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Stanley Cavell, Prominent Harvard Philosopher, Dies at 91

By **Neil Genzlinger**

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Stanley Cavell, a prominent philosopher who found heady ideas not only in the works of great thinkers of the past but also in romantic comedies from Hollywood, died on Tuesday in Boston. He was 91.

The cause was heart failure, his son David said.

Professor Cavell was for decades on the faculty of Harvard University, where he often expounded on the ideas of what is called ordinary language philosophy, which argued that philosophers had become so preoccupied with convoluted statements of philosophical problems that they had lost touch with everyday words and their meanings.

As he put it in his 1984 book, “Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes,” philosophy should be a “willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about.”

And thus he would often connect philosophy to movies and plays, as he did in “Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage,” a 1981 book that trained a philosophical lens on “All About Eve,” “Bringing Up Baby” and five other films from the years 1934 to 1949.

“Stanley Cavell brought to philosophy a human depth and subtlety that it had all too often lacked,” said Martha C. Nussbaum, a former colleague at Harvard and now the Ernst Freund distinguished service professor in the law school and philosophy department at the University of Chicago. “He also showed his more cautious peers that writing on Shakespeare and even Hollywood films could make a philosophical contribution, illuminating issues of love, shame and community.”

“As a teacher,” she added, “he thrilled and challenged generations of undergraduates in the core curriculum, and nourished the careers of many graduate students who are now leaders in the profession.”

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Stanley Louis Goldstein was born on Sept. 1, 1926, in Atlanta. His mother, Fannie (Segal) Goldstein, was a gifted pianist who instilled in him an interest in music. His father, Irving, had a series of jewelry and other small shops.

When he was young the family moved from Atlanta to Sacramento, Calif., and back again several times as his father chased economic stability during the Depression.

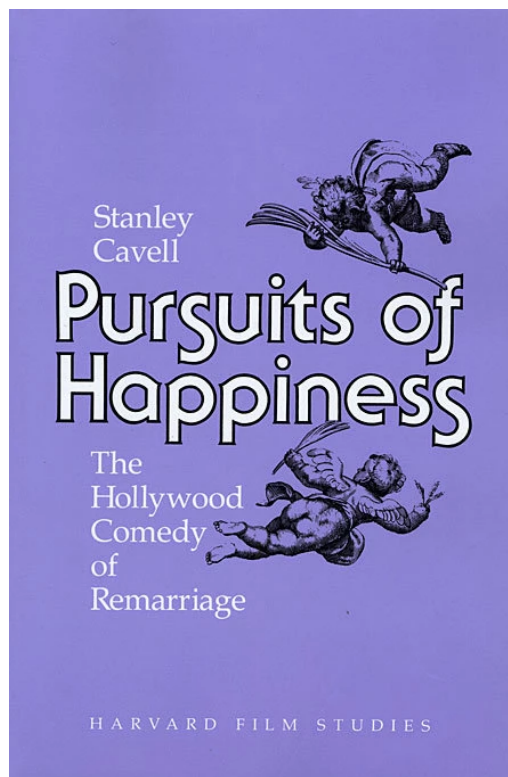
Stanley, a gifted student, graduated from high school in Sacramento in 1943 and, after changing his name to Cavell, enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley. David Cavell said that “Goldstein” had been assigned to his father, an immigrant from Poland, when he arrived in the United States and said he was Jewish. “Cavell” was a variant on the family’s original Polish name, although David Cavell said the exact rendering of that name has been lost to history.

Professor Cavell was rejected for military service because of ear damage he had suffered when he was struck by a car at age 6, although, eager to serve because of his family’s roots, he tried to bluff his way through.

“He tried to both lie about his age and forge a doctor’s note,” David Cavell said. “The Army doctor took one look at his ear and told him, ‘Go home, son.’ ”

He studied music at Berkeley and, after graduating in 1947, was accepted at the Juilliard School as a composition major. But he soon developed other interests.

“Within three months, two months, six weeks, I started playing hooky from my composition lessons,” Professor Cavell said in an oral history recorded for Berkeley’s “Conversations With History” video series.



“Pursuits of Happiness,” one of Professor Cavell’s best-known books, trained a philosophical eye on Hollywood romantic comedies.

“I went, while I was playing hooky, to at least two films a day,” he added, “and often to the theater in the evening.”

He eventually entered graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he discovered a passion for philosophy. Transferring to Harvard, he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy and from 1953 to 1956 he was a junior fellow in Harvard’s Society of Fellows. He then went back to Berkeley, where he taught for six years.

In 1957, he wrote an essay called “Must We Mean What We Say?” (His first book, a collection published in 1969, carried the same title and led with that essay.) It examined the issue of philosophy’s detachment from real-world language. It opened stridently.

“That what we ordinarily say and mean may have a direct and deep control over what we can philosophically say and mean is an idea which many philosophers find oppressive,” he wrote. The essay went on to discuss the theories of J. L. Austin, one of his main influences, and others on both sides of the ordinary-language debate.

Professor Cavell returned to Harvard to teach in 1963 and settled there, becoming professor emeritus in 1997.

In 1969, when students protesting the Vietnam War and the presence of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps on campus set up headquarters in a building where he was supposed to be teaching a lecture class, he staged an impromptu question-and-answer session for students on the

steps. News coverage of the moment gave the sense that Professor Cavell was even then encouraging students to make intellectual connections.

“There is a way of looking at going into a building like Lyndon Johnson’s going into Vietnam,” he was quoted as saying.

Professor Cavell wrote 18 books, with “Pursuits of Happiness” among the most attention-getting. That book discussed seven movies that involved couples pondering divorce or trying to reconcile after separation — he called them comedies of remarriage and filled his discussion of them with references to Astin, Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Kant and other philosophers. But he invited readers not to take it all too seriously.

“If my citings of philosophical texts along the way hinder more than they help you, skip them,” he wrote.

Professor Cavell’s marriage to Marcia Masters ended in divorce. In 1967 he married Cathleen Cohen, who survives him, as do his sons, David and Benjamin; a daughter, Rachel Cavell; and four grandchildren. He lived in Brookline, Mass.

Professor Cavell, who received a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” in 1992, was particularly known in philosophical circles for his interpretations of Wittgenstein. His books included “The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy” (1979).

Jonathan Lear, reviewing that work in The New York Times, faulted the prose but admired the effort.

“While much of the book is charming,” he wrote, “there is much that is overwritten and self-conscious. Yet perhaps stylistic difficulty is the inevitable cost of having taken on the remarkable task of welcoming the poets back into the Republic and re-establishing a dialogue between literature and philosophy.”

Did Professor Cavell’s efforts to bring subjects like film into philosophy create problems for him in the ivory towers of Harvard?

“It’s caused me a certain amount of grief,” he conceded in the oral history.

But he defended the choice.

“It was not a question of why I was interested in film,” he said, “but a question of, since everybody is interested in film, throughout the world, why don’t philosophers write about it?”

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