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Abstract Title:
Cavell and the Rationality of Criticism

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The main task of a theory of criticism has traditionally been to ground the validity of critical judgments. In line with this tradition, Cavell has incessantly subjected his own critical practice to reflection aimed at assessing its foundation. What is most distinctive and intriguing about Cavell's vision of criticism is the way it undermines certain traditional boundaries between (1) validity in interpretation and evaluation, and (2) the rationality of moral and aesthetic judgments and practices. For Cavell, the validity of interpretation and evaluation are inextricably interwoven. Critical evaluation takes its impetus from a felt response of pleasure and is essentially the articulation of this pleasure. This is an activity that is not clearly distinguishable from the activity of characterizing the object in which the pleasure is taken, or what Cavell calls "reading." Cavell takes a procedural view of what makes a reading valid that makes his view of critical rationality isomorphic with his view of moral rationality. In both the moral and aesthetic cases, Cavell is guided by his sense of the rationality of the procedures of ordinary language philosophy (especially Austin's speech act theory), which provides for him a model of assessing judgments and practices for their rationality by looking primarily to the way in which they require, in order to exist at all, specific subjective commitments. In this way, Cavell seeks to preserve a place alongside the rationality of criticism for the subject's unique voice.