

ESSAY REVIEW

The Difficulty Here Is: To Stop

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David Bloor, *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 192 pp., ISBN 0415161479, Hardcover £45.50.

In the late 1970s, when I was a graduate student at UCLA, we poured over bootleg tapes of Saul Kripke's lectures on Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following. Finally, in the early 1980s Kripke published a paper and then a book reporting his reflections, reaching back over some twenty years, on Wittgenstein's remarks.¹ Kripke's publications launched a flurry of further publications on Wittgenstein and rule-following (which Bloor cites on p. 145) that produced a sea-change in Wittgenstein scholarship.

Whereas once the 'private language argument' had seemed to be the central issue in the *Philosophical Investigations*, now rule-following seemed to replace it. The new debates focused on the adequacy of a generally anti-realist and/or collectivist account of rule-following, and its legitimacy as an interpretation of Wittgenstein. The book here under review hopes to clinch the case for the former, collectivist account. As for the latter, Bloor finds Wittgenstein's treatment to be 'suggestive, but disconnected and in need of filling out' (p. 48). Thus, it is where one is led if one tries to take Wittgenstein seriously. In any case, the book constitutes a sort of culmination of a fifteen-year set of debates.

But in the course of those fifteen years, other things happened in Wittgenstein scholarship as well. The biographical work of Brian McGuinness finally came to partial fruition with the publication of the first volume of his biography of Wittgenstein in 1988; and Ray Monk's comprehensive biography was published in 1990.

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¹Kripke (1982), and earlier, in Block (1981) (but not included in the American edition published by MIT Press).

These two books helped to deepen our interest in and understanding of how Wittgenstein's work was a part of his life. And the extensive four-volume commentary (1980–1996) by Baker and Hacker, later just Hacker, on the *Investigations* made the case very powerfully that Wittgenstein had to be understood as an anti-theorist about our favorite issues.

Bloor's book, carefully thought through and argued as it is, is an illustration of why Wittgenstein did not offer theories, but only reminders,² and why Wittgenstein thought it was important to know when to stop—resting content with descriptions and short of explanations. It is possible that if one insisted on theoretical explanations of rule-following, then what Bloor offers is what one would be reduced to; but Wittgenstein specifically resisted such insistence. As such, this book is of more interest to those concerned to theorize about rules and institutions, and of less interest to those concerned with Wittgenstein. But if Wittgenstein's reminders have relevance to reflection on rules, it should be possible to show where Bloor goes astray.

No one can deny the power of the Kripke–Bloor case for the importance of social context for understanding such crucial notions as meaning and rule-following, and for understanding Wittgenstein's remarks on these notions. The normative force implicit in judgements about meaning and rule-following similarly seems mysterious when considered in terms of mental intentions or objective standards, but explicable in terms of patterns of communal behavior. As Wittgenstein put it: 'To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (*uses, institutions*)' (*Philosophical Investigations* 199), and their being done correctly depends on their roles in our common life. To continue a series correctly is to continue it 'as we do it' (*ibid.*, 145).

The fact that Wittgenstein offered reminders rather than theories in his philosophical remarks is important to remember when surveying the debates that Bloor tries to conclude. Those taking sides in these debates generally search for texts that support one theory or another concerning rule-following. And it is possible to find remarks by Wittgenstein that seem to support either side in these debates. One can judge the debates by counting up supporting texts and determine the winner by weight of evidence. Or one can try to judge the importance to Wittgenstein's thinking, and the philosophical supportability, of some texts as compared with other texts and declare the winner by some broader assessment. Both of these approaches seem inconclusive. Or—and this is what I would propose here—one can resist the attraction of finding a winner. For the textual contest presupposes the value of a theoretical perspective for understanding Wittgenstein and undervalues the biographical context of his remarks.

Given Wittgenstein's emphasis on social context and community in his philo-

²The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose' (*Philosophical Investigations* 127).

sophical remarks, it is interesting to examine what Wittgenstein's experiences were of community in his life. When we do, we find that Wittgenstein lived almost always as a stranger in a strange land. Experience of alienation pervades his life—at school in Linz, in the army during World War I, as a school teacher in the 1920s, in Cambridge society. Even his times in Norway, calm though they were in some ways, exhibited none of the acceptance and normativity of community that one might have thought had to have occurred somewhere in Wittgenstein's life.³ In fact, they existed nowhere in his life. And this raises the question of how the community that is lacking in his own experience of life could play a central role in his philosophical thinking. There is not a single case (that I can find) of a group that Wittgenstein was involved with, in which he would have allowed the patterns of behavior of the group to be normative for what he thought or did.

It might be objected here that I am construing Wittgenstein's remarks too broadly. While it may be true that Wittgenstein would not have been guided in his moral judgements, say, by the patterns of any group, he certainly was so guided in say, his alphabetical judgements. After all, the letter 'B' follows the letter 'A' in the alphabet simply because that's how we do it. The 'we' here is the community of the users of the language in question, and Wittgenstein certainly was a part of that community, unnoticed as it usually is. No biographical research is necessary to bolster this claim, nor could any research undermine it.

The objector has a point here. There is no more to getting the alphabet right than saying the letters 'as we do it'. Every rational person who has been properly trained will say the alphabet as we do. In some sense, trained rational people constitute a community. 'It would be an answer to say: "I have learnt English"' (*Philosophical Investigations* 381).

But the distinction that is exemplified by the difference between moral and alphabetical judgements needs to be examined further. Alphabetical judgements don't matter. It makes no difference what order we say the alphabet in—it is only important that there *be* some order in which we say it. The same holds true for a number of other rules, such as which side of the road we drive on, how a strike is signaled by an umpire, whether we call a certain color 'green', and whether we call the sum of 'two' and 'two' 'four'. Another way to put the fact that they don't matter is to say that everyone couldn't be *wrong* about any of these kinds of things. Everyone couldn't be wrong, because in a deep sense there is nothing to be wrong about. For rules like these, the normativity of the rule is nothing more than the pattern of behavior concerning these things. One way is as good as another.

Granted, Wittgenstein often uses examples like these, which do not matter, to illustrate points he is making about rule-following. But these are only one case of

³I have investigated Wittgenstein's alienation in World War I in Section VII of Klagge (1998), made the case for his alienation in Norway in Klagge (1999), and explored his general condition of cultural alienation in Klagge (2000). This review-essay of Bloor's book overlaps at a few points with Klagge (1999).

rule-following, and if one is going to theorize about rule-following, rather than simply assemble reminders about rule-following, then it is crucial to be aware that they are a special case. For there are also kinds of cases that do matter—that is, there is possibly something more to them than simply how ‘we do it’. Moral judgements are likely to be of this sort. Indeed, anyone familiar with Wittgenstein’s own decisions and judgements about behavior knows that he thought there was more to it than just determining what the group thinks. One of his students reported:

[Wittgenstein] had strong aesthetic and moral views... he had a passionate moral seriousness which expressed itself in everything he did rather than in particular precepts. Above all, his judgements were given with a directness and authority seldom met with, and with complete disregard of current intellectual, aesthetic or moral fashions⁴.

Even if there were widespread agreement about what to think or how to behave concerning some issue, everyone (or most people—certainly a large majority) could still be wrong. Bloor claims (p. 22): ‘We are only compelled by rules in so far as we, collectively, compel one another’. But while Wittgenstein certainly tried hard to compel others, it is laughable to imagine him feeling compelled by others. He was, in fact, immune to such compulsion.

Bloor puts his relativistic position by saying: ‘Any individual can fall into the abyss of non-alignment with others, but there is no question of alignment or non-alignment for the institution as such’ (p. 36). But the implausibility of this position is apparent from the standard examples in introductory ethics classes. (This, frankly, is why philosophers are so often unimpressed by sociologists.) When antebellum Southerners queried the morality of slavery, they were not simply questioning a tautology. When Proudhon announced that property was theft he was not simply contradicting himself. The history of discussions of moral issues shows that discussion of the morality of well established institutions is possible and meaningful. Bloor tries to protect himself here by denying that ‘the word “wrong” means “deviant”’. But he still insists that ‘ultimately to be wrong is to be deviant’ (p. 16). This implies that in the absence of deviance there is no substantive question—yet manifestly there is, or can be. Or perhaps he means to construe deviance so broadly that the mere fact that I judge something to be wrong implies that it deviates from my judgement—but in this case deviance is present simply by definition. Few would say that it is wrong *because* it deviates from my judgement.

In deference to the individualist, Bloor extends the institutional account of wrongness in terms of deviance ‘because often such judgements are mediated by appeal to notions of authority and expertise’ (p. 16), which are themselves social notions. Although we do sometimes have institutionalized positions of authority or expertise, moral judgements are rarely accepted because of such positions. And in any case Wittgenstein didn’t see himself as a moral expert or authority in any

⁴Lee (1979), pp. 216–217.

institutional sense. He simply imagined that he had thought, or thought harder, about moral issues, and that he took them more seriously than did others.⁵

For anyone interested in theorizing about the normativity of rule-following, it would seem crucial to distinguish between the kinds of cases where it doesn't matter what we do as long as we all agree, and the kinds of cases where it doesn't matter whether others agree. To think that all cases can be assimilated to the first type is stultifying, and one hopes not typical of sociologists.

On the other hand, it is probably a mistake to theorize that normativity can arise from the on-going behavior of a single isolated individual. Though evidence can be garnered for this side of the debate as well, the mistake lies in seeing the evidence as something more than reminders intended to lead us away from some equally questionable theory on the other side. Wittgenstein does not offer a theory of normativity, either collectivist or individualist. But any attempt at an account of his remarks about normativity has to make space for his sometimes violently personal sense of propriety. And any attempt at an account of normativity *per se* has to make space for the thought that institutions that matter can be misguided. The truism that normative judgements have to be made *relative to something* should not be construed as support for some form of relativism.

Some of Wittgenstein's comments specifically about morality seem, however, to fit with Bloor's normative relativism. In particular, Rush Rhees records some conversations with Wittgenstein concerning ethics from the 1940s,⁶ in which he borders on relativism.

In considering hypothetically a researcher's dilemma over whether to leave his wife, Wittgenstein imagines someone questioning the researcher's, say, Christian perspective by offering instead a Nietzschean one. Now, which of them is right, and which is wrong?

But we do not know what this decision would be like—how it would be determined, what sort of criteria would be used, and so on. Compare saying that it must be possible to decide which of two standards of accuracy is the right one. (Rhees, 1965, p. 23)

But the language game of considering someone else's decision from various possible perspectives is a very different one from the practice of making decisions oneself. Of course a person needs a framework for making decisions or choices at all. But to hold that all decisions are *relative* to that framework is either truistic or misleading. From the outside, after the fact, so to speak, one can discern different possible incommensurable frameworks, and insist that the decision was relative to one of them. But to do so threatens to 'ignore the different grammars, the different ways in which rules are used' (*ibid.*, p. 24).

Any perspective is questionable. The choice of a perspective is not itself a perspective-relative matter, and cannot ultimately be understood in terms of insti-

⁵Cf. his 16.11.44 letter to Malcolm, in Malcolm (1984).

⁶Rhees (1965), pp. 21–25.

tutional conformity. While some may experience such choices as existential leaps—and hence become relativists—others continue to experience them as rule-governed—and hence resist relativism. While Wittgenstein may have wavered in his experiences of difficult decisions, this did not lead him to adopt a relativistic theory.

Yet, despite my biographical and textual quibbling, there is no denying the social underpinnings of Wittgenstein's remarks. The question is how to place these underpinnings within our reflections about Wittgenstein's remarks. Perhaps we can adapt Wittgenstein's own approach to another philosophical chestnut—solipsism: 'For what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be said, but makes itself manifest' (*Tractatus* 5.62). And a similar approach might be taken to Wittgenstein's 'meaning finitism'—that meaning does not determine use but follows from it.

In both cases, relativism and finitism, the philosopher who tries to articulate these theories is led to say things that conflict with how we ordinarily speak about rules and meaning—as though we do things to conform, or we are free to decide how to go on. Rules and meaning *do* determine what one should do or say in certain circumstances. And a philosophical account that denies these ways of speaking to us will have gone astray.

Theorists of relativism or finitism might respond by denying any concern to interfere with ordinary talk, while offering to explain everyday talk at another level, the meta-level of philosophical theorizing, where we can say what we want. And, although Wittgenstein doesn't exploit the notion of a metalanguage, couldn't he simply acknowledge the existence of a separate language game—the language game of philosophy, where we can say these things without impinging on the language game of deliberation and action?

This raises two interesting questions. Firstly, why doesn't Wittgenstein allow for a language game of philosophy? And, secondly, would a language game of philosophy solve these puzzles? Their answers are related, for the answer to the latter question is: no.

Wittgenstein, in his later work, tends to 'protect' certain realms of thought and life from critique by ghettoizing them into their own language games—religion, or a particular religion, has a legitimacy and dignity of its own that is separate from and invulnerable to the truths of science. (Similar things might be said for 'folk psychology'.) Whether or not this ghettoization works,⁷ could it not be done for 'philosophy'? Instead of seeing philosophical statements as illegitimate extensions of ordinary language, why not see them as a separate set of statements having their own momentum?

It is noteworthy that Wittgenstein never considers that option. Perhaps he just lacks the sympathy for traditional philosophy that he has for traditional religion.

⁷I raise some skepticism about whether such ghettoization works for folk psychology in Klagge (1989).

Hence he has no desire to protect it. Perhaps the same moves could be made, and would have been by someone of a different temperament.

But I think there is a deeper reason beyond lack of sympathy or mere neglect. Although there would be no objection in principle to acknowledging a language game of philosophy, it would not fulfill the philosopher's expectations. Philosophers who theorize about relativism want to be theorizing about the moral judgments that people make. Finitists want to be theorizing about the rules that people follow. Yet the separation between language games that avoids hegemony also undermines these 'aboutness' connections. The philosopher not only wants to be able to say this or that, but also wants the statements to have a certain stature. It is that stature that is missing, on Wittgenstein's view, when things are said.

But a proper understanding of a language game—a synoptic view—will make various things manifest. What is made manifest will not generally support a theory, but it will allow a better appreciation of how the language operates. And this may lead one to appreciate or suspect that what relativism and finitism mean is quite correct. And that appreciation is not inconsistent with saying a variety of things, as Wittgenstein does, that conflict with *relativism*, *finitism*, and *collectivism*.

Bloor ends his book by writing: 'to understand Wittgenstein is to go beyond him' (p. 144). But this betrays a failure to understand what Wittgenstein meant when he said: 'The difficulty here is: to stop' (*Zettel* 314).

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