

## Wittgenstein And The Scientific Spirit

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### Abstract

In the opinion of Wittgenstein philosophy is not a natural science. Philosophy is not concerned with discovering regularities in the natural world. The function of philosophy is clarification or elucidation. Metaphysical problems arise because of our failure to understand the logic of language and to use language properly. Philosophy discovers hidden linguistic connections and thereby it seeks to provide clarifications and to dissolve problems. Scientific understanding is, according to Wittgenstein, not the only type of understanding. Philosophy provides a type of understanding which is elucidatory in nature.

**Key words :** elucidation, deep grammar, scientism, intellectual puzzles

Analytic philosophers like Bertrand Russell, Carl Popper and others generally draw inspiration from science. Many of them regarded science to be the model of knowledge and in that light attempted to find certain deficiencies in philosophy. Russell even regarded mathematics to be a model for philosophy. The science of mathematics and the achievements of mathematics always attempted to remove logical fallacies and discover demonstrative proofs. Many analytic philosophers attempted to construct ideal language and in this regard they drew inspiration from mathematics. Wittgenstein was deeply interested in mathematics and like many logicians he did research work upon the foundations of mathematics. His acquaintance with and understanding of the mathematical method did not make him regard this method to be the ideal method for philosophy. His philosophical method was basically a method of elucidation. In contrast the method employed in mathematics is concerned with deductive demonstration and rigorous proof. Unlike Descartes, Wittgenstein did not attempt to introduce the mathematical method into philosophy. At least in his *Philosophical Investigations* he indirectly maintained that philosophy is to be open ended and there cannot be any scope for the construction of a deductive system in philosophy. The construction of a rigorous deductive system was also neither the spirit nor the outcome of his *Tractatus*. By admitting the metaphysics of silence Wittgenstein ruled out the possibility of the construction of a deductive system. But still it can be maintained that the spirit of science, specially the spirit of mathematical thinking is present in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. But the way of thinking which is generally called scientism is not found in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. When Wittgenstein stated that philosophy is not one of the natural sciences he actually rejected scientism. But the rigour in thinking that he acquired in his early days as a student of science was very much present later in his philosophical thinking. His rejection of woolly headed metaphysics is traceable in a way to this respect for rigorous investigation which he encountered early in his scientific studies.

Many scientists who are even inspired thinkers and who have acquaintance with the long philosophical tradition (particularly of the West) are not satisfied with the present state of affairs in philosophy. They believe that our contemporary philosophy is almost divorced from science. Philosophers are not drawing knowledge and inspiration from science. These scientists maintain that as long as philosophers maintained contact with developments in science, philosophy remained a vigorous and influential subject. But at present times it has disassociated itself from science and hence instead of a flown river it has become a dead cesspool. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow wrote, "... philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge." \*(1)

Wittgenstein would not have agreed with this assessment. He explicitly stated that philosophy is not a body of doctrines. \*(2) A body of doctrines might be regarded as dead if it is found to be not justified or justifiable through some rigorous procedure, a procedure in conformity with critical thinking. Wittgenstein regarded philosophy to be an activity. \*(3) It is the activity of clarification or elucidation. The activity of elucidation is not directly connected with the body of scientific knowledge at a particular point of time. It is the general point that we have to keep in mind when trying to understand Wittgenstein's link with science. His keen awareness of many central issues of science did not make him come to the

conclusion that science is the only body of knowledge that gives definite answers to certain questions related to meaning, value and significance etc.

A very important feature of Wittgenstein's philosophy is its rejection of scientism. In *The Tractatus* Wittgenstein wrote – "Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a body of doctrines but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations." \*(4)

Many scientists, including the great scientist Rutherford held that everything that can be regarded as an item of knowledge can ultimately be reduced to physicalistic terms and regularities which can be represented in the physical sciences. It is an extreme form of reductionism. In scientism it may be held that the methods employed in the natural sciences are the only acceptable methods in any intellectual investigations, including philosophical and psychological investigations. Rutherford even wrote, "There is physics and there is stamp – collecting." \*(5) Wittgenstein was completely against such an approach. He was keenly aware of certain limitations of science. He felt that there are many issues related to life and value which cannot be answered by science. When we look for the presentations of questions relating to their issues and when we try to probe into their answers then we step beyond the limits of meaningful scientific discourse. That is why he wrote, "We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer." \*(6)

Wittgenstein believed that the purpose of science are different. Therefore science cannot be reduced to philosophy or conversely philosophy cannot be reduced to science. Philosophy is concerned basically with elucidation. Its function is clarification of thought and not producing new factual knowledge. The aim of clarification of thought makes philosophy concentrate upon the logic of language. The main focus of science is not upon this logic of language. Many logical positivist philosophers treated philosophy as a handmade of the natural sciences but Wittgenstein never thought that the function of philosophy is just to assist natural sciences.

Psychology is definitely a science. Many of the ideas and views elaborated by Wittgenstein had direct impact upon the discipline of psychology. Logical behaviourism that gained certain amount of popularity emerged under the impact of the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Though *Philosophical Investigations* and Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* are regarded to be two major works of philosophy emerging in the English language just after the second world war. The second work is undoubtedly made possible by the descriptivist and logical behaviouristic attitude expressed in the first work. Wittgenstein was the first philosopher who demonstrated that a purely private language is not possible. This idea had far reaching consequences in both philosophy and science. All language is public and all language is ultimately truth functional in nature had many scientific implications. Issues like privileged access to the contents of one's own mind, so diligently advocated by philosophers like Descartes, were viewed in new and critical light under the impact of Wittgenstein. All these exerted great deal of influence upon psychology and other cognitive sciences.

In Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* there are certain significant ideas that have bearings upon his conception of science. One idea is the idea of the fluctuation of the scientific definition (*Philosophical Investigations* – 79). The other is the idea related to the treatment of language by logic (*Philosophical Investigations* – 81). Wittgenstein stated that there is a special sense in which it may be said that, "natural science treats of a natural phenomenon." \*(7) But in such a sense it cannot be said that logic treats of language or of thought. Wittgenstein had certain reservations about the use of the term ideal language. The term ideal language may give rise to the misunderstanding that such an ideal language is better than the language of our everyday space. There is no question of considering some language to be better (some language that represents some sort of calculi with definite rules).

Wittgenstein generally maintained that natural sciences are basically empirical problems. To solve empirical problems we have to look at the world. The information that is required is factual information in the broadest sense. New facts, new ways of looking at facts, developing new understanding through the discovery of casual connection etc. are important in natural science. But philosophical problems, according to Wittgenstein, are not empirical problems. Philosophical problems are embedded in the use of language. We have to gain understanding and insight about the use of language and only through this process philosophical problems can be solved or dissolved. Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* wrote – "It was correct that our considerations must not be scientific ones .... an we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All explanation must disappear, and the description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light – that is to say, its purpose – from the philosophical problems. There are, of course, not empirical problems; but they are solved through an insight into the workings of our language, and that in such a way that these workings are recognized despite an urge to misunderstand them." \*(8)

The method of philosophy and the method of science for Wittgenstein, are different. Philosophy is not concerned with new discoveries. It seeks to assemble what is already known and thereby it seeks to solve intellectual puzzles. Science,

more specifically natural science is concerned with factual knowledge. It seeks to discover new causal connections. Philosophy makes use of the resources available in our language. Philosophical method is concerned with clarity. Philosophy seeks intellectual clarity but in science new information and new causal explanation are sought to be discovered.

In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein emphatically asserted that philosophy is “purely descriptive.”\*(9) In this book Wittgenstein clearly condemned what he called “the craving for generality.” According to him this craving arises out of philosophers’ wrong fascination with the scientific method. This wrong fascination, he says, leads philosophers to ask and answer questions in the way in which science does. According to Wittgenstein this leads philosophy to metaphysical doubt and obscurity. We may quote here the relevant remark of Wittgenstein in the *Blue Book*, “Our craving for generality has another source : our pre – occupation with the method of science. I mean the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using a generalization. Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness.”\*(10)

One of the primary functions of science is to make discoveries. The physical sciences, as pointed out by Galileo, state that the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics. Natural sciences generally seek to discover regularities in nature and these regularities are often presented in the form of laws and these laws are often expressible in the language of mathematics. Philosophy as understood and presented by Wittgenstein is not concerned with making discoveries of regularities found in nature. It is basically, for Wittgenstein, an activity of clarification. There may be two types of confusions leading to metaphysical perplexities. One is the linguistic confusion and the other is the conceptual confusion. The basic function of philosophy is to discover connections. The understanding which we may call philosophical understanding is concerned with seeking attention to what may be called “deep grammar.” Wittgenstein wrote, “A main source of our failure to understand is that we don’t have an overview of the use of our words. – One grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in ‘seeking connections’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate links.”\*(11)

According to Wittgenstein, discovering connections – both linguistic and conceptual – is a function of philosophy. Philosophy does not seek to change language. It pays attention to the use of language. Wittgenstein wrote, “For it cannot justify it either.

It leaves everything as it is.”\*(12)

Wittgenstein did not believe that scientific understanding is the only type of understanding available for us. In scientific understanding phenomena are understood in the light of discoverable regularities. Moreover scientific understanding is concerned with discovering causal relations. Philosophical understanding is basically concerned with linguistic clarification. By paying attention to the actual use of language and also to ‘deep grammar’ philosophy generates a type of understanding which ultimately removes certain mental puzzles. It is in this way Wittgenstein sought to demarcate the boundary between philosophy and science.

There are certain points that Wittgenstein sought to emphasize. First, he wanted to state that philosophy is concerned with certain aspects of things that are hidden from us. Perhaps he wanted to state that there are certain aspects of language that are hidden from us. But they are hidden in a very curious sense. Wittgenstein wrote, “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of their enquiry do not strike people at all. Unless that fact has at some time struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.”\*(13)

The actual use of language is almost open to us and we have to pay attention to it. Wittgenstein did not say that there is a single method for philosophy. He wrote, “There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were.”\*(14) It is a curious statement because Wittgenstein often considered the discovery of linguistic connections to be the method for philosophy. But linguistic connection perhaps may have to be discovered through different ways and therefore in this sense can be said that there is not a single philosophical method. The method or methods of philosophy are different from the method or methods of science. Natural sciences have to focus upon the empirical world and philosophy has to focus upon the use of language.

Thus Wittgenstein by paying attention to the nature and function of philosophical activity attempted to draw a distinction between philosophy and science. By stating that philosophy is not a natural science he attempted to bring forth a distinct area for the operation of philosophy.

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