

“Wittgenstein Against the Realism/Anti-Realism Distinction”

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ABSTRACT

In his *Blue Book*, Ludwig Wittgenstein puts forward an argument against the general realism/anti-realism distinction in metaphysics. If the argument is right, neither realism nor anti-realism concerning any putative element of reality is permissible. In this paper I am not really concerned with determining whether Wittgenstein's argument is right, but rather with presenting its structure and the assumptions upon which it rests.

The basis of Wittgenstein's criticism is his assertion that metaphysics is, in general, misguided. This assertion rests on the view that metaphysics involves taking grammatical claims as scientific claims. This view is, in turn, seen to rest on various assumptions located in the text of *The Blue Book*.

The common-sense-realism/idealism distinction is used by Wittgenstein as the *particular* realism/anti-realism distinction the destruction of which best serves to show the invalidity of the *general* realism/anti-realism distinction. The common sense makes no hypotheses and is but the grammar of ordinary language is a key assumption in this part of Wittgenstein's argument.

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I

This paper is essentially exegetical, being concerned with understanding Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* argument against the realism/anti-realism distinction in metaphysics⁽¹⁾. I outline here what I take to be the *structure* of Wittgenstein's argument, and also present the several assumptions upon which the argument depends.

II

The realism and anti-realism in which we are interested are *metaphysical* theses — i. e., they deal with the structure of reality². Now, consider these three questions from metaphysics:

- (1) Is there reality?
- (2) Is there physical reality?
- (3) Is there mental reality?

Prima facie, we might count an affirmative response to any of these questions a kind of "realism", and a negative response a kind of "anti-realism".

We are likely to consider a negative answer to question (1) as nonsensical. "Of course there is reality", we are wont to say, "reality is just what we call that which exists. And surely *something* exists". In saying the answer to (1) is "yes" we are affirming what I (non-standardly) call *Metaphysical Realism* (MR)— something is real.

Metaphysical Anti-realism (MA) denies this and is, I would say, inconceivable (how can *nothing* be real?).

MR is a very general (and thus weak) claim. Stronger and more specific claims identify what *in particular* is real (or anti-real). Hence, by the truth of MR, we are guaranteed of the thesis being true *of* at least one *kind* of stuff. Of course, if MR is false of a kind of stuff then MA is true of that same kind of stuff.

Questions (2) and (3), although shocking to the common man, do not produce the same sort of bewilderment question (1) does. Those who answer affirmatively to question (2) hold what I will call *Metaphysical Physical Realism* (MPR); those who answer negatively, *Metaphysical Physical Anti-realism* (MPA). Likewise, "yes" and "no" responses to (3) yield *Metaphysical Mental Realism* (MMR) and *Metaphysical Mental Anti-realism* (MMA), respectively.

The general realism/anti-realism (R/A) distinction in metaphysics seems to hold in that *either MR or MA must be true* (indeed, it is commonsensically obvious that MR is

(1) *The Blue Book* appears in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, New York: Harper Row, 1965. References in the text to *The Blue Book* will be made by putting the appropriate page number(s) inside parentheses.

(2) Metaphysics can, I think, be understood roughly as the study of reality (especially its structure). I am going to leave the concept of reality largely unanalyzed.

true). Those who believe that either MPR or MPA must be true hold what I call the physical R/A distinction. The same position on MMR and MMA yields the *mental* R/A distinction.

III

Wittgenstein means to deny the general R/A distinction, due to its metaphysical (and thus for him misguided) nature⁽³⁾. The core argument, then, is this:

Argument A

- 1a. Metaphysics is misguided.
 - 2a. The general R/A distinction is a metaphysical distinction.
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- 3a. The general R/A distinction is misguided.

Though simple, this argument contains two premises which will get quite specialized support in Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* "system".

Premise 1a represents one of the central claims of *The Blue Book* (18). Its support rests on a controversial characterization of metaphysics. The argument proceeds in this manner:

(3) The pages of interest in *The Blue Book* are from 45-74, with special emphasis on 45-49.

Other philosophers have seen the need to doubt this and more specific R/A distinctions. See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1982, pp. 35-41; and *The Will to Power*, New York: Vintage, 1968, pp. 300-7; Richard Rorty, "The World Well Lost", *Journal of Philosophy*, Oct. 26, 1972, pp. 649-65; Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1986, pp. 183-98; Hilary Putnam, "Realism and Reason", *The Proceedings and Adresse of the American Philosophical Association*, August, 1977, pp. 483-98; and Arthur Fine, "The Natural Ontological Attitude", in *The Shaky Game*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1986, pp. 112-35.

I am, of course, not the first to suggest (or imply) that Wittgenstein gives up the R/A distinction. See concerning this Nicholas F. Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*, Albany: SUNY, 1981, pp. 43, 54, 127, and 164; P. M. S. Hacker, "The Rise and Fall of the Picture Theory", in ed. Irving Block, *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981, p. 100; and Peter Carruthers, "Ruling-Out Realism", *Philosophia*, Sept. 1985, pp. 66-7; Peter Winch, "Im Anfang war die Tat" in Block, p. 168; and Don Mannison, "Hume and Wittgenstein: Criteria vs. Skepticism", *Hume Studies*, Nov. 1987, pp. 138-65.

Some seem to argue that Wittgenstein can be thought of as a kind of realist if we understand realism in a sufficiently restricted sense. See, for example, Lynn Rudder Baker, "On the Very Idea of a Form of Life", *Inquiry*, July 1984, esp. pp. 286-8; and Donald P. Screen, "Realism and Grammar", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Winter 1984, pp. 523-34.

As these works will attest, Wittgenstein discusses realism and anti-realism in other places than *The Blue Book*. For example, in his early philosophy, Wittgenstein seems to espouse a type of solipsism. See his *Notebooks: 1914-1916*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961, pp. 77e-85e; and *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1961, pp. 115, 117, and 119.

Argument B

- 1b. Metaphysics involves taking grammatical claims as scientific claims.
 - 2b. Taking something for what it is not is misguided.
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3b. Metaphysics is misguided.

Determining exactly how we should interpret premise 1b must wait for a later section. Let it suffice that its interpretation, *and support*, come from several assumptions Wittgenstein makes.

Nowhere does Wittgenstein take on the general R/A distinction explicitly. He implies its metaphysical nature by way of claiming the same for all its instances:

Argument C

- 1c. All instances of the general R/A distinction are metaphysical distinctions.
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2c. The general R/A distinction is a metaphysical distinction.

Premise 1c gains its support through a survey of a few of the more prominent instances of the distinction. An inductive argument of the following sort is implied.

Argument D

- 1d. The common-sense-realism/idealism distinction is a metaphysical distinction.
 - 2d. Other kinds of R/A distinctions are metaphysical distinctions.
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3d. All instances of the general R/A distinction are metaphysical distinctions.

Textual support for the claim that Wittgenstein actually held premise 2d will be brought out in a later section.

Highlighted in premise 1d, the classic common-sense-realism/idealism distinction is the most important distinction for Wittgenstein to destroy. Because of the distinction's intuitive nature, its demise serves as a *model* for generating the conclusion of Argument D. However, what exactly *is* the common-sense-realism/idealism distinction?

The common-sense-realism/idealism distinction Wittgenstein attacks can be characterized given the work we did in section II. Wittgenstein's idealist in *The Blue Book* insists that

...[our] personal experiences [of the objects surrounding us] are the material of which reality consists (45).

Hence, we can take idealism to be a combination of MMR and MPA.

The common sense realist of *The Blue Book* is one who notices that we have propositions which describe the material world, and propositions which describe personal experiences, and from this infers that

...we have two kinds of worlds, worlds built of different materials; a mental world and a physical world (47).

Common sense realism, then, is a combination of MPR and MMR, and might also be called *dualism*.

The common-sense-realism/idealism distinction comes down to a dispute over the metaphysical status of the physical *given a realist construal of the mental*. Both sides of the debate are going to agree that *either MPR or MPA must be true*.

Premise 1d concerns one of the oldest and most prevalent disputes in the history of philosophy. Showing that it all rests on a mistake is important for Wittgenstein, as I said above, and deserves special attention. Wittgenstein's argument for 1d, then, is this:

Argument E

1e. Common sense realism and idealism are competing views which both put forward a claim about language *as if* it were a claim about experience.

2e. Common sense realism and idealism are metaphysical theses, their distinction thereby being a metaphysical one.

Support for premise 1e, as for premise 1b above, rests with assumptions to be chronicled later.

Arguments A, B, C, D, and E represent the most general structure of Wittgenstein's argument against the general R/A distinction. Arguments B and C support different premises of A, while D supports the premise in C, and E, in turn, supports the crucial premise of D.

IV

Although Wittgenstein discusses many issues other than realism and anti-realism in *The Blue Book*, there is one which stands out because of its close textual connection with these views—namely, solipsism. I feel I must say something here about why I otherwise ignore what is one of Wittgenstein's favorite topics.

In many of Wittgenstein's works, including our topic of concern here, *The Blue Book*, but also *the Philosophical Investigations*, realism and idealism do not appear simply opposed to one another. Solipsism is often included to make a metaphysical triumvirate. What's more, overall, solipsism gets "more press" than either realism or idealism, often being Wittgenstein's sole object of discussion. Why, then, have I decided to say next to nothing about Wittgenstein and solipsism? I have three reasons.

First, as I just said, Wittgenstein has much more to say about solipsism, and this holds true in *The Blue Book* alone, as well. (63-4, 71-2). To cover solipsism *along with* realism and idealism would take much more space and time than I have.

Second, what Wittgenstein means by "solipsism" is not entirely clear. Consider, for

example, what I call *Metaphysical Solipsism* (MS) — i. e., the view which can be expressed by the claim, “I alone exist”. Just given this rendering of the view, MS cuts across the common-sense-realism/idealism distinction. For, with no constraints on what the lone existent is like, we cannot rule out either irreducible mental attributes or irreducible *physical* attributes. I could be, for example, that I alone exist and *all of the physical world is my “body”*.

Many times when people use the term “solipsism” they have in mind a particular species of this view — namely, the claim that *my experiences are the lone existents*. I call this view *Metaphysical Mentalistic Solipsism* (MMS).

Another view which comes up, perhaps most naturally in a discussion of the Problem of Other Minds, but which is technically not a type of MS, says that *my experiences are the only experiences*: the mental realm is *my* mental realm. Nothing is said about the physical realm, and by this silence we might expect it still to be countenanced. I call this view *Metaphysical Solipsism of the Mental* (MSM).

In Wittgenstein’s Blue Book discussion of “solipsism”, some things which are said suggest that MSM is meant, others that MMS is meant. For example, at one point Wittgenstein writes:

There is a temptation for me to say that only my own experience is real: “I know that I see, hear, feel pains, etc., but not that anyone else does. I can’t know this, because I am I and they are they”(46).

Apparently he is identifying in the first part of the quoted section (i. e., where he says that one cannot know if anyone else has experiences) an epistemic *premise* which, along with some other claim linking what we can know with what there is, leads to solipsism. However, the reason for the epistemic premise is that ‘I am I and they are they’, where “they” refers to other people. How could MS rest on a claim which countenances the existence of other people? This is a point in favor of interpreting “solipsism” as MSM.

What the MMS-interpretation has going for it is that *it*, and not MSM, is a kind of MS. Hence, when, in other places, Wittgenstein discusses solipsism and doesn’t include a reference to others (like ‘they are they’), simply leaving us with the ambiguous claim, ‘only my own experience is real’, we are inclined to think what’s at issue here is MMS (48).

Third, regardless of which interpretation is correct, solipsism does not form a distinction with either realism or idealism which seems as natural as the one between these latter two. One reason for this may be that while realism and idealism are concerned with *if* there is a particular realm of existence —i. e., the physical— whatever Wittgenstein’s solipsism is it concerns how a particular realm of existence —i. e., the mental— is manifested.

If by “solipsism”, then, Wittgenstein meant MSM, a solipsist accepts both MPR and MMR. But common-sense-realism already more clearly represents for us the conjunction

of those views. So why not just concentrate on realism? If, however, "solipsism" is to be read as MMS, then it is just a species of idealism. And again, if we are interested in drawing the common-sense-realism/idealism distinction as forcefully as possible, why not simply concentrate on the more general idealism?

V

We can now discuss some of the assumptions Wittgenstein makes which have a bearing on the premises we left dangling in section III. I will first concentrate on the reasons for holding premise

1b. Metaphysics involves taking grammatical claims as scientific claims.

Later I will shift to an examination of premise 1e.

Assumption 1: We have a tendency to be preoccupied with the method of science. By 'method of science', Wittgenstein means

...the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using a generalization (18).

One might suppose that it is the predictive success of science which is the reason for this tendency in us (17-18).

Assumption 2: Philosophy is simply the study of grammar. Philosophy's task is seen by Wittgenstein to be *restricted* to the question of how we use our words.

Although we may be tempted to talk about more it is important to remember 'to say no more than we know' (45). Indeed, the true philosopher must guard against "doing science", to which philosophy is diametrically opposed.

...[I]t can never be our job [as philosophers] to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. Philosophy really *is* 'purely descriptive' (18).

Assumption 3: Claims can be either symptomatic or criteriological. Wittgenstein draws a distinction between what I will call *symptomatic* claims and those which are *criteriological*. The latter are either true or false by definition. For example,

[i]f medical science calls angina an inflammation caused by a particular bacillus, and we ask in a particular case "why do you say this man has got angina?" then the answer "I have found the bacillus so-and-so in his blood" gives us the criterion, or what we may call the defining criterion of angina (25).

A claim to the effect that angina is had *if* the bacillus is found is, then, a tautology.

Symptomatic claims rest on the notion of a symptom. For Wittgenstein, a symptom is

...a phenomenon of which experience has taught us that it coincided, in some way or other, with the phenomenon which is our defining criterion (25).

If an inflamed throat is a symptom of angina, the to say the latter is present if the former is is a symptomatic claim — not a tautology or contradiction, but an *hypothesis*.

Criteriological (or grammatical) claims are the province of philosophy, while symptomatic claims concern science.

Assumption 4: The manifestations of many general terms are linked only by family resemblance. As Wittgenstein puts it in an example,

If one asks what the different processes of expecting someone to tea have in common, the answer is that there is no single feature in common to all of them, though there are many common features overlapping. These cases of expectation form a family; they have family likenesses which are not clearly defined (20).

Family resemblance is responsible for the ever tricky nature of ordinary language, where apparent analogies mask distinct disanalogies.

We are now in a position to explain premise 1b. According to Wittgenstein, metaphysics has as its source our preoccupation with the method of science (18). This is because in metaphysics we only deal with the criteriological (or grammatical) claim, yet we treat it as a (scientific) hypothesis (35,55). Our scientific focus, with its 'craving for generality', (17-18) screens out the nuances of ordinary language.

VI

Given Wittgenstein's understanding of metaphysics, premise 1e amounts to saying that common sense realism and idealism are metaphysical theses. We now have to see that these two views fulfill the criteria for being metaphysical.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein refers to disputes between common sense realists and idealists (as well as solipsists) as being like this:

The one party attack (sic) the normal form of expression as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being (4).

This, in a nutshell, is what is said in *The Blue Book*. Idealists, in espousing MPA,

(4) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, New York: Macmillan, 1968, #402, p. 122.

really only attack criteriological claims of ordinary language concerning physical objects. They think they replace one hypothesis with another, but instead only replace one notation with another.

Common sense realists, on the other hand, see themselves as supporting common sense in advocating MPR. Yet, all they are doing is defending ordinary language. They, too, make no hypothesis.

We are likely to ask here, "Isn't the issue of common sense a substantive one? Doesn't common sense involve hypotheses, just like science does?" Wittgenstein's answer, which gives us a fifth assumption, is in the negative.

Assumption 5: Common sense, which makes no hypothesis, is but the grammar of ordinary language. In describing his own project Wittgenstein wrote

There is no common sense answer to a philosophical problem. One can defend common sense against the attacks of philosophers only by solving their puzzles, i. e., by curing them of the temptation to attack common sense; not by restating the views of common sense (58-9).

Philosophical (read here "metaphysical") troubles can have non common sense answer since such difficulties are looking for a scientific hypothesis as a cure. Common sense involves grammatical rules for ordinary language; a language which needs no replacing according to Wittgenstein (28).

If Wittgenstein finds fault with the common-sense-realism/idealism distinction because of its metaphysical nature, are we sure he thinks the same of other R/A distinctions? Solipsism, which we have discussed, is a firmly metaphysical thesis, and thus it forms a metaphysical distinction when contrasted with any other metaphysical view. Emergent mentalism —i. e., what I call the view where the mental real, *emerges* from a suitably complex physical realm— is dismissed for the same reason (47). However, the key to seeing that Wittgenstein does indeed hold premise 2d is his short discussion of neutralism.

After remarking on one of the reasons for holding idealism (48), Wittgenstein turns away from the entire common-sense-realism/idealism distinction:

...we are inclined to use our idea of a building-material in yet another misleading way, and to say that the whole world, mental and physical, is made of one material only (48).

I interpret the preceding view as something like a neutral monism. Its decidedly metaphysical nature goes toward supporting premise 2d.

VII

The two most questionable elements of Wittgenstein's argument against the general

R/A distinction come in the form of assumptions 2 and 5. In those assumptions, philosophy and common sense —i. e., entities which, *prima facie*, are *not* solely concerned with the linguistic realm— are strongly linked to ordinary language and its grammar. Without these assumptions, Wittgenstein cannot get his intermediate controversial conclusions about metaphysics, and without these, the R/A distinction is not in danger.

Both assumptions 2 and 5 appear to violate common sense themselves. Unlike common sense claims, 2 and 5 both require justification and lack common acceptance. So, according to Wittgenstein, how are these pieces of “common sense” to be justified? And when is the “common-sense man” our model, and when not? And if 2 and 5 in fact do *not* violate common sense, why does it seem that they do? Answering these questions is part of the project of a critical evaluation of Wittgenstein’s *Blue Book* attitudes towards not only the general R/A distinction, but towards many other issues discussed in that work. Perhaps what I have said here makes such an evaluation easier.