One of Cavell's constant preoccupations is to address the sentiment often voiced by critics of ordinary language philosophy that its methods and its very inspiration are conservative in nature. Those who express such a concern or criticism see in Austin's analysis and in the procedures of Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* the attempt to deny any relevance to the traditional practice of philosophy—with its sets of questions, problems, and specific terminology—in the name of nothing else, or nothing better, than the defense of common sense and of the supposed beliefs of ordinary people, that is to say in the last resort in the name of the blessing given to things as they are. As if the world, in its present state, were perfectly in order and no one—and particularly not philosophers—should feel entitled, let alone called upon, to raise the slightest objection about it. In other terms—which are not exactly those used by Cavell, but that strongly resonate, I believe, with his—this brand of criticism addressed to Austin and Wittgenstein sees in their methods the betrayal of what Plato considered the original vocation of philosophy: namely, the vocation to break with the power of opinions and the tyranny of *doxa* in favor of an altogether different conception, and practice, of knowledge.

To such a criticism Cavell answers along several different though related lines, without avoiding the question of what in Austin's and Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy creates the sense of a certain conservatism, and indeed produces the impression that they aim at a defense of 'ordinary beliefs'—of what others would call dominant opinions. One line of response consists in emphasizing that ordinary language philosophy rather than being a repudiation of philosophy is a revolution internal to it, a new way of thinking philosophically. Another line of response that Cavell finds particularly important highlights that the philosophy of the ordinary, when it comes to politics, leaves the question totally open of knowing whether what is at stake is the consent given to things as they are, or, to
the contrary, the need for a thorough criticism of culture and society.\(^1\) The constant reference to the figure of Socrates is, I believe, yet another way for Cavell to foreground a vision of philosophy as a practice of knowledge and self-knowledge rooted in the moral and political realm of the city that is hardly compatible with any form of submission to the powers of the day, or of uncritical conformism.\(^2\)

In the last instance, however, the most complete rejection Cavell offers of this kind of criticism of ordinary language philosophy is to be found in his own interpretation of what is at stake in Austin’s and Wittgenstein’s appeal to ordinary language. It is obviously impossible to discuss all these different threads in the present essay and in what follows I will limit myself to certain aspects of Cavell’s understanding of ordinary language that can be found in Must We Mean What We Say? and in the Claim of Reason—the two works in which Cavell arguably lays out the general framework of his philosophy. I will particularly focus on Cavell’s remarks about Kant’s analysis of aesthetic judgments and on the connections he establishes with Wittgenstein’s use in the Philosophical Investigations of the first person plural, of the ‘we,’ as the only source of authority for the elucidation of the grammar of our language. My hope is to clarify why the appeal to the ordinary in Cavell cannot be understood as a call for the acceptance of the present state of society, or as a demand for renouncing the critical task of philosophy.

1. The Universal Voice

In “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” one of the essays collected in Must We Mean What We Say?, Cavell discusses what he finds most relevant in Kant’s famous analysis of the nature of aesthetic judgments and draws some comparisons with the inspiration that guides ordinary language philosophy. In the Critique of Judgment, Kant singles out aesthetic judgments for being essentially subjective rather than logical or objective and thus for following their own specific rules. He further distinguishes between two kinds of aesthetic judgment: on the one hand, those that

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1. See Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say? (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), xviii, xxxix.
2. See ibid., 39-40. If the reference to Socrates expresses Cavell’s own understanding of the task of philosophy more than it is an interpretation of Austin’s and Wittgenstein’s methods, it is nevertheless quite central to what he takes the appeal to ordinary language to be and mean.