *slightly* differently."[43] Indeed, Austin suggests that one reason excuses are especially valuable objects of study is that they are offered in "just the sort of situation where we might be inclined to think people will say 'almost anything,' because they are so flurried, or so anxious to get off."[44] But even in the realm of excuses, he claims, there is an extraordinarily high degree of order and agreement in how we judge our words should be used; a claim he then goes some way toward

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38. Cavell, "Must We Mean," 19-20. In his desire to defend Austinian ordinary language procedures, Cavell is perhaps not sufficiently careful about the senses in which it is and is not correct that I have learned, for example, what an umiak is by learning the definition of the word. I *have* learned that it is a kind of boat, that it differs from a kayak in being open, and I may be able to recognize one encountered in the wild. This is not nothing. However, even without venturing into a Heideggerian Black Forest of jugs, bridges, and boots, we must also recognize that what an umiak is for people who "dwell" with them is hardly touched by its dictionary definition.
39. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 183.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 183. After all, as he remarks in another context, "we are not all (terribly or sufficiently) strictly brought up" (Austin, "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers*, 77).
42. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 183.
43. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 183-84.
44. Ibid., 184.

supporting with his famous tale of two donkeys, one mine and one yours, and when we should say I shot yours by accident and when by mistake.

These remarks about agreement highlight two (connected) aspects of Austin's vision of our lives in language. First, the agreement to which Austin points is not descriptive but normative. He is not reporting empirical findings about our speech, and when we respond to his examples and questions we are neither predicting what we (or others) will say nor reporting what we (or others) have said. Rather, Austin is revealing our agreement in what it is *right* (correct or natural) to say, what we *should* say in the specific circumstances he presents, and he is also revealing, at least implicitly, *why* it is right. Second, in illustrating specific instances of agreement, Austin is revealing that our agreement in language is, to use Wittgensteinian terms, expressive of our pervasive agreement in judgment and form of life. This can be seen through the vital role of examples and "background stories" in eliciting agreement. If we consider our words and how they are to be used apart from specific examples or stories, our views of their uses and meanings may be uncertain, divergent and those uses themselves may seem arbitrary, ungrounded, or without reason. However, since our lives in language express our pervasive agreement in judgment and form of life, when we situate words within a specific (real or imagined) context of human life, we find clarity and agreement — even if that context is one we never have, and never will, encounter. We know *how* the words should be used, *what* they mean, and, at least implicitly, *why* they are the right words in this context. Hence Austin insists on the importance of imagining situations "in detail, with a background story," and urges that "it is worth employing the most idiosyncratic or, sometimes, boring means to stimulate and to discipline our wretched imaginations."[45]

4.

Considering these elements of Austin's vision of language was to help us recognize representative dimensions of Cavell's response to that vision in his discovery of his own voice and philosophical pertinence. In returning to this issue, however, I once

45. Ibid.

again begin from a point particular to Cavell; namely, a moment in his autobiography in which he directly links his experiences of leaving music and encountering Austin and also, quite importantly, describes each event as producing its own kind of crisis. The passage begins with a point I noted earlier: "In reaching the crisis of giving up my search for a relation to music that mattered to me in the way I would come to imagine a life of the mind could matter to me," Cavell remarks, "I discovered that I had never, as I might say, chosen my life, or suffered its choosing me, but accepted the tow of a certain talent."[46] He then continues:

> The crisis precipitated by Austin's appearance on the scene, in contrast, left me with a set of fragments that seemed to have some obscure but essential relation to the expression of my desire for a world. In the former case (the silencing of meaning in music) I felt I had misplaced the world; in the latter case (the philosophical questioning of meaning in everyday speech) I felt disoriented with the discovery of a further world.[47]

To my ear, this description rings of Cavell's Wittgenstein and Emerson. It shows Cavell, like the child of the Augustinian tale that opens the *Investigations*, acquiring the capacity to speak by gathering fragments he obscurely senses will enable him to express his own desire. And, as in Cavell's Emerson, acquiring that capacity to speak is tied to the discovery of a further world. It is tied, that is, to the discovery of the internal principles informing phenomena and, with that, reaching a transfigured appreciation of the meaning, purpose, and coherence of our familiar world.[48] But even without insisting on these echoes, this much is clear: prior to meeting Austin, Cavell despaired of any possibility of making himself intelligible (to himself or

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46. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 187.
47. Ibid.
48. See, for example, one of Cavell's most frequently cited passages from Emerson's "The American Scholar," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 68-69: "Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the form and gait of the body;—show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law; […] and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle; there is no puzzle; but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench."

others). The language, and therefore also the world, offered by his parents were private, broken, locked in antagonism and his efforts to inherit that language and orient himself in that world drove him to wonder whether he was mad. The language and world he found in music were ordered, coherent, and offered ecstasies of expressive beauty. However, partly because he experienced this order and beauty as rarified and exclusive, Cavell discovers that this language and world are not, finally, those in which he can find and express himself. However, Austin's repeated, specific, and utterly convincing illustrations of the reason animating our uses of words and of the depth and intimacy of our pervasive agreement in language, project a language and world in which intelligibility is possible. Austin's examples provide Cavell a perspective on his own language from which he recognizes the power of our common words in their ordinary uses. He discovers that, in so far as he entrusts himself to the order of our ordinary language, he not only *can* be intelligible but his intelligibility is all but inescapable; he must mean what he says.[49]

The pleasures of work with Austin that, for Cavell himself, represented compensations for or continuations of his life in music, can be recognized as rooted in this this vision of language and so available to all. The seriousness, playfulness, and continuous mutuality that Cavell prized in Austin's classes and associated with his experience of musical performance, depend on and express a willingness to attentively entrust ourselves to the shared language that holds us in common. And the pleasures of an ear for ordinary language, in which Cavell found a non-musical form of virtuosity, will also be open to all. In attending to what we say, we discover and map the contours of the reason animating our speech and so experience the pleasure of becoming (more fully) intelligible to ourselves. This is a place for Cavell's insistence that, unlike a descriptive linguist gathering empirical observations of how some group speaks, in Austin's practice of attending to ordinary language, "one is not finally interested *at all* in how 'other' people talk, but in determining where and why one wishes, or hesitates, to use a particular expression oneself."[50]

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49. Indeed, in light of Austin's work, Cavell realizes that it is not *achieving* intelligibility but *defeating* intelligibility that requires special efforts. In this regard, see his essay on Beckett, written in the immediate wake of his encounter with Austin, "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 115-62.
50. Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," 99.

The idea that the procedures of ordinary language philosophy allow us to *discover* why we speak as we do has two levels, and distinguishing them will move us further into Cavell's conception of discovering or claiming one's own voice. At one level, we discover the existence of, and the reasons for, normative patterns in our uses of words. For example, Austin points out that our ordinary uses embody a principle he formulates as "no modification without aberration"; that is, "for the *standard* case covered by any normal verb, no modifying expression is required or even permitted." In coming to recognize this principle, we reach a new understanding of our speech and of why, for example, we resist calling a yawn at bedtime intentional, unintentional, voluntary, involuntary, deliberate, or anything else. It was just a yawn and, as Austin notes, to "yawn in any such peculiar way [i.e., intentionally, unintentionally, etc.] is just not to just yawn."[51] But at a further level, precisely because our uses of words are governed by a normative order that we sustain but of which we are, to a large extent, not self-consciously aware, our uses of words can mean more than we know and can reveal us beyond what we know of ourselves. (Hence, as Cavell has argued, in calling upon us to examine what we say and why, the methods of ordinary language philosophy "are methods for acquiring self-knowledge"[52]). The idea that we stand revealed or exposed by our words is familiar in Cavell's writing on Wittgenstein and Emerson.[53] But it is equally central to his consideration of Austin. In *A Pitch of Philosophy* he speaks of an Austinian "pathos of the necessity of sense" which he glosses by saying "I may be understood by [my words] too well."[54] In philosophically considering our uses of words, our focus is often on how they convey what we understand ourselves to mean. However, in response to Austin's demonstration of a pathos of the necessity of sense, we are charged with the complimentary task of discovering reaches of what we must mean beyond what we had understood ourselves to mean, and of doing so by attending to the ranges of sense carried by our words themselves in the contexts in which we use them.

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51. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 189-90.
52. Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 66.
53. See especially, for Wittgenstein, Part Four of *The Claim of Reason* and, for Emerson, "The Philosopher in American Life."
54. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 73.

Cavell's extends these ideas in speaking of Austin revealing that "I am abandoned to [my words], as to thieves, or conspirators, taking my breath away."[55] These remarks highlight our subjection to the independent life of words, to their agency, and emphasize that it is in abandoning ourselves to our words that we, as it were, receive the breath we use to express ourselves. While this may chasten our dreams of private control or power (as though thieves have robbed us of that), by suggesting that our meaning is sustained and carried on the common air, it also affirms our expressive power. In this light, the issue of achieving or claiming one's own (philosophical) voice may be framed in these terms: If my capacity to mean at all demands allowing my words to be carried on the common air, how is *my* voice defined or distinguished within a generalized and howling gale?

Cavell's central direction of response builds on, but also moves beyond, Austin. He emphasizes that we cannot achieve our individual voice by trying to separate ourselves from ordinary language and the order of meaning and value it embodies; for that simply leaves us breathless and so voiceless. Rather than through efforts to stand out or to *assert* ourselves, we achieve our individual voices through practices of, or forms of, listening or reading; that is, through more closely attending to, and situating ourselves with respect to, what our shared language gives us to mean. Much of the work Cavell produced in the aftermath of his encounter with Austin can be understood as articulating and/or exemplifying various forms of this attending and situating. Here, I will briefly mention two ways in which Cavell engages these practices.

First, his claim in discussing Wittgenstein that he requires a "convening of [his] culture's criteria" expresses a demand to self-consciously attend to what his language gives him to mean. As children coming into language, we absorb a structure of values embodied in that language and its criteria. However, Cavell argues, our task in becoming adults is to bring these values to reflective consciousness and determine our stance toward them. This task, Cavell says, "warrants the name of philosophy" and describes "something we might call education."[56] In undertaking it,

55. Ibid., 125.
56. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

> I bring my own language and life into imagination [...] in order to confront [my culture's criteria] with my with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me.[57]

Second, one of Cavell's characteristic practices in writing exemplifies a mode of attending to and situating himself within our common language; namely, his practice of activating unexpected or over-looked dimensions of the meanings of familiar words. Frequently, he explicitly directs attention to these efforts — as, for example, when he details the economic valences of dozens of key terms in Thoreau's *Walden*. Often, however, Cavell leaves it to us to hear, or not, the ways in which he gives his voice its own inflection by sounding specific registers of the words he employs. Indeed, one such moment occurs in describing his Austinian awakening. As I noted earlier, Cavell explicitly ties the decisive discoveries of his (philosophical) voice and pertinence to philosophy to an experience of what he calls Austin's "inexhaustible faith in the philosophical yield of the details of the language we share and that shares us." But we catch something of Cavell's individual voice in recognizing that his slightly awkward formulation "and that shares us" activates valences of "shares" and "yields." In the verb form in which it appears here, "share" means to hold in common but also to divide, to cut, or to apportion. Cavell's faithfulness to the meaning of "share," then, lets him suggest that the language we hold in common and through which we divide, cut, or apportion the things of which we speak also divides, cuts, or apportions those of us it holds; uniting us and separating us. "Yield," in turn, speaks of gains and, more specifically, of the fruits of harvest (as produced with a plowshare) and so tells us that we will be nourished by cultivating faithful attention to the details of our language as it, in turn, cultivates us.

5.

These thoughts about achieving our own voice through hearkening to our common language form a natural pivot to considering, albeit briefly, how Cavell's account of

57. Ibid.

Austin's enabling him to discover his philosophical pertinence illuminates more general issues of the nature of philosophy and of philosophical pertinence. Several points have already emerged, either explicitly or implicitly: (1) as native speakers of our language, we are each philosophically pertinent sources of evidence regarding what we say and mean; (2) since our uses of words illuminate the nature of things, we can participate in the philosophical quest to understand phenomena and (3) in this way contribute to disclosing the "further world" of coherence and intelligibility that Cavell found promised in Austin's practice. Further, we have also seen that attending to our uses of language (4) serves the ancient philosophical quest for self-knowledge and (5) involves the reflective examination of values that is central to philosophy. Here, however, I want to focus simply on the call for attention to ordinary language and the (different) ways in which Austin and Cavell understand this call.

Austin's call for attention to ordinary language and, more specifically, his insistence on the meticulous examination of specific cases — his "policy of splitting hairs to avoid starting them" — marks a decisive departure from a tradition of philosophy he regards as fundamentally misdirected by outsized metaphysical ambitions and a hunger for the profound.[58] Indeed, Cavell calls "the craving for profundity" Austin's "mortal philosophical enemy."[59] At the same time, while Austin would be the first to insist that we should not assume we know in advance whether the problems occupying us are real and well-formed or where our philosophical efforts will bear most fruit, it is nevertheless the case that, in important respects, he remains a fairly traditional philosopher. Much of his work seeks to address familiar philosophical questions (about, for example, the nature of action, responsibility, knowledge, truth) and his call for attention to ordinary language is supported by familiar methodological considerations: since ordinary language reveals the nature of phenomena, careful attention to our uses will provide illumination and help avoid misconstruing either the phenomena or the nature of the issues we are seeking to address. Cavell shares these Austinian reasons for directing attention to ordinary language and, as I noted at the outset, adopts or adapts several of Austin's procedures and results in his own work. However, he also departs from Austin in ways that

58. Austin, "Other Minds," 76.
59. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 88.

deepen the call for attention to our ordinary language and, in so doing, importantly expand our understanding of philosophy as well as of our pertinence to it and its pertinence to us.

The point of departure centers around what Austin calls the "jump of words" — the fact that fully competent speakers frequently employ familiar words in ways that deviate from ordinary use and, in so doing, fall into confusion, illusion, or unrecognized emptiness. Cavell cites Austin's "inexhaustible interest" in this kind of jump as integral to his early conviction in his work.[60] However, he soon came to think that Austin lacked an adequate account of this phenomenon. His concern is not simply, as he illustrates in the second part of "Austin at Criticism," that the terms in which Austin criticizes philosophers' misuses of words fail to meet his own standards for the correct application of those terms — e.g., Austin's description of Moore as "mistaken" in his use of "could" does not match his own elaboration of the conditions under which something is characterized as a mistake. Cavell's larger criticism is that Austin has failed to take these recurrent jumps into confusion or nonsense sufficiently seriously. He has treated them as indicative of professional hazards of philosophy (with its craving for the profound) or as personal lapses on the part of the philosopher. However, if we bear in mind that these philosophers, like all speakers of the language, are fully competent and authoritative regarding the use of our common words, we recognize that these kinds of explanations are insufficient. They cannot account for the endless, and typically unrecognized, recurrence of such jumps. Under the growing influence of Wittgenstein, Cavell moves beyond Austin to argue that the jump of words is not an individual failing or a professional hazard but a feature of our human relation to ordinary language as such.[61] For Cavell, the leaps into nonsense that Austin and Wittgenstein help us recognize as occurring in philosophy reflect a wholly general human drive to repudiate our ordinary conditions of sense. Indeed, a key insight Cavell draws from Wittgenstein's discussion of Augustine is that if Augustine has somehow gone wrong in his account of acquiring language, and done so without realizing it, then any of us may "at any time [...] be speaking without

60. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102.
61. This, of course, is the burden of much of Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein in *The Claim of Reason* (and elsewhere) and marks what he calls skepticism.

knowing what our words mean, what their meaning anything depends upon, speaking, as it were, in emptiness."[62]

In this light, an essential task of philosophy becomes discovering departures from sense and leading words back to their ordinary grounds of meaning. Further, since we may be speaking in unrecognized emptiness "at any time," Cavell argues that "there is no point at which [philosophy] must, or even may, stop."[63] To be sure, philosophy is importantly occupied with addressing specific kinds of questions. However, Cavell's response to the vision of ordinary language he finds in Austin (and subsequently in Wittgenstein) leads him to regard philosophy as also, and more broadly, a practice of endless attentiveness to our ordinary language and, therefore, to the lives and world our language informs and that are informed by it. This practice centrally involves uncovering and correcting nonsense. But it is also directed more broadly toward awakening to, and appreciating, the richness, order, and coherence of our ordinary lives and experience. Indeed, one reason Cavell champions Austin's rejection of metaphysics and the philosophical craving for profundity is that they devalue our ordinary experience. Our attraction toward the metaphysical, Cavell suggests, expresses our skeptical conviction that "what happens to us is inherently trivial." It shows, he continues, "that we live as if our daily experience were not ours, or just because ours, of no general significance."[64] Here we discover the most important power of Austin's stories and examples. It is not simply, as Cavell remarks, that they make differences and relations among words "so lucid and so decisive that you shudder to think of your previous, torpid state of illusion."[65] It is also that, in the brilliant light they cast on narrowly focused sets of words, we recognize a promise that our ordinary language and ordinary lives are, as a whole, radiant with significance that we have barely touched — as though we are being invited into the discovery of a further world. It can be disorienting, but thrillingly so.

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62. Cavell, "Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*," in *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 133.
63. Cavell, "Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 213.
64. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 105.
65. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 60.

6.

After an initial flurry of essays directly expressing Austin's influence, Cavell produced almost no work involving sustained engagement with Austin for nearly two decades. When he returned to Austin, first with "Notes After Austin" and then more extensively with *A Pitch of Philosophy*, the return is framed autobiographically; that is, as I traced in the opening sections of this essay, in the context of recounting how his encounter with Austin resolved a personal crisis and allowed him to discover his own philosophical voice and pertinence. But setting aside the personal crisis (or at least its specific shape), we can now see that Cavell's response to Austin is philosophically representative. For it shows how Austin's philosophy allows us all, and calls on us all, to awaken to our lives and experience as they are revealed in our ordinary speech. If that is philosophy, then all of us are pertinent to it and it is pertinent to us. It may be that nothing is more pertinent. But further, and as Cavell first began to argue in the context of reflecting on his relationship with Austin, philosophy understood in this way will be inseparable from autobiography; inseparable, that is, from attention to the concrete particulars of our individual experience.

With this in mind, I will close by looking at a moment in "Notes After Austin" in which Cavell offers a glimpse of Austin as a teacher. Cavell has emphasized that, for him, Austin's personal presence was crucial — thus acknowledging the fact that personal encounters, with all of their accidents of attraction, can determine the paths of our (philosophical) lives.[66] But beyond suggesting something of the quality of Austin's presence and how, as Cavell saw it, he could display "perfect spiritual tact," the moment I will consider illustrates how attending to our ordinary language can dispel isolating self-opacity and obscurity and provide illumination and mutuality.[67] It is the kind of moment with a teacher that can produce not only intellectual conversion but grateful devotion that lasts a lifetime.

In his seminar on excuses, Austin is distinguishing within modifiers used in characterizing accidents between "something's being just or simply or purely an

66. See Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102.
67. Ibid., 105.

accident ([…] in which nothing further, or nothing more complex, is in play, or mixed in)" and a "mere or sheer accident (one to which you could be assigning undue significance, or one whose accidental quality is transparent."[68] In this context, Cavell reports, "a student interjected that *sheer* could not mean *transparent* because there is such a thing as sheer wool."[69] Upon hearing this interjection, Cavell continues, Austin "was taken by surprise, lifted his pipe to his mouth, and asked intently, 'Is there? What is it?'" to which questions, Cavell says, "the answer began immediately, but continued with a distinct ritardando: 'Well, it's a weave you can see through'."[70] Cavell speaks of this as "the sort of shocking moment, here in the hilarity of its sheer contradiction, that might cause conversion." Austin, he goes on, replied simply, "'Well, you can see through it'" while his "eyes that had been fixed wide with attention were now almost closed, and wrinkled at the corners, with satisfaction; the lips were pursed as if to keep from letting forth laughter; and the pipe came back up, the tip not quite to the mouth but to be punched lightly and repeatedly against the chin."[71] Here, Cavell concludes, "was serious mirth in progress." But what he sees as the perfection of the moment rests in his "utter faith […] that the mirth was impersonal, that here a class had witnessed not the private defeat of an individual's experience but the public victory of sweet and shared words – mirth over the happy fact that the world is working out and we are made for it."[72]

It is too obvious, of course, that the world does not always work out. Our endless drive to use our shared words apart from, or against, their ordinary conditions of sense means that we will not let it work out. Further, the fact that our language expresses a system of values that, inevitably, does not equally serve all means that, sometimes, we *should not* let it work out but should, instead, interrogate the terms in which it seems to do so. But this only adds reason to celebrate those occasions when it genuinely, and rightly, does. This, I think, must be part of Cavell's pleasure in recounting his memory of Austin accepting an impromptu invitation to take a turn at bat during the annual picnic and softball game of Harvard's Society of Fellows. He describes Austin removing his suit jacket, but "leaving his tie in place and

68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.

his French cuffs closed," and taking up a stiff stance, knees too straight, crowding the plate. Concerned that Austin might embarrass himself, Cavell is surprised that, swinging at the first pitch, he hit the ball "sharply over the second baseman's head [...] and made it to second standing up." Cavell concludes: "[A]s I write this I can still see him standing on second with a trace of a smile, as if with an appropriate pride at a moment exactly realized, the world working out and we made for it."[73]

In a similar vein, we might celebrate Cavell's improbable path from a childhood of mute desolation, through a fortunate encounter with Austin, to a life of endless philosophical wealth and productivity. His ways of accepting and building on Austin's gift of common words stand as a demanding exemplar of grateful responsiveness, and his successes provide hope that, with luck and fortunate encounters, the world can continue to work out.[74]

73. Ibid., 108.

74. An earlier version of this paper constituted my contribution to the most recent instance of a recurring conference on Cavell's work, *Constellations of the Ordinary: The Aesthetic Turn*, held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru in October 2023. I am grateful to Joel Backström, Gordon C.F. Bearn, Victor J. Krebs, Niklas Toivakainen, and Nancy Yousef for helpful comments and questions.