

Wittgenstein's Critical Examination of the Relationship among Philosophy, Natural Science, and Language

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Abstract: The development of philosophy has always been intertwined with continuous disputes and crises. In the context where language analysis is highly regarded, the exploration of the meaning of speculative discourse manifests itself as a rejection of traditional ontology, accompanied by attempts to transform philosophy in the paradigm of natural science. Based on Wittgenstein's views on language philosophy, this paper attempts to demonstrate that it is neither possible nor appropriate to reject speculative philosophy from a scientistic stance. There is no philosophy without doubt, and Wittgenstein has fully embodied this belief. Especially in an era of the rapid development of natural science, Wittgenstein was able to demarcate the boundaries of scientific expression, point out the empirical essence of absolute concepts in ethics and the emptiness caused by the abuse of language. He paved the way for philosophy from the perspectives of thought and language, revealing meaning and value. All of this is closely related to his unique and thorough spirit of doubt.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; Ontology; Natural science; Skepticism; Language analysis

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1. Introduction

Since the linguistic - analytic turn in philosophy, the academic community has encountered numerous new controversies and reflections regarding the essence and scope of philosophy, as well as its relationship with other disciplines. On one hand, the ideological resources accumulated by traditional philosophy over a long period have formed a profound foundation for philosophical research and have become a theoretical reliance that the academic community finds difficult to abandon. On the other hand, the introduction of linguistic analysis has rapidly expanded and transformed the scope and methods of philosophical research, bringing about brand - new problem domains and research perspectives. At the same time, the rapid development of modern natural science has profoundly influenced the cognitive patterns and knowledge systems of humanity. With its precision and positivism, natural science has been constantly expanding its influence in the field of knowledge, and has even exerted an impact on the traditional territory of philosophy. Against this backdrop, Wittgenstein's thoughts have become a crucial entry point for understanding the relationship between philosophy and natural science, the role of language in philosophy, and the contemporary situation of ontology.

2. The Entanglement between Natural Science and Philosophy: Conflict and Transgression

Whether regarding Wittgenstein as the most resolute rebel against traditional ontology can enable us to break free from the meaningless and endless philosophical chaos? In fact, after the philosophical shift towards language analysis, thinkers are caught in even more complex disputes. On the one hand, the ideological resources accumulated over a long time have become the independent "objective knowledge" that people must rely

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on. On the other hand, once the intricate language phenomena are explored, they offer an extremely broad ideological horizon and a more abundant ideological reserve. It can be said that no one can truly and completely reject ontology; such rejection will ultimately turn into a circuitous return. "Philosophy is not a doctrine but an activity. Essentially, philosophical works consist of a set of explanations. The outcome of philosophy is not a set of philosophical propositions but the clarification of propositions."^[1] Wittgenstein emphasized more the dynamic characteristics of philosophy rather than simply rejecting ontology.

However, upon reflecting on the ideological situation at that time – a situation from which no one could escape, however clear-headed and self-aware one might be – we will admit that the development of natural science since modern times has indeed interfered with the development of philosophy. Although philosophy and natural science share a common origin, they have different ways of describing the world after all. The deficiencies of systematic philosophy are obvious. The more it emphasizes supreme guidance and perfect explanations, the more it arouses people's doubts. Moreover, there are so many differences among numerous philosophical theories that claim to be the ultimate truth, and the "correct" explanations that people expect still cannot be found. In particular, the ancient philosophical problems that have long troubled people have not received consistent answers. People are rather inclined to believe that the fundamental cause of this bewildering ideological situation lies in language itself. Language, which has always been regarded as external and merely used to express thoughts, suddenly becomes responsible for the meaning of thoughts. "The truth of the matter is that the realm of philosophy is in a state of complete chaos, in a state of disintegration and decay."^[2] And behind this truth lies an even more astonishing revelation: the separation of language and thought. "Speculative ontology completely misinterprets language and its role in thought. Thought cannot do without language, nor can language exist without thought. Language is not something created or fabricated. It is not given to thought a priori, nor is it a pre-prepared thinking tool or organ; rather, one develops alongside the other."^[2] Compared with the world revealed by the development of natural science, the worldview provided by speculative philosophy appears vague and illusory because language only passively realizes the Aristotelian logic that is considered to be perfect. In this way, the instrumentalized language can be used arbitrarily, and people can almost say whatever they want. So, how exactly should one "say" in order for it to have meaning? This is a question of the times.

The most convenient approach to transforming philosophy is using the power of natural science to encroach on the territory of philosophy. Positivism's assumption about the development stages of human knowledge, the so-called division of knowledge forms into ontology and positivism, exhibits no intention of preserving speculative philosophy. Questions of value and meaning are regarded as ignorant fabrications. The idea is to examine philosophy in the same way as one establishes precise natural-science knowledge, and it seems that philosophy cannot escape the fate of being "scientified."

However, does science really provide an exemplary model of reliable knowledge with no alternatives? "The development of science increasingly dissolves the 'known' in the unknown: - yet it pursues precisely the opposite, instinctively seeking to reduce the unknown to the known. In short, science is brewing an absolute ignorance."^[3] By placing high hopes on the vibrant natural science and by regarding the scientific world as the whole of the world is merely a simplistic way of dealing with people's confusion, and the chaos in philosophy still remains unresolved. "Natural science (like all sciences) is a term for mental activities, for the mental activities of natural scientists collaborating with others; these activities themselves, like all mental events, belong to the realm that should be explained by the human sciences."^[4] That is to say, if natural science is used to transform or even replace philosophy, what will be responsible for explaining natural science itself? Moreover, natural science is unable to provide any effective explanation for rationality. In other words, there must be something more fundamental to ensure the effectiveness of natural science and prevent it from overstepping its boundaries.

3. Wittgenstein's Philosophical Analysis: Language, Ontology and the Demarcation of Knowledge

Since the powerful influence of natural science has fully emerged, there are not many thinkers who can put natural science in its proper place. The value of action, demonstrated over several centuries, seems to far outweigh that of contemplation. It has to be said that nothing makes humanity feel more like the true master than natural science. Precisely because of this, all the unknowns and doubts are offered up to a new origin. However, there is also an equally intense feeling that an unprecedented force "has replaced the qualitative, sensible world in which we live, love, and perish with a quantitative, geometrically reified world. In this world, everything has its place, yet only humans have lost theirs." ^[5] The time has come to find a way to overcome the conceit of natural science and to clarify the fact that even if natural science can achieve achievements approaching and exceeding people's imagination, it still cannot clearly define its own boundaries (in fact, science cannot determine what it can and cannot do, what it should and should not do), let alone enjoy supreme power in knowledge judgment.

From this perspective, regarding Wittgenstein as a fellow traveler of Comte and those similar to him is an unwise and unfair judgment. He should not be regarded as the leader of those groups of thinkers who only notice the effectiveness of natural science while ignoring its shortcomings. In *Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus*, the doubt that traditional ontology encounters is that "most of the propositions and questions written about philosophical problems are not false but senseless. Therefore, we cannot answer questions of this kind at all, but only establish their senselessness." ^[1] What Wittgenstein is concerned about is why philosophy, which has always been so arrogant, is facing the danger of being replaced or eliminated. The reasons should be sought within philosophy itself. "Most of the questions and propositions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language." ^[1] It is precisely because philosophy itself has such a long - overlooked crux that natural science, which originally needed to be delimited by philosophy, intends to explain everything and plans to make a deep incursion into the territory of meaning. Wittgenstein clearly points out that "philosophy delimits the scope within which the disputes of natural science can take place." ^[1] That is to say, simply believing that natural science can be used to transform philosophy, making philosophy scientific, or dissolving traditional philosophy into science, seems to put the cart before the horse. One can reasonably believe that the Vienna Circle has selectively and thus inappropriately developed Wittgenstein's views. They absolutize Wittgenstein's rejection of traditional ontology, evolving it into a scientistic view.

"In fact, the ontology in the *Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus* is extremely obvious. Or rather, ontology is the central thread running through the *Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus*." ^[6] Reasons in this regard have been clearly stated from the outset. The so - called sayable and unsayable, meaningful and meaningless can only be issues falling within the purview of ontology. When the picture theory of language and reality is presented in the ladder of propositions, Wittgenstein is in fact re - interpreting the world and defending philosophy from the perspective of language. The reason this defense can hold is that the ancient ontology has not withdrawn. Why can language construct the world? How does thought, as a collection of meaningful propositions, become a picture of facts? The explanation here is that "we cannot think illogically, otherwise we should have to think illogically." ^[1] We even see a somewhat facetious yet definitely not joking reminder: "It used to be said that Origin could create everything, only not anything that would be contrary to the laws of logic. The truth is, we could not say of an 'illogical' world how it would look." ^[1] This is by no means a rejection of ontology. The noumenon is still in its proper place; it is just now called "logic."

Therefore, when we consider natural science as the totality of true propositions and use all true propositions to completely describe the world, natural science knowledge is defined within the scope of meaningful propositions. However, propositions have the possibility of being true or false, and the determination of their truth - value conditions is certainly a judgment about meaning. So, does natural science define a scope of "true propositions"

for itself? Certainly not. This mission can only be fulfilled by philosophy, which is outside (above or below) natural science and definitely not a variant form of natural science. And what determines all this is the logic that can only be shown but not said. One can fully believe that logic and philosophy are inseparable, and the world is constructed by language that conforms to logic. Thus, philosophy that conducts a critique of language not only still possesses the most basic dignity relative to natural science, but is essentially more metaphysical.

4. Wittgenstein's Doubts and the Search for Meaning: Ethics, Language and the World

It seems that skepticism bears full responsibility for every crisis in philosophy. Yet, hardly anyone would deny that reason has repeatedly sharpened itself through attempts to go beyond its limits, and skepticism has contributed significantly to this. The history of philosophy always reserves ample space for skepticism. We should see here not merely the composed Pyrrho and the placid Hume, but also the enigmatic Wittgenstein, even though his presence was but a fleeting one. It must be noted that there are not many permanent members in the ranks of skeptics, because doubt is the incentive for a more significant intellectual mission. Kant sought to elevate doubt to a sense of awe towards the starry sky and the moral law, while Wittgenstein aimed to direct the edge of doubt straight at language itself. It can be argued that, especially after Hegel, every philosopher has been full of misgivings and preoccupied, trying in various stances to participate in the anti - rationalist gathering. The irony, however, is that they almost forget that they are tightly holding a ticket called "reason." Nonetheless, there are a few individuals who have indeed retained to the greatest extent the calmness of the onlooker as Pythagoras put it, and Wittgenstein should be one of them.

If we commence reading the *Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus* in reverse, beginning from the seventh proposition, and retrogress slightly more, we will find that Wittgenstein was indeed talking about ethics. To be precise, he was "doubting" ethics. According to his own words, the ethics he was alluding to here should be "the explanation of the word 'ethics' given by Professor Moore in his *Principia Ethica*... 'Ethics is the general inquiry into what is good.'" ^[7] Two of the propositions are cited as follows: "The will as the subject of ethics cannot be spoken about. The will as a phenomenon is of interest only to psychology." ^[1] The term "cannot be spoken about" is clearly mentioned in this proposition. Another proposition is: "If the good or bad exercise of the will does change the world, it can change only the limits of the world, not the facts, not what can be expressed by means of language." ^[1] Obviously, the mention of "limits" in this proposition is consistent with his view on the relationship between language and facts. The totality of facts in logical space determines the world, and "The world is my world: this is evident in the fact that the limits of language (the language which I understand) mean the limits of my world." ^[1] There is no doubt that this world should also be a logical world, but this self - world must be distinguished from experience. Otherwise, facts such as colors and pain that fall within the scope of propositional expression only advocate an empirical or solipsistic so - called subject. Expressers may use a certain concept in a way that they think is consistent at their respective empirical levels, making the abuse of language inevitable.

Wittgenstein also perceived the difference between philosophy and natural science, which in fact lies in their differences regarding language. Consider the following proposition: "Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences." ^[1] The text in parentheses further elaborates: "(What the word 'philosophy' denotes should be above or below the natural sciences, not alongside them.)" Does this really answer the question of whether philosophy is superior or inferior to natural science? Can we assert that Wittgenstein thought philosophy had no status? One must admire his acumen here.

As is well - known, in his era, natural science was expanding its territory without restraint. The remarkable ongoing achievements of natural science, its technical control power, the demand - driven stimulation of materialized means, and the positivist method advanced in parallel. Natural science was regarded as qualified and capable of taking over

the research objects of philosophy, and the attempt to fill the essence of reason with the objectivity and precision that are the external forms of reason was repeatedly exposed. Many new disciplines emerging during this period arrogantly began to carve up the research objects of traditional philosophy. Natural science made inroads, and philosophy seemed to have no place to exist and no reason to be.

Wittgenstein, however, was a philosophical savior from the camp of natural science. His arrival was not deliberately to add fuel to the dissolution of philosophy. On the contrary, perhaps carrying the burden of doubt, he had to traverse the minefields of empiricism and psychologism alone, just like many of his predecessors, to safeguard and revive the glory of reason. Therefore, when he stated that philosophy is either above or below natural science, he clarified this in the following sense: Philosophy delimits the scope within which natural science disputes can occur.^[1]

Let's ask, if the status of philosophy were truly lower than that of natural science in a common - sense way, how could it demarcate the boundaries of natural science? Then, what Wittgenstein meant here can only be that in terms of status, natural science is far from comparable to philosophy. At most, there is only a possibility for natural science to determine its own position relative to philosophy.

To use an imprecise analogy, for a celestial body, we can't say that the universe is above it or below it; the universe is omnipresent. In other words, saying the universe is above it is no different from saying the universe is below it. Even if we say the universe is below this celestial body, it in no way impairs the expanse of the universe itself. This situation is similar to how we speak of the noumenon in a metaphysical sense. We call it the highest cause and the ultimate essence, but isn't it also the "lowest" cause from which everything originates? Another available analogy is that precisely the highest moral principle sets for us what can be called the moral bottom line, and the moral bottom line is not some actually low - level moral factor.

Based on this consideration, it can be argued that Wittgenstein actually put forward a thought - provoking warning against natural science in the following proposition: "The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen; in it no value exists - and if it did exist, it would have no value."^[1] That is to say, the world where there is no value - value examined from the perspective of thought itself - is actually the world where natural science oversteps its bounds, drowning meaning with a blindly optimistic, metallic - sounding paean.

Under these circumstances, the following view can only be said to be partially correct: "It is for Wittgenstein that the world is composed of facts, not values. Values are something outside the world of natural science. Just as the language he refers to is the language of natural science, the world he mentions is also the world of natural science."

^[8] Wittgenstein also clearly stated that "The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science."^[1] And propositions, as pictures of reality, surely cannot solely refer to those that conform to empirical facts. Numerous relevant propositions in the *Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus* serve to prove this.

It can be easily observed that Wittgenstein did not hastily adopt the so - called empiricist or natural - scientific criterion of truth to restrict language. It is hard to say that the language Wittgenstein mentioned is merely the language of natural science. Therefore, the world that can be thought and expressed in language cannot refer exclusively to the field of natural science.

So, why can one contend that the meaning of the world lies outside the world? The possible answer to this question should be associated with the following proposition: "Even if all possible questions of natural science have been answered, the problem of life has not even been touched upon at all."^[1] This indicates that the world, including the part that has been explained by natural science, is not the real and entire world. Just like the "life - world" mentioned by Husserl, the world as a whole cannot be divided solely within the scope of natural science. As a world that exists before and outside of science, a world of contextuality, natural science has always been within this world. No matter how much science emphasizes its own transcendence. Such transcendence is a willful misunderstanding.

At the same time, an undeniable point is that natural science unforgivably bypasses itself in the process of meaning adjudication, and natural science itself encounters the embarrassing situation of a lack of meaning.

However, Wittgenstein had no intention of turning to ethics for help. It is highly doubtful whether the moral concepts that people revere are merely superficial. The misuse of language has become a deep - rooted ailment of the times, and how could ethics not be affected? Wittgenstein discovered that almost all ethical language expressions unfold in two extremely different senses: the unimportant or relative sense and the ethical or absolute sense, which gives rise to relative and absolute value judgments. "Every relative value judgment is merely a statement of fact, and thus can be formulated without any indication of a value judgment,"^[7] Wittgenstein believed that statements of fact can in no way become propositions of different levels. They have no distinction of good or bad. Even if different attitudes arise towards the same fact. By no means can it be said that certain propositions are lofty or transcendent. "The words we use, just as those we use in science, are the only vessels that can contain and convey significance and meaning, that is, supernatural significance and meaning."^[7]

However, there is always something that lures people to use judgments related to the absolute. Usually, it is those typical experiences that support all this. Wittgenstein cited experiences shared by all people, such as the sense of wonder about the whole world, the feeling of absolute security, and the sense of guilt, pointing out that words like "wonder," "existence," and "security" have all been misused without exception. As a result, ethical language is full of similes. Unfortunately, "when we try to abandon this simile and directly state the fact behind it, we find that there is no such fact."^[7] That is to say, through the abuse of language, ethics illogically endows experiences with absolute value. Thus, Wittgenstein could only regretfully declare, "Insofar as ethics springs from the desire to talk about something regarding the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, and absolute value, it cannot become a science. What ethics talks about in no sense contributes to our knowledge."^[7] He eliminated the experiences that masqueraded as meaningful concepts through thorough doubt, thus preserving the logical efficacy of language and thought. However, the manifestation of meaning precisely indicates that the existing language, especially the mode of expression similar to scientific language, should know when to stop. What should be most silent is the ambitious natural science that is full of confidence and intends to conquer everything, including meaning and value.

Whether Wittgenstein's skepticism is a doomed - to - be - forgotten intellectual posture, he should take comfort. It is precisely the interrogation directed at the previously unquestionable language that has led to the profound result: "The whole sense of the *Tractatus Logico - Philosophicus* is to draw a metaphysical limit to the world,"^[9] enabling him to freely navigate through the sacred realm of thought. Only by being good at doubting can life derive meaning. Moreover, any ultimate skeptic is the most benevolent watcher of thought. Just as Wittgenstein's self - evaluation after repeated deliberation: "I should only be a mirror, for through this mirror, my readers can see all the flaws of their thoughts, and thus correct their thoughts by means of this approach."^[10]

5. Conclusion

Wittgenstein's profound insights into philosophy, natural science, and language offer a unique perspective for understanding and disentangling ourselves from the predicaments of contemporary thought. He did not simply reject ontology. Instead, through a critique of language, he reshaped its connotations and emphasized the importance of philosophy in demarcating the boundaries of natural science. His skepticism towards ethics reveals the misuse of language in value judgments, highlighting the characteristic that the meaning of the world transcends the scope of natural science. In an era of the continuous expansion of natural science, Wittgenstein's ideas remind us to respect the unique status of philosophy and be vigilant against the encroachment of science. At the same time, his emphasis on the logic of language prompts us to reflect on the relationship between language expression and thought, avoid the abuse of language, and pursue truth and meaning in a way of thinking.

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