Ludwig Wittgenstein and Yorick Smythies. A hithero Unknown Relationship

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1. A short biographical sketch

As Monk points out in his Wittgenstein biography (Monk 1990, 402) Smythies -though a person who is often referred to in published texts- is still a rather unknown figure.

Born in Februrary 1917, Smythies entered the University of Cambridge (King's College) in October 1935 and graduated in June 1939 with a 1st class degree in philosophy. Moral science built his main subject. After leaving Cambridge he worked as a local investigator at Nuffield College, Oxford (1942-44), as a librarian at the Cambridge Philosophical Society (1945-47), as an assistant libriarian at the departement of forestry (1947-1951) and later at the department of social studies at the University of Oxford. Although he never worked as a professional lecturer he taught philosophy part time at the University of Oxford in 1944 and for the Advanced Student Summer Courses between 1955-57. In his conversations with Wittgenstein, Bouwsma remembers the latter saying: "Smythies will never get a lectureship. He is too serious." (Bouwsma 1986, 34)

Smythies became best known for his published notes of Wittgenstein's *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, (1966) the *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics* (1976) and the two *Lectures on Freedom of the Will* (1989). He also composed a hithero unpublished collection of Wittgenstein lectures on different subjects such as knowledge, similarity, states of mind, description and others, which are now prepared for publication. Smythies has, however, written a great deal of his own philosophical work, containing about 65 notebooks, a play, and a series of poems, material some of which he also intended to publish.

In contrast to Monk's version (Monk 1990, 403) Smythies did not suffer from paranoid schizophrenia and there were no tragic circumstances of his death at all. Having been afflicted with emphisema for about five years and knowing not to live much longer he died in 1980, (not in 1981 as Monk remarks).

2. Wittgenstein and Smythies

There has been a very intense written correspondence between Wittgenstein and Smythies but Smythies did not collect anything and as far as I am able to ascertain only two letters still exist.

Smythies entered Cambridge in 1935 and joined Wittgenstein's lectures until summer 1939. According to Bouwsma's memories they did, however, not get in closer personal contact before 1938/39 (Bouwsma, 66).

There are also only very rare remarks from students or friends of Wittgenstein about his relationship to Smythies. Again, Bouwsma remarks that in one of their conversations Wittgenstein described Smythies as follows: "Speaking of Smythies he said that he stands out as in a field of grain, not the common sort. What a figure! And how like W. himself" (Bouwsma, 72). Mays remarks that Wittgenstein disliked his students to take notes during the lectures and that he would obviously prevent anyone "who was follhardy enough to try. He did, however, allow Smythies to take notes." (Mays, 81) In his book on analytic philosophy of the twentieth century, Hacker does not even name Smythies amongst those students attending Wittgenstein's lectures in the years 1935 to 1939 (cf. Hacker 1996, 77) and Monk besides the already quoted remarks only mentions Smythies in another two contexts in a more detailed way: The first instance refers to a translation of Rabindranath Tagore's Act II *The King of the Dark Chamber* from Tagore's original English "into English used *by* L. Wittgenstein and Yorick Smythies, by L. Wittgenstein and Yorick Smythies" (Monk 1990, 408-410).

The second instance deals with Smythies conversion to catholicism in 1944. In one of his conversations with Wittgenstein, Dury refers to a letter from Wittgenstein to one of his pupils who had just become a roman catholic. According to Drury Wittgenstein commented the descision with the metaphor of a tightrope walker saying: "If someone tells me he has bought the outfit of a tightrope walker I am not impressed by it until I see what is done with it." (Drury 1984, 88). Wittgenstein did indeed write this letter to Smythies on the 7th of April and since Dury's quoted remark is rather cryptic it seems worth taking a closer look at what is said in it.

In 1948 Wittgenstein writes: "An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it" (Wittgenstein 1980, 73).

In his letter to Smythies Wittgenstein ellaborates this idea of a tighrope walker as follows:

"Deciding to become a christian is like deciding to give up walking on the ground & do tight-rope walking instead, where nothing is more easy than to slip & every slip can be fatal. Now if a friend of mine were to take up tight-rope walking & told me that in order to do it he thinks he has to wear a particular kind of garment I should say to him: If you're serious about that tight-rope walking I'm certainly not the man to tell you what outfit to wear, or not to wear, as I've never tried to walk anywhere else than on the ground." Further Wittgenstein remarks the decision to wear such a garment to be a terrible one however he looks at it for if it means to be serious about it is terrible although it might be the best thing Smythies could do and if he would dress up and not do the tight-rope act it would be terrible in a different way. The question why Wittgenstein also regarded the seriousness as terrible -a attitude he certainly expected from Smythies- is left unanswered but might be connected with the idea that the act of tightrope walking forces one to look just straight ahead in deep concentration without being allowed to turn around to observe and think, a point that built the main part of their numerous discussions on the subject.

Wittgenstein also included the following warning concerning the dressing: "There are certain devices (weights attached in a particular way to the body) which steady you on the rope & make you act easy, & in fact no more dangerous than walking on the ground. This sort of device should not be part of your outfit. - "

Eventually, Wittgenstein could not applaud Smythies descision. His final remark "I'm really interested in what sort of a man you are + will be. This will, for me, be the eating of the pudding" does, however, show Wittgenstein's deep respect and interest for Smythies, which can also be proved by two testimonials: In 1940 Wittgenstein wrote: "Mr. Yorick Smythies has attended my classes for four years; I have also had a great many discussions and conversations with him outside these classes. He has always impressed me by his uncommon intelligence as well as by his seriousness and sincerity. He is a kindhearted, gentle and even-tempered man." And as a recommendation for the post of a librarian at Barnett house in 1950 Wittgenstein remarked: "Mr. Yorick Smythies attended my classes on philosophy for over three years during the time when I was first lecturer and later Professor of Philosophy in Cambridge. I came into personal contact with him about eleven years ago and soon became greatly impressed by his mind and his personality. He is a man of very great intelligence, scupulous honesty and conscientiousness, and of a kindly and obliging nature. He has a vivacious mind and is widely read. I have, in the last ten years, had innumerable discussions with him on a wide range of subjects and have always found his remarks most stimulating."

3. Smythies and Wittgenstein

In a paper prompted by the freewill lectures Smythies gives different accounts of Wittgenstein as a person, a thinker and a teacher. In chapter (1) he describes Wittgenstein as a little figure with a habitually grim facial expression addressing thoughts to his class, which except in fragmentary glimpses none of the members followed but hoped to think about at later time.

The difficulty in trying to explain what Wittgenstein was saying and doing is not comparable to any difficulities in trying to explain what his followers are saying and doing. Smythies remarks: "[They] have produced semi-truistic, systematic, synoptical, analytical surveys of particular established conceptions and usages. In Wittgenstein's work, descriptions of established types of utterances occur infrequently; when they do occur, they are not put together systematically and synoptically; he is not attempting to produce analytic outlines of well known types of utterance. In Wittgenstrein's work, attention is concentrated primarily upon points at which established conceptions break down, points at which there is not any longer anything which could become communicated; points at which there is not anything on which language could become fixed. (...) Wittgenstein's interest is directed, not primarily upon those things which are said and can be said, but upon those things which are never said and cannot be said."

In chapter (4) "Trivial character of the language games used as illustrations", Smythies tries to draw a line between Wittgenstein's examples of different language games and Wittgenstein's own character as well as the physical surroundings in which he lived. His utterances of language games are known as rather ordinary and trivial in their interest. And this ordinariness of the examples is according to Smythies exceedingly characteristic of Wittgenstein's own person and the areas in which he moved, e.g., his sparsely furnished small room, the pantry on the landing where he served pieces of bread and butter or the 'Wittgenstein soup' (a mixture of porridge and bovril), etc. "There was almost the implication: "Watch Wittgenstein in action, playing absolutely ordinary language games." - There was something incomprehensible, and therefore engrossing, about this demonstrated bareness."

Underlining this parallel Smythies remembers two short instances: Once when a cat had got into Wittgenstein's room and he had put it outside, Smythies replied that he had absolutely no understanding what it would like to be 'Wittgenstein putting a cat outside'. The latter replied "What do you mean? It's quite simple isn't it? There is a cat and I put it out." But he showed no responses at all to the cat. His treatment of 'the cat being in the room' consisted in nothing but 'putting it outside'. - "The absence of descriptiveness, the absence of explanatory or of expressive developments from the skeletonal

language game performed, made the spectacle of 'Wittgenstein acting and speaking in ordinary manner' a fascinating spectacle to watch." And the illustrations he provided in his lectures might also remind one of such performances.

The second instance decribes a situation where Wittgenstein showed Smythies a passport photograph in which according to the latter he looked "derilict, imbecile and criminal": a open rough shirt, a gaping mouth, a vacant, obsessionally depressive expression in his face and blank staring eyes in a picture of degeneracy. Looking at the photograph, Smythies started to laugh uncontrollably for more than 15 minutes. Wittgenstein, sitting abolutely motionless in his chair afterwards said: "Smythies this is not funny. I know the face only too well", a remark which set the latter off laughing again. When he eventually became quite Wittgenstein started a discussion as if nothing had happenend at all. Smythies asks: "Why did Wittgenstein neither interrupt my laughter, nor respond to it, nor promote it? Was he himself laughing silently in some parallel manner? What comments was he uttering to himself, apart from the one comment he uttered aloud?- The 'simplicity' with which he treated this incident, characterising it only by his motionless silence, his closed eyes, and with one brief remark, was not 'simple' in any way whatsoever."

In his final chapter "Greatness", Smythies tries to contrast Wittgenstein with other philosophers referring to a question Wittgenstein raised in the first lecture on freewill: "Suppose I said: 'The difference (of greatness) between myself and Kant is only one of degree'? Would I say the difference between black and white is only one of degree?" (Wittgenstein, 1989). According to Smythies Wittgenstein could not find an answer but was strongly inclined to deny any kind of greatness in his own case. What makes his work obviously unique, however, is its freedom of any current presuppositions which results from no adaptions or modifications of other philosophical writings. This shows at least, that he was not interested in what has been said about different matters but rather in the matters themselves. Finally, Smythies remarks: "That which makes writings about Wittgenstein 'ungreat' -chatty, easily shareable, socialized- cannot be shown to those who produce these writings. They go on thinking inside those shared fields which condition their area of interest; everything thought about by them gets transformed into an occupant of these fields. Nobody knows of anything which could be shown them which would result in their spurning field work.

If they began to produce work unrelated to fields of interest, they would not any longer be able to explain the things they say and do. They would not any longer be able to place under categories the impulses which propel their work. If Wittgenstein had been able to explain effectively, the meaning and purpose of his words, his primitiveness would have become lost."

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Endnote

* This paper is based on numerous discussions with Smythies wife Peg Smythies Rhees who also supplied me with all of Smythies work including hithero unpublished Wittgenstein lectures notes for the purpose of publication.