

Book Reviews:

Bouwsma's Notes on Wittgenstein's Philosophy, 1965-1975

J. L. Craft and Ronald Hustwit, editors. Lewiston, NY:
The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.

Wittgenstein says in *Philosophical Investigations* §133 that

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. —The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question.— Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off.—Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem.¹

As I understand this passage, Wittgenstein does not claim that in the *Investigations*, he puts an end to philosophy. Rather, he tries to eliminate certain philosophical difficulties. He does this not to end philosophy but to demonstrate a method that we can use in trying to eliminate those and other philosophical difficulties. So, according to one reading of *PI* §133, there are philosophical difficulties that Wittgenstein does not address in the *Investigations*; he breaks off “the series of examples” that he uses to demonstrate his method. He does this at least in part because he wants us to learn to use his method, and good teachers never solve all of their students’ problems; good teachers never “spare other people the trouble of thinking.”² We might say, then, that Wittgenstein leaves us a few practice exercises that we can use in completing our homework assignment, that is, in learning to use his method.

From the 1930's, when he first encountered what we now know as Wittgenstein's *Blue Book*, until his death in 1978, O. K. Bouwsma was a student of Wittgenstein's; he was during that time doing the homework that Wittgenstein assigned. Bouwsma constantly used Wittgenstein's method to try to solve the philosophical difficulties that faced him. And since using Wittgenstein's method helps us not only to solve philosophical difficulties but also to understand more clearly exactly what that method is, Bouwsma's work was a constant effort both to learn to use and to gain a deeper understanding of Wittgenstein's method.

Bouwsma's *Notes on Wittgenstein's Philosophy, 1965-1975* represents the efforts that he made late in his life to use and to understand Wittgenstein's method. We might put it this way: Bouwsma's *Notes* is made up of some of his last filled-in homework notebooks. In the *Notes*, Bouwsma practices using Wittgenstein's method when addressing a variety of philosophical problems that arise from the comments of Bouwsma's students and from passages in the writings of philosophers. The subjects of these comments and passages range

from time and the self to the nude in art and the categorical imperative. His treatments of these subjects are thorough and detailed, but in many places they come complete with what Bouwsma himself considered failures (p. 81), defects (p. 251) or diversions (p. 127). Yet in spite of Bouwsma's failures, defects and diversions, or probably in virtue of them, reading his *Notes* is like watching a good student do his homework, and watching him do his homework is tutorial—it helps us to do our own homework.

To do our homework, to learn to use Wittgenstein's method, we must realize that we use our words in countless ways (*PI* § 23), and we must be able to recognize at least some of the different ways in which we use our words. As Bouwsma says, we must "cultivate the art of discerning differences among our uses of language and the skill of describing the varieties of such uses" (p. 369). An important part of our homework is to cultivate that art, to train our ears to recognize uses, as well as abuses and misuses, of language.

In the *Notes*, Bouwsma tries to train our ears and, thus, helps us to be able to recognize abuses and misuses of language. He sometimes play[s] on your ear with wrong descriptions and with wrong words and discords in the language. This is for practice. Such discipline as is required for this, a good ear, cannot be taught as 1, 2, 3. It takes time and incessant practice. (p. 369)

Bouwsma plays on our ears with discords in the language, not to mislead us, but to train us to recognize such discords. Bouwsma has us consider, for example, the expressions in the following list (see p. 292):

- "The meaning of"
- "The spelling of"
- "The pronunciation of"
- "The history of"
- "The etymology of"
- "The first syllable of"

For the most part, the expressions on this list are expressions that we understand. Bouwsma claims, however, that the first of these expressions—"The meaning of"—is out of tune with the others. He says, "Why should '*What is the meaning of a word,*' strike one dumb? Whereas, '*What is the spelling of a word,*' would not?" (p. 293). When we compare "The meaning of" with the other expressions on Bouwsma's list, we can see that the way we use "The meaning of" is different from the way we use the other expressions. In fact, according to Bouwsma, comparing bits of language is essential to recognizing discords in the language. He wants to show us that if we are to recognize that expressions like "The meaning of" are discordant, we must examine them in the light of a variety of similar expressions. For just as we cannot hear that C-sharp is out of tune with other notes if we listen only to C-sharp, so too we cannot see that "The meaning of" is out of tune with other expressions if we examine only "The meaning of."

Why, though, is it important to be able to recognize these discords? According to Bouwsma (and to Wittgenstein), when we fail to recognize that a particular expression is out of tune with others—that is, when we mistakenly

believe that certain expressions are used in the same way as other, perhaps similar expressions—philosophical difficulties can arise. The mistaken beliefs that cause these difficulties are what Wittgenstein might call mistaken analogies between different forms of expression (*PI* §90). Bouwsma claims, for example, that difficulties arise when we believe that “red sensation” or “red image” is analogous to “red tomato,” “red crayon,” or “red apple” (see pp. 79-81). He says,

Notice if I ask, “A red tomato,” you can show me the tomato. “Indeed red.” But if I ask, “The image of a red tomato?” You have nothing to show for it; you are helpless with your image, if you have an image. And I, of course, I may feel even more helpless since I cannot even have a look for myself, as you can. (p. 80)

Bouwsma points out that if we give in to the temptation to believe that “red image” is analogous to “red tomato,” we will probably accept “red image”—a bit of disguised nonsense—as sense. And if we accept as sense bits of nonsense, we will soon enough feel philosophically helpless.

Bouwsma tries to show us how, by using Wittgenstein’s method, we can avoid such philosophical trouble. He tries to show us that we will fail to understand expressions like “red image” if we insist that they are analogous to expressions like “red tomato.” This mistaken analogy disguises “red image” as an expression that makes sense and, thus, as an expression that we should try, but that we are doomed to fail, to understand. Bouwsma uses Wittgenstein’s method to remove the masks of sense from that bit of disguised nonsense. And Bouwsma wants to help us to be able to remove these masks for ourselves, to recognize for ourselves that certain bits of disguised nonsense that we accept as sense are, in fact, not sense at all.

To that effect, Bouwsma sometimes “translate[s] or elaborate[s] [on a bit of language] in order to bring the sense or the non-sense to light—usually the non-sense” (p. 138). For example, Bouwsma says,

I get “the sensation of red,” an object of perception (I see it), the sensation, and I call it red. The image of red serves in the same way. It will then follow that when I call “it” red you cannot see “it” and when you call another “it” red I cannot see “it,” so you cannot understand me and I cannot understand you. (p. 78)

This elaboration suggests that “red image” and “red sensation” are non-sense; if we say that our images or sensations are red, we say things that cannot be understood. Bouwsma goes on to point out that unless we see expressions like “red image” and “red sensation” as nonsense, we are tempted to try to understand those expressions. Yet we encounter the philosophical difficulties that come with trying to understand those expressions only if we try to understand them. So removing the temptation to try to understand them—rec-

ognizing “red image” and “red sensation” for the nonsense that they are—prevents the philosophical difficulties that result from trying to understand those expressions.

Few of Bouwsma’s elaborations, however, are as brief as the above quotation. Usually, when he translates or elaborates on a bit of language, he takes no shortcuts, if there are any that he may take. Instead, he takes the long way home. He worries bits of language “in the same way that a dog worries an old shoe” (p. 122), deliberately gnawing, searching for the chewiest parts, tugging at it from every angle, rolling it around in his paws for most of the day, until the leathery cows come home. He does this in order to see—or to hear—more clearly which uses of an expression are in tune and which are out of tune. Bouwsma’s worryings let us see, not only when we understand certain uses of a word, but also when we fail to understand uses of that word: His worrying with “red” helps us to see not only that many sentences in which “red” is used make sense but also that sentences like “My image of a tomato is red” make nonsense.

At times, though, Bouwsma seems to worry a bit of language too much, for he sometimes gets a bit lost or, perhaps better, diverted. We sometimes find him, and he finds himself, distracted by an ultimately less helpful worrying. At times he is like a geologist who, during the course of collecting a variety of stones, stops at the pond to skip a few. (“Language is our delight,” Bouwsma says, “as well as our workhorse” (p. 82).) For example, Bouwsma worries “red” in the following way:

Blood, her lips, my sweater, a beet, sunsets, the big chair. It is in the surroundings of such things that we learn the use of the word “red.” “Today you will wear your red hair ribbon and your red socks.” “I have a sister who has red hair.” “There’s the red flag and there’s the red, white, and blue.” Roses are red. Peaches have red cheeks. Fire departments trucks are red. Coals in the grate are red. Tomatoes are red, and so are some apples. . . . (p. 79)³

Perhaps diversions such as these are grounds for criticism of Bouwsma’s *Notes*.

On the contrary, these diversions are welcome, both because they are delightful and because they can help us to do philosophy in the way that Wittgenstein would have us do philosophy (or, perhaps better, because they can help us to avoid doing philosophy in ways that Wittgenstein would have us avoid). Wittgenstein claims that when we are in the mi(d)st of a philosophical problem, a main cause of our difficulty is limiting ourselves to only one kind of example of the use of a particular bit of language. We have seen that, according to Bouwsma, certain philosophical difficulties arise when we examine “The meaning of” or “red sensation” in isolation from other, similar expressions. Limiting ourselves in either of those ways—which would be, in effect, to allow ourselves only a sort of tunnel vision—is dangerous because when we are so limited, we tend to answer our questions, to solve our philosophical problem,

on the basis of that example alone. But we ought not overlook other examples, for they might call into question the answers that we gave when we focused on only one example. Other examples are helpful because they might allow us to see that the answers that we gave when we focused on only one example are incomplete or, what is worse, confused.

Typically, Bouwsma's worryings, even those that are diversions, forcefully and gracefully remind us of the variety of examples of use of language, for we should count among that variety even those examples that Bouwsma's diversions produce. And since Bouwsma supplies himself with a variety of examples, he need not nourish himself with only one example; he can avoid "a one-sided diet" (*PI* §593). If we learn from Bouwsma to worry bits of language as he does, we too will be able to provide ourselves with a variety of examples and to avoid the troubles that can arise from focusing on only one example. Bouwsma's worryings remind us to remind ourselves, and they show us how to remind ourselves, of the variety of kinds of use of language.

Furthermore, once we remind ourselves of the variety of kinds of use of language, we will be in a better position to understand and to eliminate certain philosophical difficulties. Bouwsma says,

If in any philosophical discussion you have trouble with a word [and] you cannot understand it in that context then to gain perspective[,] you may set it in a context in which you do understand it. In that way, you may discover [w]hat is wrong when you did not understand it. (p. 175)

If we worry bits of language as Bouwsma does, even if our worrying sometimes includes diversions, our chances are increased of finding a use of some bit of language that makes sense and of revealing uses of that bit of language that make nonsense; the more we worry a bit of language—that is, the more we play "with the grammar or with the sense" (p. 228) of a bit of language—the better chance we have to discover which uses of that bit of language we understand and which we do not. In turn, worrying bits of language as Bouwsma does increases our chances of discovering what is wrong when we do not understand some use of a word and, thus, of discovering what our philosophical troubles are.

When Bouwsma, in the *Notes*, tries to see how philosophical difficulties arise and how, by using Wittgenstein's method, to eliminate those difficulties, he is doing the homework that Wittgenstein assigns us. By watching Bouwsma do his homework, we are, I think, in a better position, we are better equipped, to do our own homework. Bouwsma's *Notes*, if we use them as a supplement to the writings of Wittgenstein and as an example, can help us learn to do philosophy in the way that Wittgenstein would have us do it.

But J. L. Craft claims that Bouwsma's *Notes* are more than a filled-in homework notebook: Craft claims in his introduction to the *Notes* that they "are a kind of commentary on certain themes in Wittgenstein, significant themes in *The Blue Book* and *P. I.*" (p. xi). But on what themes are Bouwsma's *Notes* sup-

posed to be a commentary? As I see it, Craft might answer that question in any of three ways. First, he might say that Bouwsma's *Notes* are a commentary on the use of Wittgenstein's method. Now, to use Wittgenstein's method, we need, among other things, to get clear on certain things that Wittgenstein says in the *Investigations* and in *The Blue Book*. To that effect, Craft says that "Bouwsma wanted to bring out [certain] key themes or 'discoveries' of Wittgenstein's" (p. xii). As I have already suggested, if Bouwsma's *Notes* are meant to be a commentary on the use of Wittgenstein's method, where part of being able to use that method is trying to understand certain themes or passages in Wittgenstein's writings, then Bouwsma's *Notes* are a valuable and illuminating commentary.

However, Craft might say that Bouwsma's *Notes* is a commentary on certain problems that Wittgenstein himself addresses in his writings. Bouwsma spends time worrying not only over problems that Wittgenstein does *not* address but also over some problems that Wittgenstein does address in the *Investigations* and in *The Blue Book*.⁴ Craft might say, then, that when Bouwsma worries over some problem that Wittgenstein worries over, Bouwsma is giving a sort of commentary on Wittgenstein's treatment of that problem. However, it is much more useful to think of Bouwsma's worrying over those problems not as a commentary on Wittgenstein's treatment of those problems but as Bouwsma's own effort to eliminate some of the same difficulties that Wittgenstein himself tries to eliminate. With Wittgenstein's guidance, Bouwsma struggles with some of Wittgenstein's problems, yet we should not, I think, represent Bouwsma's struggles as a commentary on Wittgenstein's struggles.

Last, Craft might say that Bouwsma's *Notes* is at least in part a commentary on specific sections of the *Investigations* and on specific passages in *The Blue Book*. But this, too, is the wrong way to think of Bouwsma's *Notes*; it is best not to see the *Notes* as a commentary in the sense of explanations or interpretations of Wittgenstein's remarks. Bouwsma himself admits as much. For example, in the course of his discussions of §43 of the *Investigations*, Bouwsma says, "What I wrote must not be taken as an account of how W [Wittgenstein] understood 43, how he intended it" (p. 202). Also, Bouwsma at times admits that he has failed fully to understand some passage or other of Wittgenstein's. He says, at the end of his notes of 21 March 1968, in which he ponders PI §273 and related sections, that "I am still troubled by 'the sensation of red'" (p. 81). At least on these occasions and, I think, on many more, Bouwsma did not intend his notes to be a commentary on specific remarks in the *Investigations* or on specific passages in *The Blue Book*. We should not, then, look upon Bouwsma's *Notes* only as a commentary on specific themes or passages in Wittgenstein's writings.

Since "Bouwsma did not compose [his] notes for publication and never intended their circulation among a wider audience than his students" (p. xi), we might think that the publication of Bouwsma's notes is a disservice to Bouwsma and perhaps even to the readers of the *Notes*. Yet in the end, if we see the *Notes* for what it is, as what I have called a filled-in homework notebook rather than as a commentary, then Bouwsma's *Notes* can be inviting, instructive, and, at times, downright fun. In the *Notes*, Bouwsma entices us to ponder certain philosophical problems, and he helps us see how we can use

Wittgenstein's method when we ponder those problems. But Bouwsma does more than that in the Notes, for he also reminds us of the joys of skipping stones, of gnawing on an old shoe, of delighting in language.

Tim Black

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1958).
2. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. vi.
3. Compare Bouwsma's worrying with the word "word" (pp. 113-5). For that worrying, he was criticized by a student: Bouwsma says, "In connection with examples of sentences containing the word 'word,' Lee Gordon remarked about the surfeit of examples. Four or five would be enough. He is no doubt right about that. Enough is enough" (p. 127).
4. Bouwsma worries, for example, about the notion of a private experience (see, e.g., pp. 75-79), about which Wittgenstein worries, and about the nude in art (see pp. 417-420), about which Wittgenstein did not worry (or, at least, not in *Philosophical Investigations*).