

## Final essay for Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein

What is the relation between early analytic philosophy and naturalism? Part of your answer must explain Russell's call for philosophy to become scientific.

### 1. Introduction.

The naturalist commonly attempts to describe the world through causal terms and rejects any supernatural or spiritual explanations. It is a fundamentally scientific view of the world that derives the legitimacy of its claims from empirical evidence. However, philosophy was not always conducted in this way. The early analytic philosophers, Wittgenstein and Russell in particular, had an anti-naturalistic conception of the discipline that saw the chief task of philosophy as a clarification of thought with the a-priori at its centre. Analytic philosophers did not ally themselves with science. Rather, the method of logical analysis was considered a tool to be used to clarify problems through the analysis of language. Russell gained inspiration from science in the cohesive way it worked through problems. He hoped that philosophy would become a community of inquiry where problems would be solved and progress could be made by building on the past. I will begin this essay with a short discussion of the term naturalism. We will then analyse the difference between philosophy, as an a-priori discipline, and the natural sciences, which are empirical in nature. We will then see Russell's attempt to create what he described as a scientific philosophy. I will conclude with brief remarks on the value of philosophy as a discipline.

### 2. Naturalism.

Contemporary philosophers readily admit that “the term naturalism has no very precise meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, it is a doctrine which holds that “everything arises from natural properties and causes, and supernatural or spiritual explanations are excluded or discounted.”<sup>2</sup> Naturalism can thus be characterised as an approach to questions which places an emphasis on empirical data and causal explanations.

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1 David Papineau, '*Naturalism.*' The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Winter 2016: Accessed June 12, 2017. url: [plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/)

2 '*Naturalism.*' In Oxford Dictionary of English (3 ed.) ed. by Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

These philosophers aimed to ally philosophy more closely with science. They urged that reality is exhausted by nature, containing nothing “supernatural,” and that the scientific method should be used to investigate all areas of reality, including the “human spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, our understanding of the world is dependent, first and foremost, upon the sciences. David Armstrong defends a view of naturalism whereby physics is considered authoritative. Whereas a broader interpretation, as practiced by Peter Railton, includes the human sciences in the study of reality.<sup>4</sup> In any case, the outcome of this view leads to a particular conception of philosophy. Philosophy is no longer a separate discipline, the aim of which is to deepen understanding. Rather, the aim is to simply enlarge our scientific knowledge of the world. In the words of Quine:

The naturalistic philosopher...tries to improve, clarify, and understand the system from within.<sup>5</sup>

That is, the task of the naturalist philosopher is simply to improve and clarify the knowledge that the scientist discovers. Subsequently, philosophy cannot claim any particular domain of its own, it is there to assist the scientist in his work. Macarthur notes the following:

This transformation of philosophy is largely a matter of a realignment of the relation between philosophy and science, which now sees science, not philosophy, as the last word when it comes to questions of knowledge about understanding and existence.<sup>6</sup>

This antagonism between philosophy and science goes back to the foundations of Western philosophy. Plato was antagonistic towards the natural sciences, and he saw mathematics as the highest form of thinking. He held an almost mystical view of reality where the triad of Forms – beauty, truth, good – exist in a realm separate from mundane reality. The task of philosophy was to purify and free the mind from appearances and thereby see these Forms in their true light. Philosophy was the highest calling and a path to wisdom. Plato's conception of philosophy aims to free the mind and ultimately the soul. Whereas the contemporary naturalist simply wants to describe

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3 David Papineau, '*Naturalism*.' The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Winter 2016: Accessed June 12, 2017. url: [plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/)

4 David Macarthur, 2008, 'Quinean Naturalism in Question,' *Philo*, vol. 11, no. 1, pg 2-3.

5 Daniel Isaacson. '*Quine and Logical Positivism*.' In The Cambridge Companion to Quine, ed. Roger F. Gibson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pg 245.

6 David Macarthur, 2008, 'Quinean Naturalism in Question,' *Philo*, vol. 11, no. 1, pg 2.

the world in terms of empirical data and causal explanation, and “many analytic philosophers now think of themselves as being engaged in scientific activities.”<sup>7</sup> This is a problem because if philosophy is to have any worth, it must recognise its own function within a broader scheme of intellectual pursuits. Russell and Wittgenstein make themselves clear with regards to this conflict. They had a conception of philosophy that focused on the a-priori, and logical analysis was a tool to be used to clarify thoughts through the analysis of language.

### 3. The empirical and the a-priori.

The naturalist takes a scientific view of the world. Thus, when we speak of naturalism, we are speaking of the natural sciences, one of the distinguishing features of which is a reliance upon empirical evidence. Empirical data, based on observation, is primarily for the scientist. However, philosophy differs because, in simple terms, philosophy is an arm-chair discipline that focuses on a-priori theorising. Thus, when we speak of the relationship between naturalism and analytic philosophy, we are speaking about the relationship between empirical knowledge and a-priori knowledge. Of the early fathers of analytic philosophy, Wittgenstein makes the relationship between the two most clear:

Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. (The word 'philosophy' must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside them.)<sup>8</sup>

This is because the natural sciences rely on empirical evidence for its claims. When a hypothesis is shown to be correct, it is done so on the basis of empirical evidence. “Darwin's theory has no more to do with philosophy than any other hypothesis in natural science.”<sup>9</sup> This is because philosophy, as conceived of by Wittgenstein, is concerned with the a-priori. Once we step outside the arm-chair and into the laboratory, then we are outside the realm of philosophy. Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy is one of clarification. The scientist aims at creating a picture of the world, whereas the philosopher “aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.”<sup>10</sup>

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. Philosophy does not result in 'philosophical propositions,' but rather in the clarification of propositions. Without

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7 David Macarthur, 2008, 'Quinean Naturalism in Question,' *Philo*, vol. 11, no. 1, pg 2.

8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pg 29 (4.111).

9 *Ibid.*, pg 30 (4.1122).

10 *Ibid.*, pg 29 (4.112).

philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, we have a view of philosophy that opposes any reliance upon empirical claims, and early analytic philosophers were strongly committed to an anti-naturalistic view of philosophy.<sup>12</sup> However, “in light of the rise of modern science,”<sup>13</sup> the naturalist is committed to a view “about how one ought to conduct philosophy.”<sup>14</sup> This commitment is clearly contrary to that of Russell, Frege, and the early Wittgenstein. The problem is that underlying naturalism is a metaphysical claim about the nature of reality.<sup>15</sup> The naturalist holds, albeit unconsciously, that the scientific view of the world *is* a view of reality. Only the more subtle mind would realise the assumption underlying this claim. Namely, the scientific picture is not *necessarily* correct. It is merely what Nietzsche referred to as a “regulative fiction,”<sup>16</sup> specifically advising that “it is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests.”<sup>17</sup> That is, a scientific picture of the world is merely a description of the world that explains our experiences. However, this description is not *necessarily* true. The universe could have evolved differently, or our senses may be severely underdeveloped such that we have a skewed understanding of reality. This means that, ultimately, a scientific description must be accepted on faith. Regarding the propositions of natural science, Wittgenstein says the following:

The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science.<sup>18</sup> A proposition is a picture of reality. A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it.<sup>19</sup>

That is, natural science is made up of propositions, and these propositions provide us with a picture of reality in the sense that their aim is essentially descriptive. However, Wittgenstein was not concerned simply with how reality appears. He wants to discover something more fundamental.

We do not have an a-priori belief in a law of conservation, but rather a-priori knowledge of the possibility of a logical form.<sup>20</sup>

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11 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pg 30 (4.112).

12 David Macarthur, 2008, 'Quinean Naturalism in Question,' *Philo*, vol. 11, no. 1, pg 3.

13 *Ibid.*, pg 18.

14 *Ibid.*, pg 18.

15 *Ibid.*, pg 6.

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pg 200.

17 *Ibid.*, pg 201.

18 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pg 29 (4.11).

19 *Ibid.*, pg 23 (4.01).

20 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pg 81 (6.33).

Here, we have an explicit distinction made between natural laws and a-priori knowledge. The propositions of natural science cannot be considered a-priori, and philosophy as a discipline must grasp a-priori knowledge. Recall that Russell, Frege, and Wittgenstein all, at one point, make a distinction between the grammatical and the logical form of sentences. This implies that there is a difference between the way the world is presented to us, as shown in natural language, and the way the world really is, as shown through logical form. For Russell, logic is “the essence of philosophy,”<sup>21</sup> and once a problem is reduced to its deep logical form, then it can either be resolved or ignored as beyond human intellect.

The tool of investigation is logical analysis. Crucially, logical analysis as an activity assumes the a-priori nature of philosophy in the sense that it does not rely upon empirical evidence. That is, early analytic philosophy assumed philosophy would focus itself on the a-priori, and insisted that the natural sciences were above or below. Whilst scientific laws provide us with a picture of the world, philosophy, as an a-priori discipline, is able to investigate the logic and language upon which this picture is built. In early analytic philosophy, we see an emphasis placed on logic and language; and analytic philosophy, as conceived of by both Russell and Wittgenstein, was fundamentally anti-naturalistic. The aim was not to ally with science. The aim throughout was a clarification of thought, and a discovery of what can and cannot be known.

#### **4. Russell's scientific philosophy.**

The word 'scientific' has many connotations. However, when Russell spoke of philosophy becoming scientific, he did not mean it “in Quine’s sense of simply being part of science.”<sup>22</sup> Rather, he had a vision of philosophy which as a discipline would become “co-operative and cumulative.”<sup>23</sup> For Russell, there was “only one constant preoccupation,”<sup>24</sup> which was to “discover how much we can be said to know and with what degree of certainty of doubtfulness.”<sup>25</sup> The direction of his work, both in mathematics and philosophy, show a desire for strong foundations, and from this build on the success of the past rather than engage in endless debates about ancient problems. Referring to the method of logical analysis, Russell states the following:

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21 Bertrand Russell. '*Logic as the essence of philosophy.*' In *Logicism and the Philosophy of Language* ed. by Arthur Sullivan (Ontario, Canada: Broadway Press Ltd, 2003), pg 263.

22 David Macarthur, 2008, 'Quinean Naturalism in Question,' *Philo*, vol. 11, no. 1, pg 21.

23 *Ibid.*, pg 21.

24 Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pg 9.

25 *Ibid.*, pg 9.

It has, in my opinion, introduced the same kind of advance into philosophy as Galileo introduced into physics, making it possible at last to see what kinds of problems may be capable of solution, and what kinds must be abandoned as beyond humans powers.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Russell's desire for a more 'scientific' philosophy refers to the "exactitude and certainty"<sup>27</sup> that science demands rather than the specific problems it hopes to solve. Russell was inspired by the scientific spirit - objective inquiry that results in a community of philosophers slowly building cumulative knowledge - but the task of the philosopher, the questions he poses, is distinct to that of the scientist. Thus, the focus of Russell was the *method* not the results of science. "It is not results, but *methods*, that can be transferred with profit from the...sciences, to the sphere of philosophy."<sup>28</sup>

This possibility of successive approximations to the truth is, more than anything else, the source of the triumphs of science, and to transfer this possibility to philosophy is to ensure a progress in method whose importance it would be almost impossible to exaggerate.<sup>29</sup>

With this desire in mind, Russell claims to advocate a "division into distinct questions of tentative, partial, and progressive advance."<sup>30</sup> He does do this in practice, and in *The Scientific Method in Philosophy*, Kant's transcendental aesthetic is found to be "three entirely distinct problems."<sup>31</sup> "There is a problem of logic, a problem of physics, and a problem of theory of knowledge."<sup>32</sup> However, we can also see a clear interest in scientific problems and a bias towards empirical evidence being the ultimate arbiter. In *The Relation of Sense Data to Physics*, Russell explicitly states that "what I...maintain is that sense-data are physical."<sup>33</sup> In this short time, we cannot go through a summary of the theory. The important point to note is the emphasis that Russell places on the existence and theorising about certain physical phenomena as proven through empirical data.

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26 Bertrand Russell. '*Logic as the essence of philosophy*.' In *Logicism and the Philosophy of Language* ed. by Arthur Sullivan (Ontario, Canada: Broadway Press Ltd, 2003), pg 277.

27 Bertrand Russell. '*Mathematics and the metaphysicians*.' In *Logicism and the Philosophy of Language* ed. by Arthur Sullivan (Ontario, Canada: Broadway Press Ltd, 2003), pg 233.

28 Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic: And Other Essays* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919), pg 98.

29 *Ibid.*, pg 113.

30 *Ibid.*, pg 124.

31 *Ibid.*, pg 114.

32 *Ibid.*, pg 114.

33 *Ibid.*, pg 151.

To recommend this conclusion, we must consider what it is that is proved by the empirical success of physics...Thus we may lay down the following definition: Physical things are those series of appearances whose matter obeys the laws of physics.<sup>34</sup>

Note that Russell's conclusion depends on empirical data and the laws of physics. In this sense, it is not the a-priori theorising that he advocates through logical analysis. Rather, it is what he refers to as "scientific philosophising."<sup>35</sup> For Russell, "a philosophical proposition must be such as can be neither proved nor disproved by empirical evidence."<sup>36</sup> However, he then defies this maxim by relying on empirical data from physics for his very own philosophical claims. Thus, his philosophical claims become descriptive and we may accuse Russell of holding a naturalistic bias. However, this would be premature, he merely seems to be a philosopher with an attraction to the problems of science. He sees the value of philosophy in the questions, not the results, and his scientific philosophy is a focus on the *method* of science, not the ultimate outcome.

Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions since no definite answers can...be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation.<sup>37</sup>

Russell draws a distinction between problems of value and problems of fact, holding that "whatever can be known, can be known by means of science; but things which are legitimately matters of feeling lay outside its province."<sup>38</sup> Russell seems to think that as far as knowledge of the physical world is concerned, science is the best method we have. However, the world is not explained entirely in terms of cause and effect. That is, the metaphysical claim that naturalism makes is rejected because there is a sphere of the world that lay outside causal explanation. Russell respects the impressive leaps that science has made in our knowledge of the universe, however he is aware of the limitations of science. This seems reasonable and philosophically prudent. The physical world may best be explained through science. However, crucially, one must be aware of the philosophical claim that one holds, namely naturalism, when engaged in science. Russell seems to

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34 Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic: And Other Essays* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919), pg 172-173.

35 Ibid., pg 155.

36 Ibid., pg 111.

37 Michael D. Burroughs and Jana M. Lone, *Philosophy in Education* (Maryland, United States: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), pg 20.

38 Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pg 743.

make this recommendation and thus stops short of recommending a scientific study of all spheres of human life.

## **5. Conclusion.**

We have seen how the naturalist takes a certain conception of philosophy and considers it an assistant of science. However, analytic philosophy in its infancy did not accept this conception of philosophy, and had broader goals for the work that was to be done. Wittgenstein explicitly states that without philosophy thoughts are cloudy and indistinct. The philosopher is thus valued for his ability to question assumptions and reason through thoughts in a careful and detailed way. The aim is understanding, not definitive answers, and wherever understanding is sought then philosophy can be of service. Thus, we should be reserved about any conception of philosophy that accepts the assumptions of naturalism almost as truth and not the debatable claims that they are. Apart from the aesthetic and moral outcomes, the danger of this is it relegates philosophy to one corner of knowledge instead of allowing it the freedom that it needs to function as it should. The philosopher is a generalist, and whilst personal idiosyncrasies would lead each philosopher down a certain path - one to physics, the other to religion - there is danger in allowing philosophy as a discipline to be cornered. Although we may not accept Plato's triad of Forms in the scientific age, his aim of purifying the mind through philosophy still holds. Philosophy enables one to question dogmatic assumptions, and through this realise that much of what we know is held in error or contradiction. It is only through philosophy that we can come to know this, and it is only through philosophy that we can hope to free the mind.



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