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## Must We Mean What We Say?

# Must We Mean What We Say?

## A Book of Essays

Updated edition



STANLEY CAVELL



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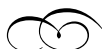
*To Cathy and Rachel*

Contents



<i>Permissions</i>	page viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Preface to this edition by STEPHEN MULHALL</i>	xv
<i>Preface to updated edition of Must We Mean What We Say?</i>	xvii
<i>Foreword: An audience for philosophy</i>	xxx
1 Must we mean what we say?	1
2 The availability of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy	41
3 Aesthetic problems of modern philosophy	68
4 Austin at criticism	91
5 Ending the waiting game: A reading of Beckett’s <i>Endgame</i>	107
6 Kierkegaard’s <i>On Authority and Revelation</i>	151
7 Music discomposed	167
8 A matter of meaning it	197
9 Knowing and acknowledging	220
10 The avoidance of love: A reading of <i>King Lear</i>	246
<i>Thematic index</i>	326
<i>Index of names</i>	329

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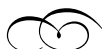
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## Acknowledgments



Four of the ten essays in this volume are published here for the first time:

The reading of *Endgame* was written in the summer and fall of 1964 and I have used some selection of its material each spring since then in the Humanities course which the Department of Philosophy at Harvard offers in the General Education program of the college. Similar selections were the basis for lectures given at Western Reserve University and the Case Institute, at the University of Saskatchewan, and at the University of North Carolina.

“Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*” was prepared for a colloquium on that book held at the University of Minnesota by its Department of Philosophy in January 1966.

“Knowing and Acknowledging” is an expansion of my contribution to a colloquium held at the University of Rochester in May 1966. Its original version was written as a set of comments on a paper presented at that Colloquium by Professor Norman Malcolm; that is the paper of his, subsequently published with minor revisions, which is cited in this essay.

Part I of the reading of *King Lear* was written in the summer of 1966, partly as preparation for, partly out of dissatisfaction with, my lectures in the Humanities course mentioned previously. Part II was written in the summer and fall of 1967, during a period in which a sabbatical term was generously granted early by Harvard University in order that I might bring this book to a finish.

Nothing like it would have been started apart from Harvard’s Society of Fellows, in which I was a Junior Fellow from 1953–1956. The highest praise of the Society, and all it asks, is expressed in the work produced by the years of freedom it provides. In my case, the most precious benefit of those years was the chance to keep quiet, in particular to postpone the Ph.D., until there was something I wanted, and felt readier, to say.

The six essays which have already been published have been brought into uniform stylistic format; otherwise they appear here without, or with trivial, alterations. I might mention here one stylistic habit of mine which, in addition to irritation, may cause confusion. I use dots of omission in the usual way within quoted material, but I also use them apart from

quotations in place of marks such as “etc.” or “and so on” or “and the like.” My little justifications for this are (1) that since in this use they often indicate omissions of the end of lists of examples or possibilities which I have earlier introduced, I am in effect quoting myself (with, therefore, welcome abbreviation); and (2) that marks such as “and the like,” when needed frequently, seem to me at least as irritating as recurrent dots may be, and in addition are false (because if the list is an interesting one, its members are not in any obvious way “like” one another). I also use these dots, and again at the end of lists, as something like dots of suspension; not, however, because I suppose this device to dramatize the mind at work (generally, the opposite is truer) but because I wish to indicate that the mind might well do some work to produce further relevant examples. I can hardly excuse my use of list dots, any more than other of my habits which may annoy (e.g., a certain craving for parentheses, whose visual clarity seems to me to outweigh their oddity); for if I had found better devices for helping out my meaning, there would be no excuse for not having employed them. A further idiosyncrasy is especially noticeable in the later essays, the use of a dash before sentences. Initial recourse to this device was as a way of avoiding the change of topic (and the necessity for trumped up transitions) which a paragraph break would announce, while registering a significant shift of attitude or voice toward the topic at hand. The plainest use of the device is an explicit return to its old-fashioned employment to mark dialogue.—But there are so many justifications for not writing well.

My editors at Scribners have evidently had a mixed lot to contend with in helping to order this work. I am grateful for their indulgences, as well as for tact in drawing lines.

For permission to reprint I am grateful to the original publishers:

“Must We Mean What We Say?” is a greatly expanded version of a paper read as part of a symposium at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Coast Division, on December 19, 1957. The first part of that symposium was “On the Verification of Statements About Ordinary Language,” by Professor Benson Mates. These papers were first published together in *Inquiry*, Vol. 1 (1958) and both are reprinted in V. C. Chappell, ed., *Ordinary Language* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964). The page references to Professor Mates’ paper are according to its occurrence in the Chappell collection.

“The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” was first published in *The Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962), and reprinted in George Pitcher, ed., *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations* (Garden City,



New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966). Material for this paper was prepared during a period in which I received a grant from the Henry P. Kendall Foundation, to which I wish to express my gratitude.

“Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” was prepared for a volume of original essays by younger American philosophers, edited by Max Black, *Philosophy in America* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965). Approximately the first half of this paper was presented to a meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in October 1962. It was written during the year 1962–63 in which I was in residence at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, as was a longer study from which the Austin paper, listed immediately below, was extracted. These are fragments of the continuing profit that year remains for me.

“Austin at Criticism” was published first in *The Philosophical Review*, LXXIV (1965), and reprinted in Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

“Music Discomposed” was read as the opening paper of a symposium held at the sixth annual Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy in April 1965 and was published, together with the comments on it by Professor Monroe Beardsley and by Professor Joseph Margolis, as part of the Proceedings of that Colloquium, in Capitan and Merrill, eds., *Art, Mind, and Religion* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967). Most of the material in sections V, VI, and VII of this essay was presented as part of a symposium called “Composition, Improvisation and Chance,” held at a joint meeting of the American Musicological Society, the Society for Ethnomusicology, and the College Music Society, at the University of California, Berkeley, December 1960. The title of the symposium, as well as my participation in it, were both the work of its moderator, Joseph Kerman. I am grateful to him also for suggestions about the initial material I presented at Berkeley and about an earlier draft of the present paper.

“A Matter of Meaning It” constitutes my rejoinders to Beardsley and Margolis; while not read at the Oberlin Colloquium, it is included in its Proceedings.



The few personal acknowledgments which are scattered through these essays scarcely suggest the debts I have accumulated in the writing of them. Because the largest of these are debts of friendship as much as of instruction, I must hope that they were partly discharged in the course

of incurring them, for certainly the essays alone are insufficient repayment. I am thinking of conversations with Thomas Kuhn (especially during 1956–58, our first two years of teaching at Berkeley) about the nature of history and, in particular, about the relations between the histories of science and of philosophy; of the countless occasions on which I have learned about continental philosophy and literature from Kurt Fischer, in everything from isolated remarks to the course of lectures he gave to his graduate seminar at Berkeley on Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*; of the years during which Thompson Clarke taught me to understand the power of traditional epistemology, and in particular of skepticism. My debt to Clarke is systematic, because it was through him, together with a study of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (on which we gave a joint seminar in 1959–60), that I came to see that everything I had said (in "Must We Mean What We Say?") in defense of the appeal to ordinary language could also be said in defense, rather than in criticism, of the claims of traditional philosophy; this idea grew for me into an ideal of criticism, and it is central to all my work in philosophy since then. Its most explicit statement, in the work which appears here, is given in the opening pages of "Knowing and Acknowledging." It is a guiding motivation of my Ph.D. dissertation. *The Claim to Rationality* (submitted to Harvard University in 1961, now soon to be published), a fact I mention here because ideas and formulations of that book (in particular, the view it develops of Wittgenstein's later philosophy) appear throughout the essays collected here, and I am uneasy about the possibility that from time to time I am relying on it as backing for claims which in the space of an essay are not developed enough to stand by themselves. This creates obvious risks of delusion.

The piece on Kierkegaard, the two on music, and that on Lear—that is to say, the bulk of the latest work—were written during periods in which their controlling ideas were recurrent topics of conversation with Michael Fried and John Harbison; the reservations and the satisfactions they expressed were always guiding for me. Their wives, Ruth Fried and Rose Mary Harbison, were frequently very much a part of those conversations, as they are part of those friendships; if what I owe to them is less specific, it is no less real. To say, in addition, that I owe to Michael Fried's instruction any understanding I have come to about modernist painting and sculpture, scarcely describes the importance that access of experience has had for me over the past three or four years. Its confirmation and correction and extension of my thoughts about the arts and about modernism is suggested by the writings of his to which I refer in various of the later

essays; but conversations with him about those topics, and about history and criticism, and about poetry and theater, are equally, if silently, present in them.

First books tend to over-ambitiousness, and nowhere more than in the bulk of debts they imagine themselves able to answer for.

I cannot forgo the pleasure of thanking my teachers of philosophy—Henry David Aiken, Abraham Kaplan, and Morton White—especially for their encouragement to think of, or to remember, philosophy as something more than the preoccupation of specialists. To the late J. L. Austin I owe, beyond what I hope is plain in my work, whatever is owed the teacher who shows one a way to do relevantly and fruitfully the thing one had almost given up hope of doing. And because all the pieces of this book were written after I had begun to teach, the responses of my students are often guiding in the way I have written, in everything from the specific choice of an example or allusion to a general tendency to swing between dialogue and harangue. Here I single out Allen Graubard and John McNees and Timothy Gould, whose intellectual companionship and whose acts of friendship since I came back to Cambridge to teach, are unforgettable.

That since that time I have enjoyed the friendship of Rogers Albritton, and therewith the power of his intelligence and sensibility, is a fortune which only those who know him can begin to appreciate.

My mother and father have waited for, and supported, these first fruits in the peculiar patience, and impatience, known only to parents. My uncle, Mendel Segal, began his avuncularity by supporting my infancy on his shoulders, and continued it, through my years in graduate school and my first years of teaching, with brotherly advice which usually cost him money. My wife, Cathleen Cohen Cavell, beyond the moments of timely editing and encouragement, kept in balance the sabbatical months in which the final stages of composition were accomplished. And now my daughter Rachel can see what it was I was doing as I inexplicably scribbled away those hundred afternoons and evenings.

That I am alone liable for the opacities and the crudities which defeat what I wanted to say, is a miserably simple fact. What is problematic is the expense borne by those who have tried to correct them, and to comfort the pain of correcting them.

S.C.

31 December 1968  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

## Preface to this edition

STEPHEN MULHALL



I had... fancies of putting [this] book out in a newspaper format, so that each essay could begin on the front page and end on the back page, with various conjunctions in between. (Cavell)

Suppose that a classic text is one whose ability to go on speaking to new generations of readers is grounded in the precision and depth of its address to its own time and place. Then a better understanding of the continuing fertility of Stanley Cavell's first book requires an appreciation of its penetratingly various engagements with North American culture in the late 1960s.

That culture's philosophy was divided between what were called "analytic" and "Continental" approaches to the subject, and—within the analytic side—between the earlier reception of logical positivism (with its attempted elevation of science and denigration of evaluative judgement) and the more recent reception of Wittgenstein's later philosophy (often affiliated with J. L. Austin's ways of affirming ordinary language). Its foremost artistic figures confronted the threats and opportunities of modernism (in the aftermath of the New Criticism, Abstract Expressionism and non-tonal music); and its political and moral life was wracked by inter-generational incomprehension and repudiation—a civil war of the spirit at once engendered by and fueling combat in foreign fields.

Each essay in Cavell's book is in conversation with at least one of these sites of confusion and conflict: and their inter-relatedness reveals that they are internally related to – hence interpretable by or in terms of—one another, and so can be (if not overcome, then ameliorated or at least better understood by being) brought into conversation. Cavell's interpretations of Shakespeare, Beckett and Schoenberg show that literature and music have ways of acknowledging (and so of denying) the authority of their own history, call it the significance of inherited forms of meaningfulness; and this brings out analogous difficulties in politics and morality—say, how temptations towards fraudulent speech and action (modes of self-presentation from which one's real self is absent, often unknowingly) can

afflict inter-generational understanding. His essay on Kierkegaard traces the genealogy of such problems, showing how deeply post-Enlightenment religion, politics and art suffer difficulties of authority that are also difficulties of authorship—of making one's thoughts, words and deeds fully one's own.

Cavell's perceptions of these broader human opacities and modes of self-injury enable and are enabled by his specifically philosophical investments, as broached in the opening sequence of essays on Austin and Wittgenstein. By allowing neither author to eclipse the other's individuality, Cavell there discloses a fascinating interpretation of "ordinary language philosophy" that sidesteps criticisms long viewed as licensing its dismissal, and reveals how extensively it interacts with the broader preoccupations of its culture. The emancipatory potential of Cavell's Wittgenstein has not thus far been properly acknowledged, let alone realized; but could anyone seriously deny that our contemporary culture continues to suffer versions and consequences of the failures of sense-making that he identifies and aspires to overcome? Until we can, this book of essays will have something to say to us.

## Preface to updated edition of *Must we mean what we say?*



Friends have repeatedly remarked to me that some later preoccupation of mine can be found foreshadowed in passages of *Must We Mean What We Say?* This quality of previewing might be understood merely as a consequence of the book's history, that although it is my first book, and although its title essay was written in 1957, it collects work from the ensuing dozen years and was not published until I was into my fourth decade, when my interests may be thought to have been fairly developed. But I understand the presence of notable, surprising anticipations to suggest something more specific about the way, or space within which, I work, which I can put negatively as occurring within the knowledge that I never get things right, or let's rather say, see them through, the first time, causing my efforts perpetually to leave things so that they can be, and ask to be, returned to. Put positively, it is the knowledge that philosophical ideas reveal their good only in stages, and it is not clear whether a later stage will seem to be going forward or turning around or stopping, learning to find oneself at a loss.

I received my first copy of the book from its publisher on the day of what I recall as the most tortured of the emergency faculty meetings following the massive arrest of students occupying the main administration building of Harvard College, in April of 1969, so that my initial joy, or its expression, in perceiving the book's existence in the world, was largely put aside, whether as a relief from isolation or as a source of refuge it was hard to tell. But each of the ten essays making up the book has its own history, as does its Foreword, and a way of introducing this new edition of them is to give a little of the history in each case.

For some years, the only essays in the book that were discussed in print, or reprinted from it, were the opening two, sometimes as a pair; and those discussions were responses to their original appearance in philosophy journals, and, I believe, subsided after their collection into the book. The context of their companion essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* would have, perhaps, made it plainer to their readers (as they made it plainer to me) that in their declarations of indebtedness to the work of J. L. Austin and of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, my motivating question

was less how we know what we say and mean (which was the point on which criticism of those two papers were centered) than it was the question of what it betokens about our relation to the world, and others, and myself, that I do in fact, to an unknown extent, inescapably know (barring physical or psychic trauma), and that I chronically do not know or cannot say what I mean, and that I can know further by bethinking myself of what I would rather or might or must or could say, or not say, or rather not. Few philosophers would now, I believe, deny that the ability to speak a language carries with it the ability to perform these linguistic feats, but I assume most do not attach the importance I continue to do to the bearing of this ability on the questions of self-knowledge and of skepticism. Controversy over the importance of the ordinary is more likely now to arise in the form of a question not of the epistemological but of the political bearing of the ordinary, say upon whether the appeal to the ordinary is a mode of conforming to the state of one's society or of criticizing it.

The opening essay, "Must We Mean What We Say?," was undertaken as the result not so much of an invitation as of an assignment. Near the end of my first year of teaching at Berkeley, in the spring of 1957, I was told that a panel on ordinary language philosophy was being scheduled at the coming Christmas meetings of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, in which I would have a chance, let's say an obligation, to defend in public the views I had been advancing all year concerning the ground-breaking philosophical importance of the work of Austin, in the form of a response to a paper to be presented by my senior colleague Benson Mates. I had, as a result of Austin's visiting Harvard my last semester there, thrown away what may have been a partially written Ph.D. dissertation, and consequently arrived in Berkeley to take up the position of Assistant Professor there not only without a degree but with no concrete idea for a dissertation (an unthinkable circumstance after my generation in graduate school). The imposition of the obligation was fair enough. It was time that I get into the open some formulation of what had seemed so enlivening in my encounters with Austin, or else suffer the humiliation of finding that it was not, at my hands, defensible in grown-up discussion.

Reading the essay now, I still sense in it the initial exhilaration in finding ways to mean everything I was saying, and to say a larger fraction of what I had philosophically to say, than I had ever experienced. The elation was an experience as of escaping from what I had inarticulately felt in my philosophical education, and remaining in much of philosophy's dispensation as I began my life of teaching philosophy, as prohibitions on, or

suspicions of, everyday speech, quite in the absence of patient attention to the individual utterance. I am struck by a double anticipation in a formulation from the last page of “Must We Mean What We Say?” which speaks of Socrates “coax[ing] the mind down from self-assertion—subjective assertion and private definition—and leading it back, through the community, home.” First, the sense of the philosopher as responding to one lost will become thematic for me as my understanding of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* becomes less primitive than it was; second, the literary or allegorical mode of the formulation is something I recognized early as a way of mine of keeping an assertion tentative, that is, as marking it as a thought to be returned to. The implication that philosophical lostness requires something like guidance of a therapeutic sort may or may not be clear to others in these words, but they were ones in which at that period of my life I associated with the work of psychoanalysis. (The formulation “back, through the community, home” seems ambiguous as between meaning leading the mind back to its home in the community, or rather back, beyond this, to itself. Ambiguity was perhaps the best I could do then with the idea of philosophy’s ancient therapeutic ambition, before I had gotten into questions of the fantasy of a private language, of skepticism’s power to repudiate ordinary language, and of philosophy’s arrogance in its calling to speak for humanity, for “us.”)

I suppose that the idea of the philosopher as guide was formed in me in resistance to the still current idea of the philosopher as guard. So I should perhaps add that at no period of my life has it occurred to me that philosophical problems are unreal, that is, that they could be cured and philosophy thus ended, as if left behind. The problems I was concerned with are better expressed as about the all but unappeasable craving for unreality; Kant’s diagnosis of such perplexities was as Transcendental Illusions.

I had in “Must We Mean What We Say?” already suggested understanding the philosophical appeal to the ordinary in relation to Kant’s transcendental logic (*Must We Mean ... ?* p. 13), namely as the sense of uncovering the necessary conditions of the shared world; but not until the second essay of the book, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” was I able to give a certain textuality to this relation to Kant, at the point at which Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* announces that “Our investigation . . . is directed not toward phenomena, but, as one might say, toward the ‘possibilities’ of phenomena” (*ibid.* p. 65). And it would not be until after completing *The Claim of Reason* that I would feel I had secured some significant progress in assessing the difference it makes that



Wittgenstein sees illusions of meaning as something to which the finite creature is subject chronically, diurnally, as if in every word beyond the reach of philosophical system. The idea that there is no absolute escape from (the threat of) illusions and the desires constructed from them, say there is no therapy for this, in the sense of a cure for it—or rather the pervasiveness and hence invisibility of the idea that there might be some such escape—was evidently something that captured my fascination, halfway through *Must We Mean What We Say?*, with Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, in effect a study of the circumstance that “You're on earth, there's no cure for that” (*ibid.* p. 129).

“The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy” was written in answer to the invitation to prepare a review-essay of the publication of Wittgenstein's *The Blue and Brown Books* together with David Pole's *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, the first book (to my knowledge, in English) on its subject. My writing in this essay is from time to time marked by exasperation, even anger, always philosophically suspicious. No doubt the emotion was a response to encountering in Pole's book a dismissive treatment of work that had changed my sense of philosophy's possibilities (and rather encouraged my sense of intellectual isolation), a dismay exacerbated by the book's uniformly receiving praise, in my hearing, for its efforts. Nevertheless, I am not pleased to see my declaration that “none of [Wittgenstein's] thought is to be found” in Pole's book; I remember once changing that accusation to read “little of Wittgenstein's thought . . . etc.” and finding the change to be evasive and condescending. A more interesting reason for my review's moments of extreme impatience was my beginning to learn how difficult it was going to be, difficult in some way unprecedented in my experience, to say in some undisappointing way what my sense of the importance of Wittgenstein's work turned upon. Hence my impatience, not surprisingly, was in large part impatience with myself.

Accepting the invitation had in effect meant committing myself to reading Wittgenstein's *Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigations”* (the over-title of *The Blue and Brown Books*) with a seriousness I knew I had not begun to give to the *Investigations* itself. No deadline for my essay was set or imagined, and I waited until the end of the academic year to allow the project uninterruptedly to take all summer if necessary. In fact what took all summer was just reading through Wittgenstein's two (preliminary) texts, which initiated notes and elaborations on my part larger in bulk than the bulk of Wittgenstein's texts. Along with finding my way to the excitement of accompanying the intensity of thought expressed in

these pages, I was discovering about the ordinary what I missed in Austin, namely, that if, as Wittgenstein puts the matter, “What we do is lead words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,” then to understand how this happens we must understand how we have drifted, or been driven, *away* from the everyday, living as it were in exile from our words, not in a sure position from which to mean what we say. In short I discovered that skepticism, which metaphysics is apt to undertake to defeat, is a renewed threat in Wittgenstein, whereas Austin rather imagines that both skepticism and metaphysics can fairly readily be put aside, with the attentiveness and good will appealed to by his methods, as if the strength of ordinary language were more characteristic of it than its vulnerability. I note three passages, or formulations, from the essay, beyond the thematic matters, for example, of rules and of our knowledge of our language, that recurrently motivate later work of mine.

Take first the paragraph in “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” that runs: “We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. . . Nothing insures that we will make . . . the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling . . . senses of humor and of significance . . . , of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else . . . all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life’ . . . It is a vision as simple as it is difficult and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying” (p. 52). In recent years this passage has been receiving increasing attention. The “vision” I speak of in the passage becomes further worked out ten years later as Chapter VII of *The Claim of Reason*, entitled “Wittgenstein’s Vision of Language,” where the idea in *Must We Mean . . . ?* of the communicative power of language as requiring nothing beyond (behind, beneath) our sharing, and maintaining, our human forms of life to ensure its success, is expressed in *The Claim of Reason* as there being “no reason” (p. 178) for our sharing them. (Such a requirement—for, let’s say, a metaphysical grounding of our ability to communicate—would amount to requiring that we have a reason for caring about one another in general, for attaching any significance to the fact that some things on earth manifest forms of life, and that some of these, to speak so, have souls. I also say there that these possibilities and necessities of our forms of life are nothing more and nothing less than natural (having two chapters earlier gone to some lengths to show that the distinction between the natural and the conventional is unstable).

Second, the characterization of the style of *Philosophical Investigations* as, among other matters, a crossing of the genres of Dogmatics and

Confession and Dialogue served, even in the space of a brief concluding section, to establish for me the issue of Wittgenstein's writing as one to which I have never stopped turning my thoughts.

Third, the formulation, "Belief is not enough [in reacting, for example, to Wittgenstein's extraordinary remark, 'If a lion could talk we could not understand him']. Either the suggestion penetrates past assessment and becomes part of the sensibility from which assessment proceeds, or it is philosophically useless" (p. 71) prepares the way for, years later, in Part Four (the final, longest part) of *The Claim of Reason*, my recognition that at some stage in that part, the role of the *Investigations* is no longer one of being interpreted (cp. *The Claim of Reason*, p. xv). I would say now that this recognition was one of finding that an object of interpretation has become a means of interpretation, and the one because of the other. This became true of Austin for me earlier than of Wittgenstein, and it seems to me true in varying degrees of every writer (of what person or object not?) that I have ever taken with seriousness. Some of course prove to be more fruitful, or fateful, than others.

But while I had gained, from writing "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," what I felt was a usable sense of the depth of *Philosophical Investigations*, I was still far from seeing how to articulate this sense with the details of that text. I had, however, enough confidence now to make a beginning of a new dissertation that had been forming in my mind and in my notes on the relation between epistemology and ethics, or knowledge and the justification of confrontation, call it the articulation of the standing from which to question conduct and character, of oneself and of another, in differentiation from the standing to confront claims to knowledge. The main courses I offered in 1959-60, on Wittgenstein and on moral philosophy, were conscious preparations for the writing out of the ideas of the dissertation, so that when I began the consecutive writing, in the fall of 1960, even though I was still teaching full time, the dissertation was completed seven months later, namely before the remaining essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* were written.

I mark this moment by citing a formulation, out of sequence, that I find related to those from "The Availability . . .," namely from the Foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say?*, the piece of the book that still seems to me to speak for itself, written as its last, in 1968, within the opening phase of the decades of intellectual turmoil throughout the humanities and their related social sciences, that fill much of the remaining years of the twentieth century. In that phase, the students' call for "relevance" in their studies was at its rawest and most relentless, and the formulation I have in mind is

more or less obviously a response to that cry: “If philosophy is esoteric, that is not because a few men guard its knowledge but because most men guard themselves against it” (*Must We Mean ... ?*, p. xxvii). It is at the same time a good instance of my manner of invoking an arresting concept, one that has halted me, like esotericism, whose pertinence I felt strongly in connection with ordinary language practice (how could we become alienated from the words closest to us?—but then again, from what others?), but which I would not be able to speak about with much consequence until years later. Of course there seems no way of telling in the moment of such a formulation whether it is intellectually evasive or whether it is understandably to be trusted. What justifies creating junctures at which readers are asked to make such wagers one way or the other?

The academic year 1962–63, in transition to returning to teach at Harvard, was spent on sabbatical leave, and its first fruits were represented by the third essay, “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” one of a number invited from younger American philosophers to appear in a volume called *Philosophy in America*. I chose the topic both to identify myself with the arts, which somehow joined in forming my interest in a life in philosophy (perhaps helped by my only once in six years of teaching at Berkeley having taught a course in aesthetics, and then not satisfyingly, and not again, it turned out, for twenty years), and more immediately prompted by the idea of continuing the issue of my relation to my language by relating it to Kant’s idea of my capacity to give objectivity to aesthetic judgments, that is, to trace their distinctive source of necessity and universality. This was meant to open a new path in the continuing effort to illuminate the question whether my judgments of what I mean in speaking (or generally in conducting myself) are a priori or a posteriori. I had nothing further substantial to say about this until my interpretation of criteria in the opening chapters of *The Claim of Reason*, where my relation to my (ordinary) speech is in effect pictured as my chronic expatriation from it, the result of philosophy’s uncontrolled search for, let’s say, purity—as if what philosophy is compelled, like revolted Coriolanus, to say to Rome is, “I banish you.”

Only in stages have I come to see that each of my ventures in and from philosophy bears on ways of understanding the extent to which my relation to myself is figured in my relation to my words. This establishes from the beginning my sense that in appealing from philosophy to, for example, literature, I am not seeking illustrations for truths philosophy already knows, but illumination of philosophical pertinence that philosophy alone has not surely grasped—as though an essential part of its task

must work behind its back. I do not understand such appeals as “going outside” philosophy.

I point to three formulations in “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” that have recurred often in my thoughts and that are characteristic of something I can recognize as my manner, namely to introduce a remark in a guise (calling attention to itself) meant to mark an intuition which I find guiding, or whose obscurity or incompleteness is meant to be undisguised, intended to remind myself in public, as it were, that I find significance here that I have not earned, to which accordingly I know I owe a return. One such formulation is meant to characterize a task of philosophy I find proposed in *Philosophical Investigations*, one I call “undo[ing] the psychologizing of psychology” (“Aesthetic Problems . . .,” p. 91). This thought will be taken further two years later in the essay on Kierkegaard (the sixth of *Must We Mean . . . ?*). The formulation helped me in my ongoing bouts of revising my dissertation, *The Claim to Rationality*, into what became *The Claim of Reason*. It is specifically a way of thinking about what Wittgensteinian criteria and grammar do.

I point, second, to the formulation “Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about” (p. 95), which expresses a desire of mine for philosophy, that it invites me to reason about anything in my experience, anything I find of interest, from philosophy’s wish to inhibit or discount certain interests (say in the arts) or to reform or escape or limit to a minimum of distinct points its recourse to the ordinary, to Beckett’s finding the extraordinary ordinary and Chekhov’s finding the ordinary extraordinary.

A third formulation is “Nothing is more human than to deny them [viz., human necessities]” (p. 96). The human drive to the inhuman, tempting philosophy to the monstrous, is as reasonable and uncompromised a statement of the subject of Part Four of *The Claim of Reason*, as any other I have found. That part is in effect a small book, reflecting on the larger book to which, as it were, it is irreversibly bound, and lies in the background of much of the work I have done since then.

“Austin At Criticism,” the fourth essay of *Must We Mean What We Say?*, was the result of an invitation for a review-essay of Austin’s *Philosophical Papers*, published in 1962, two years after Austin’s death at the age of forty-eight; the essay does not disguise a concluding tone fitting a memorial address. My wish to articulate my undiminished, life-changing gratitude for Austin’s innovations seemed to require articulating my sense of Austin’s refusal (as it struck me) to draw consequences from those innovations that did justice to their radicality. What I found lacking is suggested

in the essay's idea of "terms of criticism," meant to show that Austin's charges or images of philosophers as lazy, wily, drunk with arrogance, etc. cannot, on his own grounds, be taken with philosophical seriousness. On the contrary, they encourage the sense that the appeal to the ordinary is trivial, or eccentric, directed against at most marginal errors in philosophical practice. In *The Claim of Reason*, my charge against Austin is centered on his misconceived claim that his work defeated what I came to call the threat of skepticism. So I want to add here that Austin's work has in recent years taken on renewed significance for me, in various ways: as I came to appreciate more deeply than I had in the past his work on the performative utterance I wished to protect it somewhat from Derrida's distinct but limited admiration of it (in "Signature, Event, Context") and somewhat from its subsequent reception in what in Cultural Studies is called performance theory, where Austin's work plays a more explicit role than for the moment it plays in professional philosophy (where his name is less often mentioned than his work is assumed—his memory lives under what is for me a puzzling grudge); and more recently I have broached the issue of the relation of Austin's treatment of what he calls "slips," in his great essay "Excuses," with what Freud calls slips in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, both thinkers seeing the condition of the human as immersed in a sea of responsibility, Austin wishing to limit responsibility in a way that allows civilized discourse and conduct to continue, Freud to expand it so radically as to require a new vision of the human, of its inevitable turnings from itself that threaten civilized intercourse, as well as of its powers to reason, in unexpected forms, with these threats, to turn back.

I postpone for a moment considering the fifth essay, on Beckett, to mention the three philosophical essays that follow it, the sixth on Kierkegaard, and the seventh and eighth on music. The concluding paragraph of the Kierkegaard essay now reads to me as a response to various issues of meaning what we say, from the sense of Wittgenstein's perception of us as, in philosophizing (hence when not?), estranged from our words, to Heidegger's identification of the everyday as caught up in inauthentic speech, what he (and Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche) calls something like "chatter." The main purpose of the pair on music is to lay out explicitly some issues of the modern, a concept, or perhaps it is hardly more than a recurrent experience of the world and the philosophy it calls for (and the art, and what institution not?) as having decisively but not yet intelligibly changed, as having become strange, that keeps making its appearance throughout the essays of *Must We Mean What We Say?* Why,

although I seem to recall reading music before I could read words, I have not written about music again until fairly recently, and increasingly, is something I am beginning to write about.

The ninth essay, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” written in response to an invitation to respond to Norman Malcolm’s essay “The Privacy of Experience,” represents a decisive step in the line of philosophical work represented by what precedes it. Malcolm’s philosophical honesty and his admiration for Wittgenstein’s achievements prompted from me reaffirmations simultaneously of my roots in analytical philosophy as well as of my conviction in Wittgenstein’s criticism of that mode of philosophizing. Acknowledgment became a recurrent theme of my work from the time of its isolation for attention in “Knowing and Acknowledging” and provides, together with the essay that follows it, on *King Lear* (“The Avoidance of Love”) the title of Part Four of *The Claim of Reason* (“Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance”). Its formulation of the skeptic’s plight as one which in mortality, let’s call it, presents itself as sort of limitation, “a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack” (p. 262), is one I invoke periodically in later work where I speak of “the threat of skepticism” as a sort of human compulsion to over-intellectuality (not simply a Faustian desire to know everything but a demonic will to measure every relation against that of knowing), as it were a natural weakness (to say the least) of the creature enamored of its intelligence.

The *Lear* essay, the tenth and last of the book, together with the essay on Beckett’s *Endgame*, “Ending the Waiting Game”—the two essays, whatever degree of philosophicality they are granted, distinguished from the rest and linked by their constituting readings of incontestably literary works—make up almost two-fifths of the pages of *Must We Mean What We Say?* They were not invited by any field, indeed it was after the Beckett essay had been praised and turned down for publishing by several literary/cultural journals (with requests either to shorten it for an article or lengthen it for a book) that I recognized it would have to help me make its own home. At some point in composing the *Lear* material I felt I saw what this home was going to be. Both of these essays originated in lectures on their respective plays that I had assigned in the large lecture course that the Harvard Department of Philosophy offered in what was called, from 1945 to 1979, General Education; from that time it was replaced in stages by a differently conceived Core Curriculum. Both programs were sophisticated versions of a “distribution requirement” and meant to shape a measure of intellectual community among the undergraduate body at large. I thought of my contribution as a course in reading, a skill prior to



the ability to distinguish among fields of study, and of its mission as providing an introduction to philosophy for those who may or may not go (or have gone) on to a career in the profession of philosophy. But these intentions do not in themselves warrant calling these somewhat unplaceable essays philosophical.

My sense that they are to be understood so arose negatively from the realization that they fit into no standing idea of a literary essay, a sense confirmed explicitly in recent years by several literary scholars and critics of Shakespeare who have reported their experience of strangeness upon encountering the *Lear* piece when it first appeared. Positively, it would not be until completing *The Claim of Reason* that I could claim explicitly of a Shakespearean tragic hero that his fate is bound up with a process philosophy calls skepticism. And not until writing the Introduction to the collection of my essays on six plays of Shakespeare, *Disowning Knowledge*, in the mid-1980s, would I find that I could fully articulate the fact and the way that the principal concepts that govern my reading of *Othello*, which closes *The Claim of Reason*, though they are not marked as technical, had been developed with increasing pertinence across the pages of the book that precede it, in characterizing the process, or call it the problematic, of skepticism with respect to the existence of others.

That the concepts which in my writing do the work of theory are not distinguished as technical, or given technical restrictions, may be expressed as saying that for philosophy, as I care about it most, ordinary language is no less or more an object of interpretation than a means of interpretation, and the one because of the other.

It could, I think, also justly be said of the texture and progress of the *Lear* essay, which closes *Must We Mean What We Say?*, that it works out, in terms developed in sketching the idea of acknowledgment in the essay that precedes it, the consequences, which prove tragic, of the avoidance of acknowledgment, work which as it were completes the analysis of acknowledgment as philosophy had come upon it. But that evidently was not something the author of *Must We Mean What We Say?* was capable then of saying. In that sense he can be said not to have known what he was doing.

What I did seem to know about what I was doing, namely, that I was glad to have reached the point of entrusting a book to the world (something my teacher Austin had never done, something a number of philosophers I admired in my generation working in relation to analytical philosophy had never done, have until now, I believe, not done), I indicated in the Foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say?*, where my



tone of, let me say, anxious elation, as of finding myself roughly intact, dreams evidently alive after many chances to disparage them, seems to have found responsive chords in others who have also had to be patient longer than they had figured to begin to see their attraction to philosophy manifest itself in work of their own, in however unpredictable forms. This unpredictability may be linked with my impression, mentioned near the beginning of this new Preface, that with the appearance of *Must We Mean What We Say?* even the public discussion of its opening two papers subsided—as if I had put together a book in such a way that it asked to be accepted or rejected as a whole. While I cannot deny such an impulse in myself, I must add that it also makes me happy to learn that the individual parts of it continue to find acceptance sufficient to warrant the reissuing of the whole.

I did discover something further a year after completing the book, on a fellowship at Wesleyan's Humanities Center, about the effect on myself of putting the book behind me, or perhaps I should say, of having it to stand behind. Its independence of me freed me for I suppose the most productive, or palpably so, nine months of my life, in which I recast the salvageable and necessary material of my Ph.D. dissertation as the opening three parts of what would become *The Claim of Reason* and completed small books on film (*The World Viewed*) and Thoreau (*The Senses of Walden*). I consider those small books to form a trio with *Must We Mean What We Say?*, different paths leading from the same desire for philosophy. I think of *Must We Mean . . . ?* as a lucky book, not because, as in other instances, it came so quickly, or else with so much difficulty that it is easy to imagine its never coming to pass. I call it, on its title page, a Book of Essays, having found that the interaction of the essays, despite the differences of their causes, have the feel of a sequence of chapters as much as a collection of independent texts. It is a texture I am glad of and feel lucky to have managed, supposing it is there; but lucky most distinctly in not having had, for institutional or professional reasons, to rush a book into print before I had one I felt lucky in having. (It would have been nice for me if this had all happened years earlier than it did; but that would have required a different life, nicer or not.)

My gratitude to the book in hand, associated with this surprise at its existence, is somehow expressed in a fact I learned of some years after hearing little about any consequences its publication may have had, namely, that two large libraries, one on each coast, had listed the book among those that had been repeatedly stolen, and consequently were no longer to be reordered for their catalogues. Moved as I am by the fantasm

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PREFACE TO UPDATED EDITION

xxix

of students too poor to buy the book but too attached to it to overcome the desire to possess it, I nevertheless hope that the present printing allows for its freer circulation.

*Cambridge/Brookline*  
September 1, 2001

## Foreword: An audience for philosophy



If the essays which follow do not compose a book, collecting resonance from one another, nothing I can say in introducing them will alter that fact. The relations among them are no less complex than the complexities I have sought to trace within the essays themselves; and any concept I would wish to use in characterizing their relations is either itself already at work within the essays, so far as I have been able to put it to work, or else it would require the working of another essay to do what I would want with it. The surface thematic overlappings among the essays are, I think, sometimes surprising, or surprisingly numerous. Because it would be tiresome to list them here, I have made an index of the themes I find, and found as I wrote, to be of guiding importance. Certainly I do not by this mean to suggest that I have fully treated any one of these themes; a number of them are just glanced at. But I have in each case wished that the place I have made for a theme's appearance provides data for further investigation of it.

Although various portions or drafts of separate essays were being written during essentially the same period, I have as far as possible arranged them chronologically according to their date of completion. It will be said that two of them—those on *Endgame* and on *King Lear*—are pieces of literary criticism, or at best applications of philosophy, while the remainder are (at least closer to being) straight philosophy. I wish to deny this, but to deny it I would have to use the notions of philosophy and of literature and of criticism, and the denial would be empty so far as those notions are themselves unexamined and so far as the impulse to assert such distinctions, which in certain moods I share, remains unaccounted for. Its account must include the obvious fact that these subjects, as I conceive of them, do resemble one another. One line of resemblance is marked where, in the essay on *King Lear*, I suggest a sense in which that play could be called “philosophical drama” and where I characterize a “philosophical criticism”; another line is projected at the points at which I note that each philosophy will produce “terms of criticism” directed against other philosophies, or against common sense, which are specific to that philosophy, and hence defining for it. In wishing to deny that some

of these essays are philosophical and others not, I do not deny that there are differences among them, and differences between philosophy and literature or between philosophy and literary criticism; I am suggesting that we do not understand these differences. At various moments I am led to *emphasize* distinctions between philosophy and various of its competitors, various interests and commitments and tastes with which, at various moments in history, philosophy was confusable—e.g., between philosophy and science, and art, and theology, and logic.

If I deny a distinction, it is the still fashionable distinction between philosophy and meta-philosophy, the philosophy of philosophy. The remarks I make *about* philosophy (for example, about certain of its differences from other subjects) are, where accurate and useful, nothing more or less than philosophical remarks, on a par with remarks I make about acknowledgment or about mistakes or about metaphor. I would regard this fact—that philosophy is one of its own normal topics—as in turn defining for the subject, for what I wish philosophy to do. But someone who thinks philosophy is a form of science may not accept that definition, because his picture is of a difference between, say, speaking about physics and doing physics. And this may be not only a special view of philosophy, it may be a partial view of science; because certain ways in which certain persons talk about a science are a part of the teaching of the science, and the ways in which the science is taught and learned may be taken as essential to an understanding of what that science is.

I do assert a distinction throughout these essays which, because it may seem either controversial or trivial, I want to call attention to from the beginning—a distinction between the modern and the traditional, in philosophy and out. My claim is not that all contemporary philosophy which is good is modern; but the various discussions about the modern I am led to in the course of these essays are the best I can offer in explanation of the way I have written, or the way I would wish to write. The essential fact of (what I refer to as) the modern lies in the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and the history of that enterprise, in the fact that this relation has become problematic. Innovation in philosophy has characteristically gone together with a repudiation—a specifically cast repudiation—of most of the history of the subject. But in the later Wittgenstein (and, I would now add, in Heidegger's *Being and Time*) the repudiation of the past has a transformed significance, as though containing the consciousness that history will not go away, except through our perfect acknowledgment of it (in particular, our acknowledgment that it is not past), and that one's own practice and ambition can be identified only

against the continuous experience of the past. (This new significance in philosophical repudiation itself has a history. Its most obvious precursor is Hegel, but it begins, I believe, in Kant. For it is in Kant that one finds an explicit recognition that the terms in which the past is criticized are specific to one's own position, and require justification from within that position. A clear instance of such a Kantian term of criticism is his characterization of an opposed "Idealism" as making the world "empirically ideal and transcendently real"; another is his diagnosis of "dialectical illusion.") But "the past" does not in this context refer simply to the historical past; it refers to one's own past, to what is past, or what has passed, within oneself. One could say that in a modernist situation "past" loses its temporal accent and means anything "not present." Meaning what one says becomes a matter of making one's sense present to oneself. This is the way I understand Wittgenstein's having described his later philosophy as an effort to "bring words *back*" to their everyday use (*Philosophical Investigations*, §116; my emphasis), as though the words we use in philosophy, in any reflection about our concerns, are *away*. This is why Wittgenstein's interlocutors, when he writes well, when he is philosophically just, express thoughts which strike us as at once familiar and foreign, like temptations. (Heidegger's consciousness that our deepest task, as philosophers and as men, is one of *getting back* to a sense of words and world from which we are now away, is an intimate point of similarity with Wittgenstein.)

These reflections will perhaps seem uncongenial to many of my professional colleagues, but they are meant to collect data which most of us, I believe, have noticed, but perhaps have not connected, or not taken to be potentially philosophical. Take, for example, the fact that the isolated analytical article is the common form of philosophical expression now, in the English speaking world of philosophy; something reflected in the fact that the common, and best, form of philosophy textbook is the assemblage of articles around individual topics. This is often interpreted as symptomatic of philosophy's withdrawal from its cultural responsibilities. The trouble with such an idea is that it occurs to a person who imagines himself certain of his culture's needs, and certain of his capacity to supply them on demand, and ignorant of our cultural situation—in which each major form of expression (say painting and music and philosophy) has, where serious, taken upon itself the characteristic cultural responsibility of preserving itself against its culture, against its own past accomplishments, which have helped to inform, and to distort, present culture; past accomplishments which are used as names by those incapable of contributing to the present, against those who would take those accomplishments as

setting the tasks of the present, or setting the terms in which present activity has its meaning and acquires its standards.

Analytical philosophy can, alternatively, be interpreted as symptomatic of philosophy's finally coming of age, or accepting its age, assimilating itself to the form in which original scientific results are made known. The trouble with this idea is that these articles are not *accepted* the way scientific papers are; they are not felt to embody results which every member of the profession can then build from. On the contrary, it seems to me commonly assumed among the serious philosophers I know that when they look into a new article they will find not merely a number of more or less annoying errors, but that they will find the whole effort fundamentally wrong, in sensibility or method or claim. Even when it is good—that is, when it contains one interesting or useful idea—the interest or usefulness cannot simply be taken over as it stands into one's own thought, but will require independent development or justification from within one's own procedures. It often happens that what makes an article or passage famous is its enunciation of a thesis which the profession is fully prepared to annihilate. The refuting of Mill on "desirable," or Moore on "indefinable," or Wittgenstein on "private language," have become minor industries, established more than one living. These can be disheartening facts, especially among the young who are entering the profession and still deciding whether it can support life—as though the profession as a whole has forgotten how to praise, or forgotten its value. (In emphasizing that criticism has been the life of philosophy from its beginning, I do not wish to camouflage what is genuinely disheartening about its present. I mean merely to remember that criticism *need* not be uncomprehending, nor always entered out of enmity.) It is hard to convey, to anyone who has not experienced it, how pervasive this *malaise* has become. For it controls one's response to one's own past work as well as to the work of others, and it applies not merely to chunky articles, but to each assertion one hears or makes.

The figure of Socrates now haunts contemporary philosophical practice and conscience more poignantly than ever—the pure figure motivated to philosophy only by the assertions of others, himself making none; the philosopher who did not need to write. I should think every philosopher now has at least one philosophical companion whose philosophical ability and accomplishment he has the highest regard for, who seems unable to write philosophy. Were such a person content with silence he would merely be the latest instance of a figure always possible within philosophy, possible indeed nowhere else. (It would make no sense to speak of

someone as a gifted novelist who had never written a novel; nor of someone as a scientist who had made no contribution to science. In the case of the scientist, the contribution need not be his *own* writing; but one could say that he must affect what his *field* writes. His contribution, that is, may be oral, but it must affect a tradition which is essentially not oral; this suggests that such contributions must be exceptional. It indicates further that *writing* plays differing roles in different enterprises, even that “writing” means something different, or has a different inflection, in contexts like “writing a novel,” “writing a fugue,” “writing a report,” “writing (up) an experiment,” “writing (down) a proof.” (If silence is always a threat in philosophy, it is also its highest promise.) But one finds instead various contraries of contentment, perhaps a tendency, more or less contained, to cynicism or to despair about the value of writing or of philosophy altogether—discontents often not sufficiently unambiguous, or not showing early enough, to force or to permit a break with the field. Philosophy inspires much unhappy love.

If these are facts of philosophical practice now, they must have a sociological-historical explanation; and what needs to be explained is what these facts point to, that the writing of philosophy is *difficult* in a new way. It is the difficulty modern philosophy shares with the modern arts (and, for that matter, with modern theology; and, for all I know, with modern physics), a difficulty broached, or reflected, in the nineteenth-century’s radical breaking of tradition within the several arts; a moment epitomized in Marx’s remark that “... the criticism of religion is in the main complete ...” and that “... the task of history, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world ...” (*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Introduction). This is the beginning of what I have called the modern, characterizing it as a moment in which history and its conventions can no longer be taken for granted; the time in which music and painting and poetry (like nations) have to define themselves against their pasts; the beginning of the moment in which each of the arts becomes its own subject, as if its immediate artistic task is to establish its own existence. The new difficulty which comes to light in the modernist situation is that of maintaining one’s belief in one’s own enterprise, for the past and the present become problematic together. I believe that philosophy shares the modernist difficulty now everywhere evident in the major arts, the difficulty of making one’s present effort become a part of the present history of the enterprise to which one has committed one’s mind, such as it is. (Modernizers, bent merely on newness, do not have history as a problem, that is, as a

commitment. The conflict between modernizers and modernists is the immediate topic of the two essays on music—numbers 7 and 8.) I might express my particular sense of indebtedness to the teaching of Austin and to the practice of Wittgenstein by saying that it is from them that I learned of the possibility of making my difficulties about philosophy into topics within philosophy itself—so that, for example, my doubts about the relevance of philosophy now, its apparent irrelevance to the motives which brought me to the subject in the first place, were no longer simply obstacles to the philosophical impulse which had to be removed *before* philosophy could begin, hence motives for withdrawing from the enterprise. It was now possible to investigate philosophically the very topic of irrelevance, and therewith the subject of philosophy itself: it is characteristic of philosophy that from time to time it appear—that from time to time it be—irrelevant to one's concerns, or incredible in itself; just as it is characteristic that from time to time it be inescapable. No doubt there is a danger of evasion in this spiralling self-consciousness; perhaps one should indeed search for more congenial work. Just as there is the danger of excusing poor writing in insisting upon the complexities of consciousness one is at each moment attempting to record, or to acknowledge. — Am I talking only about a condition within America? If so, it is said in the spirit in which a certain kind of American has usually spoken of his country's release from the past: out of a sense of disappointment in struggle with vistas of peculiar promise. And as usual, it is the expression of shock in finding that one's mind is not, and is, European; which in practice means (and in philosophical practice means emphatically) English or German. —If others do not share these doubts, or find these dangers, I certainly have no wish to implicate them.



The topics of the modern, of the philosophy of philosophy, and of the form of philosophical writing, come together in the question: What is the audience of philosophy? For the answer to this question will contribute to the answer to the questions: What is philosophy? How is it to be written? In case a philosopher pretends indifference to this question, or not recognize that he has an answer to it, I should note that this question intersects the question: What is the teaching of philosophy? Not, of course, that *this* question is likely to seem more attractive to those responsible for teaching it. On the contrary, like their pressed colleagues in other fields, professors of philosophy are likely to regard their teaching obligations as burdens,



certainly as distant seconds in importance to their own work. Whatever the reason for this state of affairs, it has a particular pertinence for the philosopher. A teacher of literature is, say, a professor of English, and he can say so; a professor of anthropology is an anthropologist, and he can say so. But is a professor of philosophy a philosopher? And to whom can he say so? One often says instead, asked what it is one does, that one teaches philosophy. And that is the problem. *Does* one teach philosophy? And when one is gripped by that question, one is really asking: Can philosophy be taught? Who is in a position to speak for philosophy? Such questions express that difficulty I referred to a moment ago as one of maintaining one's belief in one's own enterprise. (Hegel, I am told, said that he was the last professor of philosophy. I think I know what he would have meant—that he was the last man to feel that he could speak evenly about every way in which the philosophical impulse has found expression, the last with the natural conviction that his own work was the living present of philosophy's history, able to take that history for granted. And that would mean that philosophy, as it has been known, is past. The mention of Hegel here reminds me that the sorts of problems I have spoken of in connection with the teaching of philosophy more familiarly arise in thinking about the history of philosophy, about whether anyone but a philosopher can write or know its history, and about whether a philosopher could allow himself to do so.)

When, in "Austin at Criticism" (Essay 4), I complain that Austin never described his procedures accurately and circumstantially, I am in effect complaining simultaneously of a lack in his philosophizing and of a failure in his teaching. These complaints have their proper weight only against the recognition of how powerful a teacher he was; for it was in part because Austin was devoted to teaching, according to a particular picture of what teaching can be, or should be, that he avoided certain ranges of what the teaching of philosophy perhaps must be—the *personal* assault upon intellectual complacency, the private evaluation of intellectual conscience. (This range of teaching is not confined to philosophy, though its proportions and placement will vary from subject to subject. This is what I am talking about in the opening of the essay on *King Lear*, in pointing to the New Critics' concentration on the *teachable* aspects of poetry.) A major motive for wishing to leave the field of philosophy, for wishing relief from it, from one's periodic revulsions from it, would be to find something which could be taught more conveniently, a field in which it was not part of one's task to *vie* with one's students, nor to risk misleading them so profoundly. Wittgenstein, though he swiftly resigned his appointment as

Professor, was, as I read him, unofficially readier for these requirements, and like every great teacher he would have distrusted his right, or the necessity, to impose them. (The great teacher invariably claims not to want followers, i.e., imitators. His problem is that he is never more seductive than at those moments of rejection.) I find that his *Philosophical Investigations* often fails to make clear the particular way in which his examples and precepts are to lead to particular, concrete exercises and answers, for all his emphasis upon this aspect of philosophy. At the same time, his book is one of the great works about *instruction*—the equal, in this regard, of Rousseau's *Émile* and of Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*.

Because such writing as Wittgenstein's and such practice as Austin's strike certain minds as conservative, and because such minds are as apt as any to be over-confident in the faith that contrasts, like conservative vs. liberal, and liberal vs. radical, helpfully explain the behavior of the world and clear the mind for steady action, it is worth noting that these teachers thought of their work as revolutionary—not merely because what they did was new (something which can be overrated or overprized) but because they also thought it plain enough and immediately fruitful enough to establish a new common practice in thinking, and open to talent regardless of its standing within the old intellectual orders. This is another guise of the issue of the modern. I mention it again here because those of us who share, or credit, Wittgenstein's and Austin's sense of their revolutionary tasks are responding (as part of the experience of their work in making problematic the relation of philosophy to its tradition) to the concern and implication of their work for correct instruction. (There is no revolutionary social vision which does not include a new vision of education; and contrariwise.) This, together with the fact that their philosophical procedures are designed to bring us to a *consciousness* of the words we must have, and hence of the lives we have, represents for me a recognizable version of the wish "to establish the truth of this world." But then wherever there really is a love of wisdom—or call it the passion for truth—it is inherently, if usually ineffectively, revolutionary; because it is the same as a hatred of the falseness in one's character and of the needless and unnatural compromises in one's institutions.

When, in what follows, I feel pressed by the question of my right to speak for philosophy, I sometimes suggest that I am merely speaking for *myself*, and sometimes I suggest that philosophy is not *mine* at all—its results are true for every man or else they are worthless.

Are these suggestions both right, or are they evasions? They express an ambivalence about the relevance or importance of philosophy—one might

say, about its possession—which is also one of philosophy’s characteristic features. I have recently noticed a bit of philosophical literary practice which seems to betray this ambivalence. On half a dozen occasions over a period of a few months I found one philosopher or another referring to something called “Horatio’s philosophy” or “Horatio’s view of philosophy,” as though Hamlet’s strangely welcomed discovery that

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
 Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

constitutes a crack at Horatio rather than a manic release from philosophy (and from reasonableness) as a whole. (The generalizing non-possessive “your” is common enough in Hamlet’s way of speaking, and there is no evidence that Horatio’s view of the world is distinctive.) Perhaps the reason for this misreading is that philosophers have become threatened by an idea that philosophy has its limitations or impotencies. But I think it also expresses a legitimate confusion about the source or possession of philosophy altogether, as though half believing and half fearing that its natural state is one of private persuasion. I call this confusion legitimate because it isn’t as though the philosopher had some automatic or special assurance that his words are those of and for other men, nor even that any particular arrival of his words ought to be accepted by others. His examples and interpretations have, and are meant to have, the weight an ordinary man will give them; and he is himself speaking as an ordinary man, so that if he is wrong in his claims he must allow himself to be convinced in the ways any man thinking will be, or will not be. —Who is to say whether a man speaks for all men?

Why are we so bullied by such a question? Do we imagine that if it has a sound answer the answer must be obvious or immediate? But it is no easier to say who speaks for all men than it is to speak for all men. And why should that be easier than knowing whether a man speaks for me? It is no easier than knowing oneself, and no less subject to distortion and spiritlessness. If philosophy is esoteric, that is not because a few men guard its knowledge, but because most men guard themselves against it.

It is tautological that art has, is made to have, an audience, however small or special. The ways in which it sometimes hides from its audience, or baffles it, only confirms this. It could be said of science, on the other hand, that it has no audience at all. No one can share its significance who does not produce work of the same kind. The standards of performance are institutionalized; it is not up to the individual listener to decide whether, when the work meets the canons of the institution, he will accept

it—unless he undertakes to alter those canons themselves. This suggests why science can be “popularized” and art not (or not in that way), and why there can be people called critics of art but none called critics of science. I might summarize this by saying that academic art is (with notable exceptions) bad art, whereas academic science is—just science. (It is hardly an accident that creative scientists are on the whole at home in a university and that creative artists on the whole are not.) Now, what is academic philosophy? It seems significant that this question has no obvious answer. In the way it is significant that the questions, “What is the audience of philosophy? Must it have one? If so, what is it to gain from it?”, have no obvious answers.

When you wish to make serious art popular what you are wishing is to widen the audience for the genuine article. Is this what someone wants who wants to widen the audience for philosophy by writing summaries or descriptions of philosophical works? Or is he, as in the case of popular science, providing simplifications which are more or less useful and faithful substitutes for the original work? Neither of these ideas makes good sense of philosophy. I think someone who believes in popular, or in popularizing, philosophy (as differentiated from someone in an open business venture who finds profit in excerpting and outlining anything in demand) believes that the ordinary man stands in relation to serious philosophy as, say, the ordinary believer stands in relation to serious theology—that he cannot understand it in its own terms but that it is nevertheless good for him to know its results, in some form or other. What reason is there to believe this? There is every reason to believe, on the contrary, that this is the late version of one of philosophy’s most ancient betrayals—the effort to use philosophy’s name to put a front on beliefs rather than to face the source of assumption, or of emptiness, which actually maintains them. Those who guard themselves from philosophy show a healthier respect for it than those who are certain they know its results and know to whom they apply. For when philosophy is called for one cannot know beforehand where it will end. That is why Plato, as is familiar, at the beginning of the *Republic* allows the good old man to leave (“to see to the sacrifice”) before Socrates releases his doubts; and why, recalling that moment, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra leaves the old man (“the old saint”) he first encounters on his descent back to man, without relating his sickening tidings. Philosophy must be useful or it is harmful. These old men have no need of it, not necessarily because they are old, but because their passion for their lives is at one with their lives; either, as in the case of Cephalus, because his private passion is well spent and he is without

rancor, or because, as in the case of the old forest creature, his passion remains in control of his old God, who was worthy of it. The advantage of their age is that their sincerity is backed by the faithfulness of a long life. Otherwise, where sincerity asserts itself, it calls for testing. I do not say that everyone has the passion or the knack or the agility to subject himself to philosophical test; I say merely that someone can *call* himself a philosopher, and his book philosophical, who has not subjected himself to it.

My purpose is to make such facts into opportunities for investigation rather than causes for despair. The question of philosophy's audience is born with philosophy itself. When Socrates learned that the Oracle had said no man is wiser than Socrates, he interpreted this to mean, we are told, that he knew that he did not know. And we are likely to take this as a bit of faded irony or as a stuffy humility. What I take Socrates to have seen is that, about the questions which were causing him wonder and hope and confusion and pain, he knew that he did not know what no man can know, and that any man could learn what he wanted to learn. No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man—unless *wanting* to know is a special position. And this discovery about himself is the same as the discovery of philosophy, when it is the effort to find answers, and permit questions, which nobody knows the way to nor the answer to any better than you yourself. Then what makes it relevant to know, worth knowing? But relevance and worth may not be the point. The effort is irrelevant and worthless until it becomes necessary to you to know such things. There is the audience of philosophy; but there also, while it lasts, is its performance.