

Beale, J & Kidd, I J (eds.) 2017, *Wittgenstein and Scientism*, Routledge, New York, NY.

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The relation between Ludwig Wittgenstein and scientism is complex, and an investigation of it is arguably central to a deeper understanding of Wittgenstein the philosopher and Wittgenstein the human being. Beginning to shed light on this understudied area of scholarship is the task the editors of this volume have set for themselves. Throughout the collection of essays, a picture emerges of a philosopher concerned with the over-estimation of the application of the scientific method, both in the human and social sciences and in the wider culture in which he lived.

Throughout his writings, Wittgenstein provides many remarks concerning what has come to be referred to as scientism, though, as the editors of this collection note, he most likely never used the term, let alone attempted to define it (p. 2). Attempts to define the concept of “scientism” in relation to the work of Wittgenstein would risk instantiating systemic “craving[s] for generality” (BB, p. 18), and thus be guilty of one of the tendencies of scientism itself. The editors therefore suggest that a more careful approach to the use of the term is one that treats scientism as a “family resemblance concept” (p. 1). To this end, the editors take seriously Wittgenstein’s “*look and see*” approach, so as to observe similarities and affinities where they are encountered, rather than beginning from a standpoint from which there “*must*” be something “common to all” instantiations of the concept that are to be discovered (PI 66). This approach allows for “a conception of scientism to emerge, rather than starting with one, derived in the abstract” (p. 2). This methodological choice has overall been a success, although it does leave seemingly important areas of the topic undiscussed or merely alluded to.

The essays in this collection are grouped loosely under three distinct, though occasionally overlapping themes: First, there is the theme of scientism as it appears in Wittgenstein’s writings. In ‘Scientism as a threat to science: Wittgenstein on self-subverting methodologies’, Chon Tejedor argues against the “dominant reading” of scientism that holds that Wittgenstein is centrally concerned with science overreaching into non-scientific areas of our lives (p. 7). Drawing on discussions from the *Tractatus* and ‘A Lecture on Ethics’, Tejedor argues that Wittgenstein is rather concerned with the more fundamental problem of “self-subverting methodologies”, which, in the case of scientism, presents itself as the tendency to combine scientific methodologies with other methodologies. The consequence of such an approach, according to Tejedor, becomes not only a threat *from* science, but a threat *to* science as well (p. 25).

In ‘Superstition, science, and life’, David E. Cooper investigates Wittgenstein’s “defence of religious attitudes, discourses and practices against scientific naturalism” (p. 28). Focusing on what he calls Wittgenstein’s “lifeworld” strategy as it appears in writings from the 1920s, 1930s, as well as later in *On Certainty*, Cooper argues that Wittgenstein’s preoccupation with defending religious belief against accusations of superstition or false science belongs “to his larger attempt to make it less difficult for us to appreciate the groundlessness of beliefs” (p. 33).

In ‘Rituals, philosophy, science, and progress: Wittgenstein on Frazer’, Annalisa Coliva brings out the interconnectedness of four themes found in ‘Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*’: philosophy, anthropology, mythology, and science (p. 39). For Wittgenstein,

according to Coliva, the anthropologist James George Frazer “is the epitome of the dangers inherent to scientism, which he sees as a characteristic feature of Western culture” (p. 39).

In ‘Wittgenstein’s anti-scientistic worldview’, Jonathan Beale focuses on Wittgenstein’s later conception of philosophy as well as Wittgenstein’s negative attitude to the overly scientific times he saw himself as living through (p. 58). Beale argues that Wittgenstein’s “anti-scientism plays an important role in his later conception of philosophy”, and that this can be seen throughout Wittgenstein’s project of surveyable representations, a methodological approach aimed at “seeing connections” (p. 73), ultimately leading to understanding and clarification (see PI 122). For Beale, the late Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism is crucial to understanding his negative cultural attitude, which itself is argued to be influenced by the historian Oswald Spengler, in particular his *The Decline of the West*. Beale argues that Spengler’s influence on Wittgenstein also provides a way of understanding the relation between Wittgenstein’s philosophical and cultural attitudes (p. 74).

Second, there is the theme of the application of Wittgensteinian notions of anti-scientism. In ‘Wittgenstein, scientism, and anti-scientism in the philosophy of mind’, William Child focuses on Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism in relation to the philosophy of mind, paying close attention to an anti-scientistic strand found in the *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume II*. Focusing there on the “treatment of the ‘uncertainty’ of the relation between ‘outer’ behaviour and ‘inner’ experiences and mental states” (p. 81), Child argues that for Wittgenstein, such uncertainty is an essential part of the language-game concerning “ascribing feelings to ourselves and others” (p. 91), making it an inappropriate area of inquiry for the application of the scientific method.

In ‘Reawakening to wonder: Wittgenstein, Feyerabend and scientism’, Ian James Kidd compares Paul Karl Feyerabend’s anti-scientistic attitude with Wittgenstein’s. Kidd argues that the two philosophers’ anti-scientistic tendencies stem from an appreciation of various ways in which pictures of the world “are differently receptive to the recognition, appreciation and cultivation of a sense of wonder at the mysterious background” of human life – a sense of wonder to which scientific pictures are hostile (p. 113).

In “Too ridiculous for words: Wittgenstein on scientific aesthetics”, Severin Schroeder considers a remark on aesthetics from *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, and argues that science cannot tell us what is beautiful or aesthetically pleasing. Instead, aesthetics or art criticism focuses on providing *reasons* for what we experience, rather than the *causes* of those experiences. One must judge for oneself whether the explanation we are provided with enriches our aesthetic experience or leaves us puzzled (p. 130).

In ‘How to think about the climate crisis via precautionary reasoning: A Wittgensteinian case study in overcoming scientism’, Rupert Read brings Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism to bear on one of if not the most pressing issue in modern times. Remarks from *On Certainty* and Nassim Taleb’s insights on risk and uncertainty are taken up to argue that in the case of dangerous anthropogenic climate change, precautionary ways of thinking should guide decision making concerning the technology we use and the ways we choose to live, “*even if* there isn’t even general agreement on the science that models our likely climate future(s)” (p. 144). For Read, this approach highlights the importance of a moral common-sense prevailing in uncertain times.

Third, there is the theme of scientism as a way of understanding Wittgenstein. In ‘The method of the quietist Wittgenstein’, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock argues, against so-called “Therapeutic Wittgensteinians”, that Wittgenstein ought *not* to be read as merely providing a negative philosophical methodology aimed at dissolving philosophical problems, but also a positive, proactive stance aimed at changing both philosophy and science (p. 154).

In ‘Meaning scepticism and scientism’, Genia Schönbaumsfeld focuses on Wittgenstein’s rule-following paradox in the *Philosophical Investigations* and argues that it is set up to persuade the reader to see that a rejection of a form of “supernaturalism” does not entail the acceptance of some form of “meaning scepticism”.

In ‘Wittgenstein, science, and the evolution of concepts’, James C. Klagge begins with a remark from Wittgenstein’s ‘Notes on Logic’ that posits a clear distinction between philosophical and scientific inquiry and traces Wittgenstein’s position here as it becomes more complex towards his final years. Klagge argues that to understand the later Wittgenstein is to understand that where earlier remarks suggested a distinction between empirical and conceptual issues locks scientific investigation out of influencing philosophical concepts (p. 194), later remarks suggest that he came to hold that it is possible for scientific investigations to alter the concepts that are the focus of philosophical inquiry (p. 203). Lastly, in ‘Wittgenstein, naturalism, and scientism’, Benedict Smith makes the case for the possibility of Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism to be “consistent with a form of naturalism” (p. 209).

The picture that emerges from these discussions is not one in which Wittgenstein is seen to be on the whole hostile to science. Child, for example, remarks that “Wittgenstein sees nothing wrong with science or scientific method as such” (p. 81). Rather, Wittgenstein is presented as being concerned with attitudes that “treat scientific method as the only legitimate method of inquiry and scientific explanation as the only genuine kind of explanation” (p. 81). Such an attitude presents itself throughout this collection as various examples of the temptation for human beings (philosophers and otherwise) to attempt “to ask and answer questions in the way science does” (BB, 18), or to hold that science *will* be able to answer “any question or problem that humanity faces” (p. 209). For Wittgenstein, “[i]t isn’t absurd [...] to believe [...] that the idea of great progress is a delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known”, and that in seeking it, human beings may be “falling into a trap” (CV, p. 56e). As the editors note (p. 1), for Wittgenstein, “the age of science and technology” may well be “the beginning of the end for humanity” (CV, p. 56e).

One of the most interesting themes that emerges from the collection is Wittgenstein’s insistence on preserving those distinctively human aspects of life concerned with “celebrating whatever is replete with value” (p. 39). A number of the contributors (beginning with the editors on the very first page of their introduction) remark on Wittgenstein’s insistence on the importance of reawakening in human beings a sense of wonder, as science has become a way of “sending [us] to sleep again” (CV, p. 5e) (see Chapters 2, 3, 5 and 6). This comes out, perhaps, most strikingly in Wittgenstein’s treatment of Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. Coliva outlines the way in which Wittgenstein resists Frazer’s conviction that the scientific method is at the end of a road of progress from the practices first of magic, and then of religion (p. 40). As Coliva continues, what Wittgenstein is adamant to instil in his readers here are reminders of their own human nature. We are not wholly rational beings, and thus, the scientific method is not the ultimate realisation of the human form of life. “[S]pecifically human feature[s]” can be seen in the ways in which we kiss images of our loved ones, stab pictures of our enemies, confess our sins, and hit objects with sticks when we are angry (p.

41). These are not human errors, as Frazer would have it, but are constitutive of the symbolic and ceremonial features of human life, aimed at satisfying human desires (p. 41). To claim that such actions are based on false science is a mistake and is symptomatic of a kind of blindness to the place religious and other beliefs have in our lives.

The editors remark that this collection “seeks to demonstrate that Wittgenstein’s anti-scientism sheds light upon and reveals connections between some of the central areas of his thinking”, and “that examining the role of scientism in Wittgenstein’s thought helps to better understand some of the principal areas of his thought” (p. 5). To this end, the collection is surely a success, as it focuses on a broad range of areas relating to Wittgenstein’s writings on this topic, with only a small amount of perhaps unavoidable repetition, predominantly found in the introductory sections of some of the contributions. However, one criticism that could be levelled at the collection as a whole is the absence of a chapter that explicitly deals with the ethical implications of Wittgenstein’s resistance to scientism. It could be objected that the focus here is on scientism, and not ethics, and so such a chapter would be out of place. Yet many of the chapters do indeed gesture towards the ethical import of Wittgenstein’s attitude towards scientism. For example, Cooper’s remark that “[n]o doubt several factors, moral ones included, contributed to Wittgenstein’s animus against scientism” (p. 36) and Smith’s suggestion that the way in which Simon Blackburn provides a place for ethical thought within a scientific world-view reflects a scientific attitude “to the extent that it prioritizes the scientific, disenchanted world as that into which relevant normative properties need to fit” (p. 218) Further, there is Tejedor’s suggestion that Wittgenstein’s self-subverting nonsense is central to overhauling the traditional practices of, for example, ethics (p. 20), and most crucially, perhaps, Read’s insistence on the need for “*moral common-sense*” (p 144) to prevail when making decisions concerning anthropogenic climate change.

Nevertheless, this collection is a fine starting point for those interested in understanding the various ways in which Wittgenstein’s remarks both in philosophy and in general can be seen as in large part concerned with a defence against various forms of scientism.¹

Bibliography

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¹ Thank you to Lars Hertzberg for helpful comments and suggestions.