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Critical Discussions

TED COHEN ON SHARING THE WORLD

by Michael Fischer

In "Stanley Cavell and the Limits of Appreciation," Ted Cohen restates his hatred of Richard Wagner's music. Cohen hears something "very nasty" in Wagner's music, "an element of Nazism," to borrow Thomas Mann's phrase for what Mann, too, found disturbing in Wagner.[1] Whereas Mann was still able to value Wagner's music, Cohen despises listening to it. Cohen realizes that his revulsion sets him apart not only from Mann but also from W. H. Auden, who praised Wagner's "consummate skill" in creating heroes and heroines who exhibit the irrationality and self-destructiveness of human nature "in all its formidable enchantment."[2] Cohen notes how another eminent listener, Arturo Toscanini, also thought Wagner's music worth performing, not repulsive.

Faced with conflicting judgments of an artist or work of art, some critics have tried to defuse the disagreement by adopting a live-and-let-live approach, aligning aesthetic judgments with critics' unimpeachable personal preferences. According to this familiar approach, there is no disputing taste in art, but there is no need to. Absent any pressure to achieve consensus, let alone unanimity, we can agree to disagree about art without any harm. Different opinions of a work of art can coexist peacefully, side by side, neither threatening nor contesting one another,

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like the frankly subjective reviews of restaurants, products, and resorts aggregated by various websites.

Another, more sophisticated, way of dealing with aesthetic disagreement has been to intervene, not by picking one point of view and arguing for its superiority but by pruning discordant judgments of the underlying external interests assumed to be producing conflict. This response recalls Immanuel Kant, who claimed critics can speak with a universal voice and expect assent from others, but only by keeping their judgments of art disinterested and purely aesthetic. From this point of view, in the dispute over Wagner, Cohen's invoking "an element of Nazism" illustrates the discord that can break out when controversial political and ethical considerations disrupt the discussion of art. Tarring Wagner's music with Nazism becomes inflammatory, prejudicial, and out of order. I can imagine a Kantian mediator of this debate trying to reset it by urging the disputants to refocus their comments on aesthetic issues. The hope would be that factoring out irrelevant, incendiary political concerns might calm the discussion and reduce the unnecessary tension sparked by mixing art and politics.

Contemplating his strong disagreement with prominent advocates for Wagner, Cohen doesn't take either one of these tacks. He neither opts for a let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom relativism nor does he recant his invocation of Nazism. Cohen accepts the legitimacy of different perspectives on Wagner (his own very much included) but he does not leave it at that. He feels he must somehow incorporate into his own outlook the fact that others disagree with him; they should do the same with his antipathy toward Wagner. Here is Cohen's striking conclusion:

> My claim is that the Wagnerite is perfectly legitimate in his enjoyment of this music, and in his capacity to overlook the anti-Semitism in the operas, but that he is no more legitimate than I in my disgust. My world is one in which the music of Wagner is distasteful. Your world is one in which the music of Wagner is endlessly engaging. I have to find room in my world for you and your Wagner along with me and my Wagner. If I don't, then I forfeit my claim to *human*, moral responsibility, for it comes with an obligation not to write you off, not to consign you to some other world I have nothing to do with. It has to *mean* something in my world that you are in it loving Wagner, for after all, *the* world is no more mine than yours. (p. 158)

For Cohen, at stake in this disagreement over Wagner is nothing less than our capacity to live together and share the world with one another,

fully aware of our differences. Drawing on Stanley Cavell, Cohen goes on to note that our willingness to share the world with others is registered by our willingness to engage in conversation with them, conversation being "a way—perhaps *the* way—in which people simply are *with* one another" (p. 158).

I want here to applaud Cohen's response to aesthetic disagreement and the moral pressure he puts on himself to share the world with others who differ from him. That pressure comes from what Cohen sees as his obligation not to write others off, not to shut them out of his world, only because they disagree with him. "For after all," he says in a comment worth repeating, "*the* world is no more mine than yours." My deep appreciation for this conclusion is tied to my conviction that it is vital to democracy, especially now, when we face the resurgence of a politics defined by writing some people off, expelling them, silencing them, or otherwise keeping them from making a difference in the world—an autocratic politics, in short, bent on owning, not sharing, the world, on fencing it off and having it all to oneself on one's own terms.

Without mentioning democracy, Cohen hints at the connection I'm making between sharing the world and democratic politics when in the final section of his essay he turns to some lessons learned from game playing. He credits his brother Stephen with the insight that sore losers "never seem to feel that you've won" (p. 162): "They feel that they've lost, and would have won if only they had played their best, or the sun hadn't been blinding, or the umpire had been accurate, or whatever. Thus they depreciate you and your victory" (pp. 162–63). In the antidemocratic politics that rejects sharing the world with others, sore losing often means depreciating the opposition party and their victory, say, by contesting the opposition's legitimacy and questioning their very right to play the political game. This questioning can take many forms, including groundless allegations of fraudulent voting, dark insinuations about rigged elections, angry complaints about biased court decisions, and lies about a victorious opponent's qualifications—anything to sow distrust in an unwelcome outcome. These tactics fly in the face of what Cohen calls (thinking of game playing) "the need to live *with* them even through winning and losing" (p. 163).

In my view, "the need to live *with* them even through winning and losing" is also crucial to democracy, as Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt point out in their important book *How Democracies Die*, one of several recent books expressing concern for the future of American democracy.[3] Levitsky and Ziblatt offer several key indicators of authoritarian behavior in leaders, including:

> Lack of commitment to the democratic rules of the game. "Do [these leaders] attempt to undermine the legitimacy of elections, for example, by refusing to accept credible electoral results?" (*HDD*, p. 23)
>
> Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents. "Do they baselessly describe their partisan rivals as criminals, whose supposed violation of the law [or potential to do so] disqualifies them from full participation in the political arena?" (p. 23)
>
> Toleration or encouragement of violence. "Have they tacitly endorsed violence by their supporters by refusing to unambiguously condemn it and punish it?" (p. 24)
>
> Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media. "Have they threatened to take legal or other punitive action against critics in rival parties, civil society, or the media?" (p. 24)

These specific actions undermine what Levitsky and Ziblatt identify as two essential cultural norms or "soft guardrails" (*HDD*, p. 101) underwriting a healthy democracy: mutual tolerance and forbearance. Mutual tolerance mitigates against sore losing by honoring the need to live with one's political opponents even when they come out ahead: the need to acknowledge one's opponents as legitimate participants in the political process entitled to win, not treasonous foes or intolerable threats. Forbearance counteracts ungracious winning by honoring the need to live with one's opponents even after defeating them. Winners of elections exemplify forbearance when, out of respect for an ongoing relationship with the other side, they are generous, not vindictive. They refrain from seizing on their current electoral ascendancy as an opportunity for total, permanent control, or a long-sought-after chance to squelch their political rivals once and for all. Mutual tolerance and forbearance combine to fortify the central social vision of democracies that I think Cohen's conclusion reinforces: individuals and groups sharing the world with people who differ from them, creating that world together, talking with them, and benefiting from relationships that encourage disagreement, independent thinking, and dissent.

Cohen's conclusion grows out of his response to a disagreement over Wagner, which may at first glance restrict its transferability to politics, where much more seems to be at stake. As if responding to this caution, Cohen goes on to consider another kind of conflict that matters to him: disagreement with someone over abortion. This disagreement

is potentially harder to stomach and on the face of it more applicable to the acrimonious world of actual politics. Cohen is pro-choice, a position that he knows others passionately reject. He realizes that the abortion debate, in contrast to an aesthetic disagreement, has "to play out differently, because now it is not merely a matter of acknowledging the legitimacy of one another's feelings, because *something will have to be done*" (p. 160): laws have to be voted on, court rulings issued, funding decisions determined. But after acknowledging this difference between debating abortion and a work of art, Cohen refuses to let it nullify the conclusion he arrives at when faced with opposition to his dislike of Wagner:

> But something has to be done [in the debate over abortion], and what the pro-choicers want done is not what the pro-lifers want done. It is one thing for you to enjoy Wagner's music while I avoid it, and for both of us to credit one another with humanity and dignity, and quite another for us to engage in this mutual acceptance when something has been done that the other despises. And yet, surely, this is exactly what has to be done unless our conversation is to end and we are to be resigned, truly, to be in a war of all against all. This is not an easy thing to do (it is not really all that easy for the Wagner-lovers and Wagner-haters to share a musical world), and I do not know that it is possible to do it. I do know that it has to be attempted, and that forsaking the attempt is no less than forsaking the idea that we might live together. (p. 160)

Even when something has to be done and people differ strongly about what course of action to take, as in the debate over abortion, the underlying challenge for Cohen remains the same: "What are we to do to remain together when we cannot agree?" (p. 159). His answer: try to summon up the level of mutual acceptance that will allow us to continue to talk to one another despite our deep differences.

Far from depending on agreement, the mutual acceptance Cohen is affirming embraces conflict. Cohen is aligning social cohesion with aesthetic disagreement, not fandom or people forming communities that crystallize around their shared enthusiasm for a book or artist. As Cohen puts it, "We cannot take agreement as the only sign this appreciation [of one another] has been achieved" (p. 162). Cohen isn't letting go of his previous views or converting to an outlook he once dissented from, in effect accepting self-censorship or hypocrisy as the price for coexisting with others. That is the price exacted by autocratic leaders who want to control the world, not share it: hence their penchant for

extortion, loyalty tests, you're-either-with-me-or-against-me ultimatums, and other forms of coercion. That is a price Cohen refuses to pay. Instead of abandoning his convictions, Cohen opts for continuing to express them in exchanges with the pro-lifers and Wagnerites he disagrees with. Conversation is his alternative to the war of all against all, the otherwise unceasing power struggle that makes recourse to force inevitable.

A better word for conversation here might be quarreling. I take the term from Linda M. G. Zerilli, who finds Kant using "quarreling" in his *Critique of Judgment* to characterize what aesthetic disagreement sounds like, or, in more Kantian language, how participants in aesthetic disputes uphold different positions while claiming the right "to pronounce validly for everyone" without, however, invoking determinate concepts or unassailable rules.[4] "Quarreling" maps out a middle ground between a no-holds-barred brawl, to be settled only by force, on the one hand, and, at the other extreme, a dispute that potentially lends itself to objective resolution, say, by appealing to agreed-upon standards and facts or by deferring to broadly accepted authorities. Quarreling redeems disagreement, stays patient with it, and resists peremptory moves to cut short the conversation, whether by force or fiat.

Quarreling takes on political dimension when, in *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, Zerilli, like Cohen, persuasively contends that arguing over aesthetic judgments has much in common with contesting political opinions. Participating in a democracy entails individuals figuring out, sharing, defending, and sometimes revising their responses to the many issues that come their way. Declaring "this war should not be fought" or "this legislation is unfair" resembles asserting "this painting is beautiful" or "this music is unbearable." In both aesthetic and political debates, quarreling captures how a high level of disagreement over specific conclusions can coexist with an ongoing relationship between the very people who oppose one another. As Zerilli suggests, whether they are wrangling over art or politics, disputants keep talking to one another, not because they agree on everything but because they rely on shared patterns of support in advocating for their divergent positions.[5] These patterns of support are directive and accommodating, evidence providing yet open-ended; they shore up a particular position while respecting the freedom of others to reach a different conclusion. More specifically, a participant in an aesthetic or political debate is always soliciting, urging, and hoping for agreement from others without, however, presuming to demand it. Inviting assent (as opposed to compelling it) takes many forms, including asking others to clarify the criteria they are using to

reach their conclusions and inviting others to try to see for themselves what you see in a painting or proposal. As an example, consider Cohen inviting other listeners to hear something "very nasty" in Wagner's music while exploring with them why they either do not hear it or, hearing it, why they minimize the damage Cohen is sure it does to Wagner's music.

Here, then, is how I view the relationship I see Cohen aspiring to have with the Wagner enthusiasts and pro-life advocates he disagrees with: an unending quarrel punctuated by moments of convergence and separation, mutual attunement and incomprehension, hope for consensus and frustration, a quarrel sustained by the noncoercive patterns of support both sides adduce to back up their divergent positions. Whatever outcomes result from this exchange, Zerilli reminds us that one is especially important to democracy. By sharing the world and talking to one another in this way, we are also creating our world as a place where we can live with disagreement and resist taking arms against one another because we differ. Cohen reinforces this insight by showing how disagreement can become a sign of caring, of showing others that their opinions matter enough for us to keep talking with them, thus reaffirming that "*the* world is no more mine than yours."

There remains the serious problem of imperious people who feel they own the world and resist sharing it, who refuse to reciprocate Cohen's large-mindedness and make room for his anti-Wagner or pro-choice views in their lives. Instead of inviting assent to their various positions, these people demand it. They resort to force and reject the right of others, Cohen included, to have a voice in how they say things are going to be. As we have seen, among the many varieties of authoritarianism seeking to control the world on their own terms, one kind—Nazism—makes an early appearance in Cohen's essay as "an element" in Wagner's music that for Cohen discredits it. But Nazism, it's worth emphasizing, also exists in less rarefied or attenuated forms, not only as the hard-to-make-out undercurrent of a complex piece of music but as unabashed, Jews-will-not-replace-us hatred, violence, and anger. The threat posed by this virulent form of Nazism prompts Cohen to acknowledge, "Of course, one can go too far with this thought"—"this thought" being his own stated desire to share the world with people he disagrees with. Cohen goes on to write, "Suppose my opponent is someone who wishes to enact laws that would disenfranchise Jews, or maybe even kill them. What can it mean to share my world with that person? Am I required to appreciate him, and let it go at that?" (p. 162).

Cohen finds a parallel in his aesthetic experience even for the urgent questions raised by the threat of Nazism. He admits,

> I can find a place in my world for those who love Wagner, and I expect them to find a place in their worlds for me and my distaste for Wagner. But it is much harder for me to locate someone who finds Beethoven disagreeable. In fact I find it easier to keep company with someone who likes no music at all than with someone who loves some music but can't stand Beethoven. (p. 162)

This comment risks trivializing Nazism by equating it with someone disliking Beethoven. But Cohen is not saying that taste in music has the same horrific consequences as an abhorrent political movement. He is saying that for himself, that is, for someone who takes music seriously, disliking Beethoven raises the same question as vicious anti-Semitism, namely, how can I "keep company" with someone so far removed from my own values? This question begets another: "how far is too far?" Cohen concludes, "There is no rule for this, but it isn't bad to deal with these monstrosities as they come up, sizing up their monstrousness and seeing whether one can live with them" (p. 162).

I think this is wise advice. Cohen calls not for abandoning judgment but continuing to exercise it, "sizing up" the monstrosities that inevitably surface in one's world and calibrating the appropriate response to them, presumably in conversations with others. Our response to the monsters troubling our world can include deciding we cannot live with them and we must do whatever we can to nullify their destructive influence. In *Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor* Cohen reaffirms how the imperative to appreciate or credit others even when they disagree with us does not amount to giving them a blank check. It is always possible in a conflict to discover "at the last stage, that there is nothing attractive to appreciate [in an opponent]. There is nothing there besides ignorance, stupidity, or delusion. We cannot—should not—always give in."[6] But even in these extreme cases, Cohen adds, "It is good to identify the exact deficiency, and, perhaps, even to imagine what it is like to be afflicted with it" (*TO*, p. 81). The imperative to understand others, not automatically to write them off, is that strong.

As I have been arguing, that imperative shines through Cohen's essay and shapes his response to the people he clashes with, whether they disrupt his world by loving Wagner, favoring bans on abortion, or by taking other positions that provoke him.[7] Cohen defends the imperative to

understand others by contrasting it to the incessant fighting that befalls us if we quit trying to appreciate people whose views differ from our own. More positively, Cohen suggests that aesthetic experience itself can play a constructive role in motivating and equipping us to understand others. He rounds out his essay on the limits of appreciation by asking:

> What does it mean to appreciate someone else, and, in particular, someone whose feelings are different? For a while I have been developing the thesis that the ability to imagine oneself to be another is an absolute prerequisite for the competent appreciation of much narrative art, and maybe other art as well. It seems to me often required that one somehow put oneself in touch with the feelings, say, of characters in a novel or movie, and that one does this, if one can, by achieving a kind of imaginative identification with that character. It may also be required that one do this with an artist, say a poet, in order to gain a robust sense of how things seem to that person. (p. 161)

Cohen expands on the connection he makes between "the ability to fully appreciate narrative fiction and the ability to participate in the morality of life": both, he argues, depend on "the ability to imagine oneself to be someone else" (*TO*, p. 73). Cohen is not saying that engaging with narrative fiction and other forms of art pays off in immediate, automatic moral attentiveness. Instead, I hear him suggesting that the moral influence of literature and the arts is indirect, gradual, and cumulative, more like the benefits of everyday physical exercise than dramatic, life-transforming surgery. As Elaine Scarry has said along similar lines, "It's not that I read [a work of literature] and then go out and care about more people." Nevertheless, by fostering "a greater pliancy of thinking, a greater openness to the concerns of others," literature and the other arts can strengthen our willingness to let others count in our lives.[8]

By tying our engagement with the arts, especially narrative art, to our capacity for appreciating how someone else feels, Cohen's argument comes full circle. The very arts that inspire disagreement provide us with the resources for dealing with it. This is another conclusion that speaks to our stewardship of democracy. I value how recent writing on the challenges facing American democracy has renewed appreciation for the cultural influences and "soft guardrails," to repeat a phrase from *How Democracies Die,* necessary to sustain democratic values.[9] This expansive understanding of democracy—as depending on more than elections, laws, institutions, and constitutions—recalls Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, where he famously called attention

to the "habits of the heart" citizens must cultivate for democracy to take root and flourish. According to Tocqueville, citizens develop—or fail to develop—these habits of the heart in everyday interactions with one another: in neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, volunteer organizations, and other places where they gather every day.[10] Danielle Allen extends this crucial line of thought when she calls for cultivating "practices of political friendship" in *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since "Brown v. Board of Education."* Allen reminds us,

> Trust is not something that politicians alone can create. It grows only among citizens as they rub shoulders in daily life—in supermarkets, at movie theaters, on buses, at amusement parks, and in airports—and wherever they participate in maintaining an institution, whether a school, a church, or a business. How can we successfully generate trust in these contexts?[11]

To fortify democracy, all individuals have a responsibility to nurture mutual respect in the many contexts where they interact.

Cohen deserves immense credit for identifying the social reception of the arts as an important context in which we can develop democratic responses to conflict.[12] As I have shown, he starts out with a specific aesthetic disagreement, then uses it to explore how we might be able to share the world with the people who differ from us. By staying open to other points of view, Cohen keeps alive forms of interaction that offset the endless zero-sum vying for personal advantage that would otherwise consume even more of our lives—the war of all against all that autocratic leaders thrive on. Here is one more reason for valuing Cohen's work and the engagement with the arts he so passionately championed.

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1. Ted Cohen, "Stanley Cavell and the Limits of Appreciation," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 157; hereafter cited by page number.

2. W. H. Auden, "The Greatest of Monsters," reprinted in Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 255; quoted in Cohen, "Stanley Cavell and the Limits of Appreciation," p. 157.

3. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018); hereafter abbreviated *HDD*.

4. See Linda M. G. Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 55; hereafter abbreviated *DTJ*. Here is the passage in *Critique of Judgment* cited by Zerilli: "'*There is no disputing about taste*' is as much as to say that the determining ground of a judgment of taste may even be objective, but it cannot be brought to determinate concepts; consequently nothing can be *decided* about the judgment itself by means of proofs, although it is certainly possible and right to *argue* [*mit Recht gestritten werden kann; straiten*, to quarrel] about it" (section 56). Zerilli goes on to defend the value of quarreling even in the absence of determinate concepts and standards of proof.

5. Zerilli takes the phrase "patterns of support" from the work of Stanley Cavell. See *DTJ*, pp. 17–18, 54–55, 66–67, 77.

6. Ted Cohen, *Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 80–81; hereafter abbreviated *TO*.

7. In *Thinking of Others* Cohen adds to the list of people he disagrees with mystics, spiritualists, and "vulgar Freudians," joined by certain literary theorists whose expositions of "theory" strike him as "at best mostly vacuous and partly banal, at worst mostly meaningless and partly false," despite being cast "in terms of excruciating difficulty" (p. 81).

8. Elaine Scarry, "Poetry, Injury, and the Ethics of Reading," in *The Humanities in Public Life*, ed. Peter Brooks with Hilary Jewett (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 67, 69.

9. See, for example, Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (New York: Crown, 2018). Sites that can nurture democratic patterns of social interaction include coffee shops, public pools, public libraries, and playgrounds, where unsupervised play by children can teach them how to resolve conflicts on their own. See Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, "How to Play Our Way to a Better Democracy," *New York Times*, September 1, 2018. Several influential books and articles by Robert Putnam similarly emphasize the importance to democracy of everyday interactions developing social trust among citizens. See especially Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), and Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

10. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley, trans. Henry Reeve, vol. 1 (New York, Knopf Doubleday, 1954), ch. 17.

11. Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since "Brown v. Board of Education"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 48.

12. In *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), Suzanne Klein also values discussions of literature in book clubs, classes, and other settings that build on solitary reading. For Klein, the full impact of fiction "arises from circumstances during which teaching or active discussion accompanies reading" (p. 147): "without passionate teachers (parents, librarians, and other book lovers), even classics remain inert" (p. 146). In support of this view, Klein cites one book whose very title resonates with Cohen's argument: Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).