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Wittgenstein, Naturalism and Scientism

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1. Introduction

Wittgenstein's contributions to philosophy include numerous remarks that indicate his attitude towards science and, in particular, the relation between science and philosophy. Whilst Wittgenstein's views are not anti-science they do convey a staunch anti-scientism; indeed, he was 'certainly the least scientific of philosophers' according to Bernard Williams (2000: 493). Scientism, as I will focus on it, generally connotes an attitude of over-reliance and overconfidence in scientific methods as the exclusive routes to authentic knowledge in any field of inquiry.¹ In what follows I suggest that Wittgenstein's anti-scientism is, however, consistent with a form of naturalism.

It has been argued that scientism reflects a particular ideological orientation, one that cannot be warranted by scientific practice itself but is nevertheless committed to the epistemic superiority of such practice (Williams and Robinson 2015: 3). This orientation both reflects and fuels a pervasive (if not universal) cultural tendency which, following Williams and Robinson (2015: 6-7), can be generally characterized according to the following tenets:²

1. Only scientific knowledge counts as real, warranted or genuine knowledge;
2. The epistemology and metaphysics of natural science is appropriate for all sciences, including social and human science;
3. Science can plausibly aspire to provide complete answers to any question or problem that humanity faces.

These are accompanied by a fourth claim, one that is implicit in the other three and goes beyond the expression of over-confidence towards what scientific inquiry can achieve:

4. Scientism at least implicitly makes substantive – typically materialist – metaphysical assumptions about the nature of the world such that it can be the object of scientific understanding in the first place.

As such scientism requires a naturalist metaphysics. In one sense this is right but it is important to be clear about precisely which sense that is. This matters because 'naturalism' admits of a variety of interpretations, some of which are deeply anti-Wittgensteinian and some of which are not.³ A different interpretation of naturalism is not only consistent with but arguably captures certain aspects of the later Wittgenstein's philosophy.

One assumption that I think could be misleading in this context is that Wittgenstein's anti-scientism is entailed by his alleged anti-naturalism. That would indeed follow if the naturalism in question were already a form of proto-scientism. But there are

Wittgensteinian reasons to avoid this assumption, his remarks indicating a form of naturalism unlike the reductive or restrictive kind that leads to scientism.

In the next section I provide some details about naturalism, the relation with scientism, and recent attempts to articulate a non-reductive form of naturalism. The following sections then discuss ‘description’ in the context of naturalistic approaches and I consider a recent form of apparently non-reductive, less scientific, naturalism – Huw Price’s ‘subject naturalism’. I suggest that Wittgenstein’s position is, whilst naturalist, distinctive.

2. Naturalism and scientism

Naturalism is a view about the relation between science and philosophy, one that privileges the metaphysical and epistemological status of science. As such naturalism is usually understood as a view that regards philosophy as constrained in various ways by scientific methods and results. According to such a view, philosophical inquiry and the questions it pursues typically need to be framed in a way that makes understanding those questions and what would constitute answers to them intelligible from a scientific point of view. Thus scientism could be construed as an especially strong form of naturalism: the relevant constraint is not just that philosophical inquiry ought to proceed in light of natural science, but that philosophy must itself be part of science if it can contribute to the ways in which we investigate and come to enjoy genuine knowledge of the world. This would have significant implications for how we characterize the nature of explanation and understanding quite generally across the natural and human sciences since, according to scientism, any genuine explanation or form of understanding must cohere with the scientifically described world and the methods deemed acceptable to investigate it. The influence of scientism, as Wittgenstein would have acknowledged, often manifests at the level of cultural attitudes and sensibilities rather than explicitly considered theoretical views. In philosophy, however, scientism has had a more overt impact.

Consider Russell’s view. Russell suggested that we should adopt the ‘method of science’ in philosophy as a condition of achieving knowledge and that ‘solid and durable progress’ can be achieved in philosophy once this approach is embraced (Russell 1963: 93).⁴ Progress in philosophy, then, would be driven by progress in science supported by epistemic virtues such as ‘patience and modesty’. Such virtues are, nevertheless, underpinned by a confidence characteristic of scientism:

Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know (Russell 1998: 45)

This confidence compels us, according to Russell, to ‘abandon the hope of solving many of the more ambitious and humanly interesting problems of traditional philosophy’ (Russell 1963: 93). This consequence is, arguably, disastrous for philosophy and other forms of inquiry through which we seek to understand ourselves and the world. An important theme in Wittgenstein’s work is a deep opposition to scientific confidence, in part because it obscures what is otherwise important subject matter and also because it requires an attitude toward the nature of philosophical practice that he thought profoundly misguided. A problem with scientific confidence is that it abolishes forms of understanding that are relevant to engaging with humanly interesting problems. Or it

abolishes forms of understanding that are needed to even render humanly interesting problems intelligible at all, let alone pursue them.

A scientific assumption is that progress in philosophy is a matter of providing solutions to problems by the discovery of previously unknown facts. But the scientific error here is not just an ontological mistake where the wrong kinds of facts are identified. For Wittgenstein in particular, a problem with scientism is that it imposes an entirely inappropriate structure on philosophical activity; it is the attitude behind the search for facts in the first place that is mistaken, an attitude that is centrally expressed in coming to adopt the scientific method in philosophy.

Wittgenstein's early writings express the view that philosophy is independent of the natural sciences, a view that largely remained in later work albeit for different reasons and with different implications.⁵ Whilst ethics according to the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* could not be investigated in any empirical or scientific way nor even articulated in language at all, the very point of the *Tractatus* was nevertheless an 'ethical one', a point invisible to the realm of scientific investigation.⁶ Arguably there is no shift of principle in Wittgenstein's later work with regard to the independence of philosophy from science, although different reasons are considered as to why philosophical and natural scientific inquiry are autonomous. In 1929, a time when Wittgenstein's thought was in transition from the ideas that dominated the *Tractatus*, ethics was nonetheless regarded as 'supernatural' and quite outside the subject matter and methodology of scientific investigation (LE 7). In the 'Lecture on Ethics', for instance, one contrast that Wittgenstein seemed to have in mind was between different ways of regarding the world, or aspects of it, and, consequently, different ways in which our knowledge and understanding can be enhanced. He writes in the concluding parts of that lecture that ethics cannot be a science nor part of any science and thus 'does not add to our knowledge in any sense' (LE 12).

In part this reflects Russell's view about the steady accumulation of facts and the subsequent growth of scientific understanding on the one hand, and what is deemed essential to ethical thought and practice on the other.⁷ According to Russell, and a view still persistent in contemporary moral philosophy, the essence of ethical discourse is the expression of 'desire' (Russell 1998: 43). For Wittgenstein, ethics is independent of 'facts' which, as he puts in the lecture, are all on the 'same level': under one kind of description the 'facts' of a murder are on the same level as the 'facts' about why a stone falls to the ground. In contrast, ethics is 'intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters' and so occupies a distinct level.

The motivation to regard ethics as supernatural comes, I think, from the context which informed Russell's scientism: that the proper contrast to what is 'natural' and what can be investigated naturalistically is 'supernatural'. Whilst this seems to be the view suggested by Wittgenstein's early writings, it is one amongst others that is retracted in later work such as the *Philosophical Investigations*. Although Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical practice had no place for the idea that we can advance in philosophy by accumulating facts, he did not thereby conclude that philosophy was supernatural; neither did he conclude that we should be suspicious of facts as such.

I do not think that this alleged independence implies that Wittgenstein adopts a kind of non-naturalism. In my view Wittgenstein came to elaborate a distinctive kind of naturalism, one that helps bring into view the inadequacies of scientism and the error of supposing that scientific naturalism has a privileged status with regard to what counts as reality and to how we might investigate it.⁸ Furthermore, the relevant form of naturalism

can help expose a (scientistic) tendency to equate what is not scientific with what is supernatural. That there is in Wittgenstein a distinctive kind of naturalism suggests that we ought to distinguish between his opposition to scientism on the one hand from his relation to naturalism on the other. In particular this can help expose a mistaken assumption that one can infer Wittgenstein's (or anyone else's) anti-naturalism from remarks that are explicitly anti-scientism. This assumption makes the mistake of preserving the thing that needs questioning, the idea that scientism is an intensified and pervasive version of naturalism. The point should be familiar from the work of those seeking to articulate and defend non-scientistic forms of naturalism: one can be critical of scientism without being critical of naturalism.⁹

The issue of elucidating a naturalism that contrasts with the orthodox reductive variety has been the subject of some recent debate. One candidate is a naturalism that is incorporated under the banner of 'liberal naturalism' as developed by, for example, John McDowell, amongst a number of others.¹⁰ McDowell uses a variety of terms to identify a restrictive or reductive naturalism which grants existence only to whatever the natural sciences say exists. This would be 'neo-Humean naturalism', 'empiricistic naturalism' and 'bald naturalism'.¹¹ Alternatively, a so-called 'relaxed naturalism' extends more widely than its scientistic counterpart and includes but is not restricted to the idea of nature as it is conceived by the natural sciences (e.g. McDowell 1996: 89). Such naturalism, as we might expect, is motivated by a view about the relation between science and philosophy. In its liberal mode, naturalism is not anti-science but it is anti-scientism. What liberal naturalism promises is a way between the disjunction of scientism on the one hand and supernaturalism on the other. In doing so, it opens a potential space between naturalism and scientism such that former need not be simply a milder version of the latter. It seems right to say that Wittgenstein's naturalism is 'liberal' (e.g., MacArthur 2009) but this needs considerable clarification which I cannot provide here. As I discuss below, there are versions of non-reductive naturalism that are not consistent with Wittgenstein's views.

3. Explanation/description

Wittgenstein writes that a distinctive current in 'modern thought' is an irresistible but misleading tendency 'to ask and answer questions in the way science does' - the road to 'darkness' as he puts it in the *Blue Book*, for example. Wittgenstein understands the way science operates to at least involve forms of reductionism, a method of 'reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws' (BB 18). In part this methodological tendency reflects a modern 'craving for generality', according to which the explanatory aspirations of natural-scientific investigation have become extended to cover inquiry as such and, presumably, affect how we search for answers and find particular questions pressing. Wittgenstein puts this point in another way. Rather than referring to a 'craving for generality' he suggests an alternative: 'the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case' (BB 18). What constitutes 'the particular case' is not, however, an individual instance of word use or concept application as if each particular case was detached from its place in a wider practice. The details of particular cases are crucial because they illuminate a cluster of features that form part of but do not exhaust the features in light of which we understand and make use of a word or concept.

In the context of philosophical inquiry the craving for generality is mistaken since, as he says just after the lines quoted, the philosopher's task should not involve any kind

of reduction and nor should she be trying to explain anything: philosophy is, instead, 'purely descriptive'. In these remarks in the *Blue Book* about modern thought, Wittgenstein is interested in our treatment of 'natural phenomena', as he puts it, but where such phenomena constitute a rich and diverse subject matter. 'Natural phenomena' covers much more than, as G.E. Moore put it in 1903, 'the subject matter of the natural sciences and also of psychology' (1956: 4). Moore's stipulation dominated twentieth century moral philosophy and is still at least implicitly very influential. But what it expresses is not restricted to the context of attempting to clarify 'goodness', one of Moore's principal aims, and it reflects a general tendency to equate naturalism with scientific inquiry.

The emphasis on what is the right kind of subject matter for philosophical investigation and what it takes to bring that subject matter into view is a recurring theme which is variously treated as fundamental across Wittgenstein's work. It is especially important for the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* (and central in *On Certainty*), in which detail is given about on what our attention ought to be focused – 'the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language', for example, which is contrasted with a conception of language and meaning as a 'phantasm', drained of its embodied and diachronic character (PI §108). In that context, Wittgenstein states that empirical or scientific investigation is 'not of any possible interest', partly because such investigation is typically motivated by a deeper explanatory ambition which, as PI §109 famously recommends, should be replaced by the activity of *description*. The modern view expresses a need to 'say something further', a felt desire to articulate what is beyond or behind phenomena by adducing explanations of them (e.g. Z §313). This need can, Wittgenstein warns, take the form of a 'temptation [that] is overwhelming', producing a 'haunting' sense that only explanations can clarify and overcome a difficulty or puzzle. Descriptions remind us of 'the most important facts', facts about the meaning of words and our understanding that can only be faithfully characterized and thus understood in 'the stream of life' (Z §220; LW I 913).

Wittgenstein emphasizes the plurality of descriptive practices and of what can be described, a diversity that cannot be respected by an explanatory approach. Attending to the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language is not a form of empirical investigation but provides an awareness of the ways that language is inseparably woven into our embodied existence. We ought to treat what Wittgenstein means by 'description' as having a wide scope. For example:

Think how many different kinds of thing are called "description": description of a body's position by means of its co-ordinates; description of a facial expression; description of a sensation of touch; of a mood (PI §24)

Description is an activity that is expressed in a variety of ways and it involves a process of 'assembling reminders' of what our words, actions and gestures mean and how they are entwined with our practices in particular contexts (PI §127). The kind of 'explanation' to which Wittgenstein is opposed tempts us to conceive of what it is that we are trying to explain as if there is something lying behind or inside utterances or actions – as it were, some essence that will be revealed once our ('scientific') explanations are the right ones.

Wittgenstein's emphasis on description is intended to preserve the normativity of words and concepts as they are used in the 'stream of life'. This coupling of description with normativity stands in contrast, on the face of it, with other influential views that

interpret description as a threat to the aim of recognizing and accounting for normativity. Wittgensteinian description is, for instance, different from how it is used by Sellars in his critique of empiricist epistemology. Although both Sellars and Wittgenstein are critical of empiricist epistemology, the former chooses ‘description’ to exemplify a mistaken approach whilst for the latter it is a methodological device that can help avoid it. It is useful to consider this difference and the related scientism that Sellars embraces in order to shed light on the character of Wittgenstein’s views in this context.

In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* Sellars considers and rejects a traditional empiricist account of knowledge. Sellars insists on the condition that, to count as knowing, a person must come to occupy a status of being justified with the ability to justify what they say. Sellars explains that such normative elements to knowledge are irreducible and that they cannot be accounted for by giving an ‘empirical description’ of knowledge (1997: 76). Instead, Sellars claims that the proper characterization of knowing involves placing it in the ‘space of reasons’, a contextualization that reflects the normativity essential to knowing. Now when Wittgenstein proposes that philosophical practice should involve description he is clearly using that term in a quite different way to Sellars. For Sellars, empirical description entirely fails to recognize the normativity of, *inter alia*, human agency and interpersonal regulation in what it is to achieve knowledge. Despite intending a different sense of description, one of Wittgenstein’s core aims in the *Philosophical Investigations*, as in Sellars’s work, is to illuminate the role of human agency and social practice in coming to achieve understanding. These elements can be disclosed through the activity of description, in Wittgenstein’s sense of ‘description’. For example, in one place Wittgenstein likens activities of description to ‘instruments for particular uses’, the contrast being with an alternative (perhaps more Sellarsian) notion of description which depicts merely how something looks, the result being ‘as it were idle’ and in a sense use-less (PI §219).¹²

To an extent both Wittgenstein and Sellars share the view that their subject matter can be faithfully characterized only by recognizing a relevant normative context. Wittgenstein’s insistence on the normative context is not, however, centrally motivated by a concern to characterize knowledge.¹³ In his later work particularly, Wittgenstein is interested in the limitations to our ability to justify what we say and so in order to illustrate how we embody forms of understanding that are ‘beyond being justified or unjustified’ (OC §359). This understanding is a way of being *certain* yet, according to a common interpretation, it must be of a *non-epistemic* form since it is external to justification.¹⁴ But construed outside of its narrower epistemological setting, the idiom of ‘placing in the space of normativity’ or appreciating the irreducibly discursive context of words and actions is part of a broader strategy to direct attention to the lived context in which we think, speak and act. Wittgensteinian description enables this kind of attention, at least in part. If successful our interest is thus redirected from a concern with explanation and, *a fortiori*, from the attempt to ‘place’ the objects of investigation within a world already described by science.

Despite some affinity between Sellars and Wittgenstein in the context of characterizing aspects of our epistemic practices, there are also stark differences. In a passage that is often taken as emblematic of scientism, Sellars writes: ‘*speaking as a philosopher ... in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not*’ (1997: 83). Sellars also writes that ‘what we call the scientific enterprise is the flowering of a dimension of discourse which already exists in what historians call the “prescientific

stage” ’ (1997: 81). This sort of remark is just what Wittgenstein would have expected of the ‘modern view’ and Sellars sees a crucial role for science constraining philosophy which Wittgenstein opposes. Although we would be right to think that philosophy is not itself science nor science-in-waiting, we should not, Sellars thinks, confuse that with the quite different and unwarranted idea that philosophy is independent of science (1997: 80); again, a claim disputed by Wittgenstein. For present purposes, the point of drawing on Sellars is to help elucidate the character of Wittgensteinian description and to indicate how this relates to the ‘placement’ of our practices within an appropriate context. I turn now to address this issue in light of a recent attempt at distinguishing different kinds of naturalism and the relation between this and Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism.

4. Wittgenstein, ‘subject naturalism’, and scientism

Huw Price has drawn a contrast between what he calls ‘object naturalism’ and ‘subject naturalism’ (Price 2004; 2011). Briefly the distinction is this. Object naturalism, in its ‘ontological mode’, is the view that ‘in some important sense, all there *is* is the world studied by science’. Epistemologically, object naturalism claims that any case of genuine knowledge is a case of scientific knowledge (2004: 73). So object naturalism assumes a view about what entities exist where this view is directly informed by natural scientific inquiry. Then, in light of this assumption, we can proceed to ask whether some candidate entity or property can coherently become part of that view. As Price puts it, object naturalism implies that in so far as philosophy is concerned with the nature of objects and properties of various kinds, its concern is with something in the scientifically described natural world or with nothing at all. The objects of philosophical investigation are aspects of the world-as-studied-by-science, or else they are nothing at all (Price 2004: 73). Object naturalism is thus scientistic. Accordingly the question about whether our discourse concerning, for example, values, norms and intentionality can be construed naturalistically, is a question about whether the relevant objects that underpin that discourse can be located in the natural world – thus ‘a sort of thing identifiable by science’ (Price 2011: 188). In Price’s terminology, the central questions here are about whether candidate entities can be ‘placed’ in the world; these he calls ‘placement problems’.¹⁵ Object naturalism expresses a form of scientism since finding the question intelligible as to whether some object can be placed in the world assumes a substantive and unearned metaphysics; unearned since an account of what entities exist and the framework within which objects might be placed (the ‘world’) is supplied by science and is taken for granted. This is an example of Williams and Robinson’s fourth feature of scientism (see above, section 1); it implies that those entities that cannot be satisfactorily placed are supernatural or at least nothing about which we can have genuine understanding and knowledge.

‘Subject naturalism’, in contrast, is not primarily a view about what entities exist, taking the ontology of natural science as its guide and then regarding our practices and discourse in light of that. Rather it claims that our principal focus ought to be on our human practices and modes of discourse as such, not what would constitute a scientifically respectable metaphysical underpinning for those practices. We should begin, says the subject naturalist, with ‘what science tells us *about ourselves*’ (Price 2004: 73). Broadly, science tells us that we are natural creatures, that ‘we humans (our thought and talk included) are surely part of the natural world’ (Price 2011: 5). On the face of it this sort of naturalism is liberal in the sense referred to earlier. There is no pressure to

demonstrate the links between our everyday conceptual practices and their scientifically described material bases. Instead it is our very thought and talk that is the object of naturalistic investigation.

This is a seemingly Wittgensteinian idea: ‘Look on the language-game *as the primary thing*’, as he puts it (PI §656). According to Peter Winch, one of Wittgenstein’s most distinctive methodological characteristics is to refocus attention away from the object to which a concept applies and toward the persons doing the applying and (we might add) to the contexts within which that happens (1997: 60).¹⁶ If this sort of shift can be characterized in naturalistic terms, then a ‘subject naturalism’ seems to be a promising way to frame it. After all, the form of naturalism in question is focused on our linguistic and conceptual practices with no attempt to reductively ‘explain’ those practices or to ‘place’ those objects in some disenchanted non-normative realm.

However, in Price’s formulation, subject naturalism retains the privileged status accorded to science (Macarthur 2014b). Whilst the focus may no longer be on the metaphysical character of that which lies behind our practices, it is nevertheless science that we look to as the point of departure in order to advance our understanding. Our primary question as subject naturalists would be: ‘What does science tell us about ourselves?’ According to Wittgenstein this question would be misguided, given his view that science and philosophy are independent. Price’s contrast between forms of naturalism recognizes that we can ask questions about ourselves and that such questions are at least as important, from a naturalist perspective, as questions that seek to locate the apparent objects of thought and speech in a world described according to science. And this refocus can, according to Price, be achieved whilst preserving the privileged status of science. So whilst it is our conceptual and linguistic practices themselves that become principal focus for the subject naturalist, the motivation is still the view that *science* is best placed to inform us about those aspects of our lives.¹⁷

‘Placement problems’ typically involve those features that are part of discourse about ethics, minds and meaning and whose location in the scientifically described world needs to be demonstrated. In the context of reflecting on the nature of our ethical thought and practice, Simon Blackburn provides a good example of what a placement problem looks like:

The natural world is the world revealed by the senses, and described by the natural sciences: physics, chemistry, and notably biology, including evolutionary theory. However we think of it, ethics seems to fit badly into that world ... the problem is one of finding room for ethics, or of placing ethics within the disenchanted, non-ethical order which we inhabit, and of which we are a part. (Blackburn 1998: 48-9)

In the wider context, Blackburn’s concern is to provide an account of ethical thought and practice that coheres with a scientific world-view and, in various places, Blackburn explains that his proposed quasi-realism in ethics has an advantage over rival meta-ethical views because of its naturalist credentials.¹⁸ I do not want to suggest that Blackburn is scientistic quite generally, but I do regard the way that Blackburn portrays the task of philosophical ethics here to reflect a scientistic attitude and in a way that can be illuminated by drawing on Wittgenstein’s critique.

This way of framing the problem of ‘finding room for ethics’ is scientistic to the extent that it prioritizes the scientific, disenchanted world as that into which the relevant

normative properties need to fit. Finding the problem that Blackburn highlights compelling in the first place requires one to comply with a world-view informed by a disenchanted conception of the world. That conception and its assumed primacy is a condition for making sense of the placement problem. The idea that we are part of a disenchanted, non-ethical order could mean that we are part of the universe like other material objects and subject to the same natural laws and causal forces. What is scientific is the assumption that being part of the non-ethical world is the primary, fundamental way that we exist; other ways – ethical, aesthetic, religious – are considered secondary, at best, to that allegedly more basic existential condition.

No doubt there are a number of forms of inquiry that require considering the world and what it contains as disenchanted. But ethics is, whatever else it is, an embodiment and an expression of our agency, of our human way of life, and it is difficult to see how we could find room for our humanity in an inhuman world. Of course there are important questions about how agency is related to physical capacities, how intentionality is related to neurobiology, how meaning is related to vocalizations and bodily gestures. These are difficult (and hardly novel) questions. What I want to highlight here is the particular effect of a scientific attitude to these questions.

Under the sway of scientism, an ethical placement problem could take on a particular air of inescapability as if the particular kind of problem we face, of placing the ethics in the non-ethical order, is unavoidable once we have given up on supernaturalism. The ethical placement problem is pressing from a distinctive, if optional, perspective – yet scientism makes it seem mandatory. There is nothing intrinsically misleading about wanting to know how ethics is related to the non-ethical world. But scientific prejudice operates in a way that frames the attempt at that knowledge as our singular task, as if tackling this placement problem is compulsory for any philosopher who has proper respect for scientific inquiry. The result is a distinctive kind of puzzle that emerges once a detached perspective is adopted, a perspective that is then gripped by the problem of how, for example, our ethical agency is related to the disenchanted order. The scenario is illustrated by Iris Murdoch, who writes of our depleted vocabulary and conceptual repertoire through which we now struggle to articulate and reflect on our ethical agency. As a result, and under the influence of scientism, a person is now regarded as ‘a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world’ (Murdoch 1961: 18). This picture, potentially, threatens our ability to authentically regard ourselves in an evaluative context, ‘against a background of values’ rather than a background of dehumanized normless mechanisms.

As previously noted in section 3, one of Wittgenstein’s most important contributions to philosophy was to our understanding of agency, and not only in the context of reflecting on the role of social practices referred to earlier. It is central to the emphasis he gives to non-linguistic activity in the context of language-games, in our institution of and answerability to the norms that govern practices and to the idea of a ‘grammatical investigation’. This form of agency cannot be made intelligible by scientism. Wittgenstein’s emphasis on ‘description’ is an attempt at a perspectival reorientation that illuminates the contexts within which our activities are meaningful. The famous remarks that encourage us to ‘look at’ (e.g. PI §66, §320) the use of words and to avoid the (scientific) prejudice that stands in the way is not only an encouragement to change the mode of apprehension so to speak, to switch from thinking and explaining to looking. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein tells us that after justifications come to an end, as they inevitably will, what we are given is not a form of immediate perception of the truth of

propositions but insight into a form of embodied agency that underpins language-games (OC §204). The reorientation shows in a different light what our actions embody. ‘This is how I act’ is not a remark that is bound to discrete instances of, say, getting up from a chair in the absence of prior reflective endorsement (OC §148). When offering justifications for how we obey rules, reporting that ‘[t]his is simply what I do’ is not a concession to scepticism about rule-following once the justifications have been exhausted (PI §217). These remarks indicate that the relevant actions quite literally embody a form of life, a way of inhabiting the world that can be naturalistically construed but stands in direct contrast to characterizations offered from a scientific perspective.

By drawing attention to the rich and diverse content of descriptions, including the prominence this gives to our actions, we can become furnished with a ‘sensuous awareness’ as Marie McGinn puts it, of phenomena as inextricably nested within human forms of life (2010: 347). This kind of awareness is simply unavailable from a scientific perspective since it requires the point of view of an engaged participant and a way of understanding that is contrary to the tenets of scientific metaphysics and epistemology. We could add that this awareness is not reducible to knowing that certain propositions are true, propositions about our linguistic and conceptual practices, for example. The reorientation that is needed to accomplish this awareness is arguably a reawakening of an attitude to ourselves and what we do in the midst of human life. That, presumably, is part of Wittgenstein’s view about the aim of philosophy being to clear away misunderstandings through illuminating what is already before our eyes (e.g. PI §129), of supplying ‘remarks on the natural history of human beings ... contributing observations which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes’ (PI §416). The tendency to overlook what is familiar is arguably exacerbated by a scientific pressure to seek explanations of ordinary phenomena. Wittgenstein’s attitude in this context and the more general opposition he voices toward the idea that philosophy, like science, advances by accumulating more facts, is regarded as anti-naturalist because scientism distorts how we characterize philosophical naturalism. And this, amongst others, is one aspect of scientism that can be challenged.

5. Concluding remarks

P.M.S. Hacker writes of our intellectual and academic culture being ‘intoxicated with science and scientific explanation’ and how such a culture blocks a more hermeneutic understanding of ourselves and our practices (2011: 99-100). Here I have tried to show that whilst such a form of understanding is threatened by scientism it need not be so threatened by naturalism. In particular, I have suggested that we can isolate the ways that Wittgenstein is against scientism from the naturalist elements in some of his later work. Wittgenstein’s remarks against science are most profitably taken to be against scientism, against the tendency to take for granted the appropriateness and utility of a scientific attitude with regard to any questions whatsoever. This aspect of Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism and his more positive remarks about the ineliminable role of social context and agency can help to reinterpret Russellian pessimism about our ability to engage with humanly interesting philosophical problems. The scientism that motivated that pessimism was counterbalanced by a form of confidence in the progress that philosophy could make by adopting the scientific method. But opposition to the sort of scientism that Russell expressed need not imply an opposition to naturalism in philosophy. Wittgenstein’s remarks about the misleading influence of science on philosophy would

have this implication as long as naturalism is construed as a mild form of scientism. I have suggested that this is an element of scientism that should be resisted and it is also pertinent to clarifying an alternative form of naturalism as formulated by Price. This latter form, although apparently more consistent with Wittgenstein's view about the primacy of our conceptual and linguistic practices, nevertheless retains natural science as the source of our understanding.

Wittgenstein's insistence on the importance of sensitivity to embodied, contextual practice for philosophical inquiry and self-understanding is deeply at odds with the aspiration to locate our practices in, and explain them in light of, the scientifically described world. Alongside the remarks that Wittgenstein makes against scientism, there are naturalistic elements in his work that express the importance of our self-understanding in particular and the role of irreducibly normative contexts. That is at least one reason why Wittgenstein's anti-scientism is still important for contemporary philosophy.¹⁹

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Notes

- ¹ For a recent overview and critical discussion of scientism, see Williams and Robinson 2015.
- ² I have contracted these for reasons of space. Williams and Robinson's characterisations are more detailed than I have presented them here.
- ³ For example, David Pears writes that different kinds of naturalism share the idea that 'the right method in philosophy is not to theorize about things but to describe them as we find them in daily life' (1995: 411). This 'Wittgensteinian' naturalism clearly contrasts with other familiar kinds of naturalism that explicitly embrace a scientific method.
- ⁴ See Baldwin (1975: xvi).
- ⁵ *Tractatus* 4.111: 'Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. (The word "philosophy" must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, but not beside them'.
- ⁶ Wittgenstein described the *Tractatus* in this way in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker in 1919 (Janik and Toulmin 1973: 22).
- ⁷ Elsewhere, Russell proposed that the potential goodness of an otherwise 'scientific civilization' could be ensured by an increase in 'wisdom' as a counterbalance to the increase in 'knowledge' (Russell 1949: 11). Russell writes there that: 'Increase in science by itself is ... not enough to guarantee genuine progress', thus recognizing that progress of civilization is different from progress in science (and philosophy).
- ⁸ Others have argued that Wittgenstein adopts a form of naturalism, albeit of a kind quite unlike scientific naturalism. See, for example, Garver (1994), McGinn (1997), (2010). Kenny (2011) also suggests a way to distinguish between scientism and naturalism in the context of discussing Wittgenstein, science and faith.
- ⁹ See, for example, the essays collected in Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (eds.) (2004; 2010).
- ¹⁰ For a presentation and discussion of 'liberal naturalism' see, for example, De Caro and Voltolini (2010). See also McDowell (1996; 1998a; 2004).
- ¹¹ Although McDowell (2002:297) himself suggests that 'bald naturalism' is not to be equated with 'scientism'. On the place of Hume here, see Smith (2016).
- ¹² Cf. *Zettel* §311.
- ¹³ Some suggest that Sellars's point against description is not in any case just a point in the context of knowledge. Brandom, for example, writes that Sellars may as well have said that in characterizing 'believing' or 'applying concepts' we are not giving an empirical description but placing those actions in the space of reasons (Brandom 1997: 160).

¹⁴ The common interpretation reads passages such as *On Certainty* §511 to show how Wittgenstein deliberately avoids calling basic certainty or ‘sureness’ a form of *knowledge*. But others see nothing intrinsically illegitimate in the idea that such certainty is a form of knowledge. McDowell, for example, sees Wittgenstein’s main concern as one about when it is and when it is not appropriate to ask for the justificatory grounds for a knowledge claim, not so much about when it is appropriate to use the term ‘knowledge’. See McDowell (1998b: 415, n4).

¹⁵ Thus object naturalism promises a response to what Jackson calls ‘location problems’, questions about whether some ‘putative features of the world’ are actually part of the fabric of reality (Jackson 1998: 5).

¹⁶ See also Hertzberg (2011) for a different interpretation of Wittgenstein’s relation to naturalism, one that emphasizes the role of our reactions and responses.

¹⁷ For a connected and more comprehensive discussion of the relation between Price, language and scientism, see Macarthur (2014a) and (2014b).

¹⁸ See, for example, Blackburn (1988).

¹⁹ A version of this paper was presented at the ‘Wittgenstein and Scientism’ workshop held at Durham University on 3rd July, 2012. Many thanks to Ian James Kidd for inviting me to participate and for his and Jonathon Beale’s insightful and very helpful comments on a previous draft of this chapter. I am also grateful to the other participants of the workshop for very stimulating discussion.