

Could Philosophy be an Empirical Science?

Brentano vs. Wittgenstein

Susan Gabriel

St. Anselm College, Manchester, NH, USA

sgabriel@anselm.edu



Reception date: 20-10-2024

Acceptance date: 06-03-2025

Abstract: As is well known, Franz Brentano claimed that “the true method of philosophy is none other than that of the science of nature.” The claim is striking for a number of reasons. For one, philosophy has traditionally dealt with questions that science tends to avoid, such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the problem of evil. Brentano himself insisted both that philosophy’s method should be scientific in the sense of empirical science, *and* that philosophy should pursue those questions that empirical science typically shuns. Thus he agreed with Auguste Comte in pressing for positive science but disagreed when Comte evicted metaphysics and theology from the positive realm. Among philosophers inspired by work done in the 19th century taking a scientific approach to philosophy, there are to be included not only some of Brentano’s students, such as Husserl, but also the Bertrand Russell of logical atomism, and his student/colleague Ludwig Wittgenstein. In this paper, I propose to examine the question of whether philosophy can be an empirical science, by contrasting Brentano’s view with Wittgenstein’s. The Viennese engineer-turned-philosopher devised a way of thinking about philosophical questions which retained the precision of a science but limited the scope of such questions to the examination of certain grammatical puzzles. By contrast, although he shunned the system-building of Kant, Schelling, and Hegel, Brentano remained mindful of the big picture in a way that Wittgenstein seems to rule out. I first present Brentano’s view that philosophy is a science, as it is contained in his early lecture, “Auguste Comte and Positive Philosophy.” Then I present a reply in the spirit of Wittgenstein. In conclusion I attempt to sort out the truth of the matter.

“Vera philosophiae methodus nulla alia nisi scientiae naturalis est.”

Brentano (1867: 3)

“Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness.”

Wittgenstein (1965: 18)

As is well known, Franz Brentano claimed that “the true method of philosophy is none other than that of the science of nature.”¹ There is more than one way to construe this claim; for instance, Oskar Kraus’s German version, with a nod to modernity, points to the method of the “natural sciences” (*natürliche Wissenschaften*).² But based on Brentano’s Latin one could think more in terms of the Thomistic sense of a “science of nature,” in the spirit of Aristotle’s *Physics*.³ Either way, however, the claim is striking for a number of reasons. For one, in colleges and universities today, philosophy is grouped with the humanities, not with the sciences. Further, while science generally commands respect in our culture – think of the current emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education – the term ‘philosophy’ is commonly relegated to the realm of the abstruse, or of mere speculative opinion. And again, philosophy has traditionally dealt with questions that science avoids, such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the problem of evil. As a 19th century thinker, however, Brentano basically knew or expected all of this, yet he insisted that philosophy’s method should be scientific in the sense of empirical science, *and* that philosophy should pursue those questions that empirical science typically shuns.⁴ Thus he agreed with Auguste Comte in pressing for positive science but disagreed when Comte evicted theology and metaphysics from the positive realm.⁵

Among philosophers inspired by scientific work done in the 19th century and taking a scientific approach to philosophy, there are to be included not only some of Brentano’s students, such as Husserl, but also the Bertrand Russell of logical atomism, and his student/colleague, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Setting aside the members and the work of the Vienna Circle, who also fit this mold in one way or another,⁶ suppose we try to examine the question of whether philosophy can be an empirical science, by contrasting Brentano’s view with Wittgenstein’s.

¹ This is my translation of Brentano’s Latin. German and English translations vary a bit. See Brentano (1867: 3). Hereafter VS.

² See also Haller (1988: 3): “This involves a two-fold claim: first, that the separation of an empirical and a transcendental method proposed by Kant was to be revoked, in favor of the former; and secondly that with the bringing to end of the methodological separation, [. . .] scientific standards – in the strict sense of the natural sciences – should at all events be retained.”

³ I am inclined to agree with Werner Sauer that the Thomistic and Aristotelian reading of Brentano’s intention is correct. See Sauer (2000). But see also Huemer (2018). Huemer disagrees with Sauer, holding that Brentano’s insistence on scientific method actually is revolutionary and opens up a whole new way of doing philosophy.

⁴ See Brentano (1873). From a perspective that he held to all his life, Brentano sarcastically refers to atheism as “the Gospel of the 19th century,” and to the mistaken view of theism as something science has surpassed. He even predicts that the future will not belong to atheism. “Atheism itself,” he concludes, “is no legitimate son of science” (my translation). Surely, he has in mind texts such as Aristotle’s *Physics*, 242a16-243a30, proof of an unmoved mover.

⁵ See Brentano’s defense of traditional philosophy in Brentano (1873).

⁶ See Huemer (2018). See also “Was Wittgenstein a Neopositivist?” in Haller (1988: 27-43). Also very interesting in this connection is Stern (2013).

The Viennese engineer-turned-philosopher devised a way of thinking about philosophical questions which retained the precision of a science but limited the scope of inquiry to the examination of certain grammatical puzzles. By contrast, although he shunned the system-building of Kant, Schelling, and Hegel, Brentano held on to the traditionally broad view of philosophy's task as involving metaphysical questions, such as the existence of God and theodicy, that go beyond linguistic considerations.

In what follows, I shall first present Brentano's view, that philosophy is a science, as it is contained in his early lecture, "Auguste Comte and Positive Philosophy" (Brentano, 1869). Then I shall present commentary in the spirit of Wittgenstein. Then I shall try to arrive at the truth of the matter.

1. Brentano on positive philosophy

In 1869, Brentano published an essay on Auguste Comte's positive philosophy, addressed to a Catholic audience who he knew would not be initially receptive to Comte's views. His purpose was to show that, despite several conceptual flaws, Comte's insistence on positive science was actually a retrieval of the spirit of Aristotelian metaphysics and, as Brentano has it, theology.¹ As Brentano points out, Comte's very resistance to contemporary dominant influences in philosophy, specifically Hegel and Schelling, is what shows him to have, in principle at least, an affinity for *philosophia perennis*, traditional philosophy:

Comte saw clearly the defects in our philosophy and the evils of our time generally; he often understood its foolishness and what it lacked better than others did. And we must grant that he was eager to help, even though unfortunately his eagerness was not rightly inspired. Thus he was, though it seems impossible, a scholar who banished God from philosophy and yet held the Catholic Church in remarkably high regard and repeatedly sought salvation in the Church's structure without ever seeking it in the Church herself. (Brentano, 1869: 8)²

¹ When Brentano refers to theology in his own or Aristotle's conception of it, he means what we now usually call "natural theology," that is, not religious thought but rather philosophical attempts to answer questions about God, the soul, and the problem of evil without recourse to any religious texts or beliefs.

² My translations throughout. Brentano's reference here is to Comte's "religion of humanity."

How did Comte come to “banish God from philosophy”? The answer has to do with Comte’s theory of the three stages of the development of human thought.¹ In the beginning, he says, people thought “theologically” or “fictitiously,” imputing natural events to the forceful intervention of gods, such as Zeus or Poseidon, who had control over the heavens or the sea, and so forth. Later, abandoning this primitive kind of thinking, people discerned the forces of nature in a more sophisticated way, considering such attributes of matter as weight and velocity to be inherent properties of things, though also having an independent existence of their own. This stage he called “metaphysical,” because it posits an ontology rich with essences and quiddities (as Hobbes would say), non-personal agents that account for what happens. Finally, dissatisfied with the metaphysical stage, people turned to “positive science.” What is the nature of positive science?

[. . .] we see that its fundamental character consists in regarding all phenomena as subsumed under unchangeable natural laws. The precise statement of these laws, and tracing them back to the smallest possible number of laws, are the goals of all the positive thinker’s efforts. By contrast, research into what are called causes, whether efficient or final, seems fruitless and senseless. (VS: 14)

Brentano takes this dismissal of causal investigations in the traditional sense as characterizing Comte’s positive science, unlike the traditional science of nature as found in Aristotle, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas.² Brentano’s claim is that one can accept, approve, and promote positive science without losing the audacious inquiry into causes that characterized ancient, medieval, and early modern science of nature and philosophy. In order to show this, he re-examines Comte’s three stages.

Comte’s “theological” stage Brentano prefers to call a “person fabricating” stage. In other words, far from being theological in the proper sense, this primitive stage in human thinking is rather a child-like imputation of will to imaginary beings who have control over the forces of nature in somewhat the same way as we have control (to a certain extent) over our limbs. Similarly, Brentano prefers to call Comte’s “metaphysical” stage an “entity fabricating” stage, because rather than willful quasi-persons it postulates essences which are non-personal entities that attach to things and govern their movements. Far from being an empirically-based, rational

¹ I present only Brentano’s interpretation of Comte, without delving into Comte scholarship proper.

² See Brentano’s defense of scholasticism in his 1870 review (Brentano, 1870).

study of ontology or of the soul, this stage multiplies entities beyond necessity (as Ockham would say) in that weight, for instance, is attributed to bodies, or “soporific powers” to opium, in addition to the falling and falling asleep, respectively, that can be observed. Finally, Comte’s “positive” stage earns Brentano’s admiration because of its insistence and emphasis on empirical data.

At the same time, however, Comte’s positive stage brings with it a significant limitation of our inquiries into the causes of natural phenomena:

Comte denies concerning bodies and their characteristics in which we seek the cause of their movements, that we can acquire such a perfect knowledge as to be able to tell why they appear to operate in a given way, and why they must do so. We cannot understand this the way we know from the concepts of two numbers, say, the number 4 and the number 2, why the one is twice the other and why it must be so. The basis of their quantitative relation is clear to us from the concepts. (VS: 18)

Natural forces, though, such as gravitation, are not likewise knowable to us “from the concepts” without experience. Further, according to Comte, the knowledge we are able to acquire about nature is such that the causes of natural phenomena must remain hidden from us:

The Sun attracts the Earth because it attracts *all* bodies, as so does *every other* body with respect to *every other* body. Thus we see in what sense we know the cause here, and in what sense it remains hidden from us; we know that some thing or other is causally operative, we also know that the cause lies in this or that thing, but without actually understanding or explaining the how and why. (VS: 19)

Although this limitation on our knowledge of natural phenomena is consistent with empiricism as advocated by empiricists at least since Hume, Brentano finds it not entirely acceptable to the extent that it rules out the pursuit of questions about the existence of God. For he considers proper proofs of God’s existence to be founded on an empirical basis.¹

By saying that a rational being is the principle of the world and its order, one has by no means claimed to have an insight into the formation of the world, the very insight that is

¹ See Brentano (1987: especially 155-212). See also Gabriel (2017) and Gabriel (2018).

denied to our understanding in the case of more proximate effects. Who would venture to say that he, strictly speaking, understands and grasps God's nature and free act of creation [. . .]? However, *that* there is a God, and that he freely brought forth this world, these are truths that are perhaps to be affirmed quite solidly in spite of this. The one and the other are completely different matters. (VS: 20)¹

In other words, a distinction must be made between Brentano's empiricism and the empiricism of Comte; the former allows pursuit of metaphysical and (natural) theological questions while the latter does not. So Brentano concludes: "This position taken by positive philosophy does not *a priori* justify condemning research into a proof for the existence of God" (Ibid.) And by "research," Brentano clearly means scientific research, research conducted according to scientific method. This is what he emphasized in psychology, both descriptive and genetic, as well as what he applied to metaphysical questions concerning God.

2. Wittgenstein on science and philosophy

In his discussion of philosophical puzzles about the nature of time in *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein insists that what needs to be clarified is the grammar of the word 'time,' not time itself taken as an object of inquiry.

Very often the way the discussion of such a puzzle runs is this: First the question is asked, "What is time?" This question makes it appear that what we want is a definition. [. . .] The question is then answered by a wrong definition; say: "Time is the motion of the celestial bodies." But this only means that we don't use the word "time" synonymously with "motion of the celestial bodies." However, in saying that the first definition is wrong, we are now tempted to think that we must replace it by a different one, the correct one. (Wittgenstein, 1965: 27)²

¹ Thus, for purely scientific reasons in the Aristotelian sense, Aquinas (following Aristotle) notes that the first unmoved mover must be immobile, eternal, and without magnitude. See Aquinas (1995: lecture 12, §1076, and lecture 23, §1172, respectively). Yet these reasoned conclusions do not purport fully to disclose God's nature.

² See also Wittgenstein (1958: §89). Hereafter PI. See also "The Language of Sense Data and Private Experience," in Wittgenstein (1993: 366). Hereafter PO.

Several of Wittgenstein's commitments are operative here. One is his so-called "antireferentialism," that is, his view that it is a mistake to think that nouns invariably refer to actual objects.¹ Perhaps time is not an object, like a book or a chair. Another is his pragmatism, that is, his view that the meaning of a term is to be found in its use (Fogelin, 1996: 46, 49-50)². And a third is his descriptivism, that is, his view that philosophy does not analyze things in the way that science, for instance, analyzes water into two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen (Fogelin, 1996: 36); rather philosophy *describes*, that is, it aims to provide a perspicuous representation (*übersichtliche Darstellung*) which "directs our attention to the similarity, the relatedness, of the *facts*."³ Our vision of the facts already given is at issue; there is no question of any discovery of new facts. Thus, "Philosophy, as we use the word, is a fight against the fascination which forms of expression exert upon us" (Wittgenstein, 1965: 27). The way to address time philosophically, then, is to note different uses of the term, as in "What time is it?" "How much time do we have?" and "It is now time to face facts," and so forth. Likewise, with respect to Socrates' question, "What is knowledge?":⁴

We should reply: "There is no one exact usage of the word 'knowledge'; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used." [. . .] We may mistakenly think that a definition is what will remove the trouble [. . .] Philosophers very often talk about investigating, analyzing, the meaning of words. But let's not forget that a word hasn't got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word means. A word has the meaning someone has given to it. (Wittgenstein, 1965: 27-28)

Because the meanings of words are in a certain sense arbitrary, for Wittgenstein, science and philosophy are completely different intellectual enterprises. The sciences aim to understand

¹ See Fogelin (1996). Fogelin organizes Wittgenstein's thought, probably making it appear more systematic than it is, although the commitments he attributes to Wittgenstein can be found variously and repeatedly in Wittgenstein's writings. The question how consistently they were adhered to goes beyond the scope of the present discussion.

² See also Wittgenstein (1975: §61).

³ Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Baugh," in PO: 133. See also PI: §122: "A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. – A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing the connections.' Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases*."

⁴ Remarkably, Wittgenstein writes: "Reading the Socratic dialogues one has the feeling: what a frightful waste of time! What's the point of these arguments that prove nothing and clarify nothing?" See Wittgenstein (1980: 14e).

the natures of external things, such as the elements of matter. But, as Wittgenstein insists: “[The d]ifficulty of philosophy [is] not the intellectual difficulty of the sciences but the difficulty of a change of attitude.”¹ And he continues, “work on philosophy is – as work in architecture frequently is – actually more of a kind of work on oneself. . . . Philosophy shows the misleading analogies in the use of language.”² Hence his emphasis on grammar, “which could be called the *descriptive science* of speaking, in contrast to that of thinking.”³ G.E. Moore tells us:

[Wittgenstein] went on to say that, though philosophy had now been “reduced to a matter of skill,” yet this skill, like other skills, is very difficult to acquire. One difficulty was that it required a “sort of thinking” to which we are not accustomed and to which we have not been trained – a sort of thinking very different from what is required in the sciences.⁴

Again, a scientist discovers that water is made up of hydrogen and oxygen, but “we [philosophers] know at the start all the facts we need to know.”⁵

Not only did Wittgenstein refuse to consider philosophy a science, he actually had an aversion to academic philosophy and to science generally because of science’s place in modern culture. He condemned and was “honestly disgusted with” the worship of science (Monk, 1990: 404), and Ray Monk holds that Wittgenstein’s lectures on mathematics “form part of [his] general attack on the idol-worship of science” (Monk, 1990: 416), being an effort to counter the erroneous metaphysical assumptions of mathematicians. Moreover:

Wittgenstein’s hostility towards professional philosophy [. . .] in the years of ‘reconstruction in Europe’ that followed the Second World War [. . .] seemed to become fused with an apocalyptic vision of the end of humanity. [. . .] What links this apocalyptic anxiety with his hostility to academic philosophy is his detestation of the power of science in our age, which on the one hand encouraged the philosopher’s ‘craving for generality,’ and on the other produced the atomic bomb. (Monk, 1990: 484-485)

¹ Wittgenstein, “The Big Typescript,” in PO: 161.

² *Ibidem*.

³ “The Big Typescript,” PO: 163, emphasis added. See also PI: §371, §373, §496, §497.

⁴ G.E. Moore, “Wittgenstein’s Lectures in 1930-33,” in PO: 113.

⁵ G.E. Moore, “Wittgenstein’s Lectures in 1930-33,” in PO: 114. See also PI: §109: “The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known.”

In a word, what Brentano presents as Comte's idea of positive science is something rejected by Wittgenstein as applicable in philosophy, nor would he venerate it in science. One might note that Brentano lived and worked well before science "produced the atomic bomb," and thus did not have Wittgenstein's reasons for being suspicious of positive science. But he knew enough about the suspicions regarding philosophy, I would say, to be confident of his appreciation, as far as it goes, for Comte.¹

So what about the philosophical questions concerning God that Brentano would include in scientific philosophy and that Comte rejected as being beyond the bounds of positive science? In keeping with his antireferentialism, his pragmatism, and his descriptivism, Wittgenstein suggests instead that we consider the grammar of the word 'God.' Again, G.E. Moore tells us:

About "God" [Wittgenstein's] main point seemed to be that this word is used in many *grammatically* different senses. He said, for instance, that many controversies about God could be settled by saying, "I'm not using the word in such a sense that you can say . . . , " and that different religions "treat things as making sense which others treat as nonsense, and don't merely deny some proposition which another religion affirms"; and he illustrated this by saying that if people use "god" to mean something like a human being, then "God has four arms" and "God has two arms" will both have sense, but that others so use "God" that "God has arms" is nonsense – and would say "God can't have arms."²

As a recent example, according to Reuters, "Indian villagers have erected a shrine to 'goddess corona' and are offering her prayers in the hope that divine intervention can banish the deadly virus."³ The grammar of the Goddess Corona is quite different from the grammar of the god of the Apostle's Creed, "God the Father almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth." But that is only to say that the use of each expression can rightly be described as quite different from the use of the other. The rules that govern god-talk vary. Or in the spirit of Wittgenstein, god-talk functions according to the rules of a given *language-game*.⁴

¹ See Brentano (1874). See also Gabriel (2022).

² G.E. Moore, "Wittgenstein's Lectures," in PO: 103-104.

³ Reuters, 14 June 2021, as printed in the *New Hampshire Union Leader*, p. B10.

⁴ For clarification of what Wittgenstein means by a language-game, see PI: §23-24, and §47: "Asking, 'is this object composite?' *outside* a particular language-game is like what a boy once did, who had to say whether the verbs in certain sentences were in the active or passive voice, and who racked his brains over the question whether the verb 'to sleep' meant something active or passive." Note, however, that according to Michael Kober, Wittgenstein never defined the expression 'language-game' (see Kober, 1996). Note also what Wittgenstein says about doubt and certainty in a language game: ". . . the absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language-game," and "But why *am* I so certain that this is my hand? Doesn't the whole language-game rest on this kind of

Moreover, for Wittgenstein, religious language is poetic or allegorical:

For when we speak of God and that he sees everything and when we kneel and pray to him all our terms and actions seem to be parts of a great and elaborate allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win, etc., etc.¹

The Hindus worshiping the Goddess Corona are praying for a *miracle*, deliverance from the pandemic which has hit India particularly hard. This practice fits perfectly with the allegory in which Corona has power and humans beseech her to take pity. For Wittgenstein, “This shows that it is absurd to say, ‘Science has proved that there are no miracles.’ The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle.”² The religious use of language, i.e., the language-game of religion, is quite different from the scientific use of language, i.e., the language-game of science, in that the latter confines itself to facts while the former (along with ethics) tolerates inconsistent and nonsensical expressions. “This running against the walls of our cage,” says Wittgenstein, “is perfectly, absolutely hopeless.”³ Nonetheless, he adds, “I personally cannot help respecting [it] deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.”⁴ He had respect for religion, but not so much for traditional philosophy, which he meant to replace with “a ‘synopsis’ of trivialities.”⁵

certainty? Or: isn’t this ‘certainty’ (already) presupposed in the language game? Namely by virtue of the fact that one is not playing the game, or is playing it wrong, if one does not recognize objects with certainty” (Wittgenstein, 1975: §370 and §446, respectively). Thus not only do certainty (and by extension truth) apply only within a larger context – “What I hold fast to is not *one* proposition but a nest of propositions” (Wittgenstein, 1975: §225) – but certainty (truth, too) necessarily has no application outside such context. Thus, for Wittgenstein, no language-game has any transcendent purpose in terms of seeking the truth.

¹ Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics,” in PO: 42.

² “A Lecture on Ethics,” in PO: 43.

³ “A Lecture on Ethics,” in PO: 44.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ See G.E. Moore, “Wittgenstein’s Lectures,” in PO: 113-114: “He said that what he was doing was a ‘new subject,’ and not merely a stage in a ‘continuous development’; that there was now, in philosophy, a ‘kink’ in the ‘development of human thought,’ comparable to that which occurred when Galileo and his contemporaries invented dynamics; that a ‘new method’ had been discovered, as had happened when ‘chemistry was developed out of alchemy’ [. . .] As regards his own work, he said it did not matter whether his results were true or not: what mattered was that ‘a method had been found’ [. . .] He did not expressly try to tell us exactly what the ‘new method’ which had been found was. [. . .] He said, that the ‘new subject’ consisted in ‘something like putting in order our notions as to what can be said about the world,’ and compared this to the tidying up of a room [. . .] I imagine that it was in this respect of needing a ‘synopsis’ of trivialities that he thought that philosophy was similar to ethics and aesthetics.”

3. Proposed resolution of the question

Returning to Brentano's claim, that the proper method in philosophy is the same as the method of the science of nature, let us consider what light Wittgenstein's discussion might shed on the matter. I do not mean to suggest that there could be any real mediation between the two thinkers on this topic; their disagreements are too sharp and too fundamental about the tasks and scope of philosophy, though there may be some agreement about the tasks and scope of science. But there is a sense in which Wittgenstein's intuition about philosophy and science, as about religion and science, can function as a useful modification of Brentano's claim.

For Brentano, it was extremely important to get philosophy back in touch with empirical reality. You could say that, from Brentano's standpoint, Hegel and Schelling had lifted both of philosophy's feet off the ground, whereas Brentano wanted to put at least one foot back down. Wolfgang Huemer points out, though, that by indicating the method of natural science as uniquely appropriate in philosophy, Brentano probably did not mean to adopt what we now understand as "philosophical naturalism," nor did he mean to endorse Vienna Circle positivism (Huemer, 2018: 53-71, and 54-59). Rather, he understood 'scientific' in the traditional sense, meaning "based on experience and proceeding by induction and deduction" (Huemer, 2018: 60). Brentano himself tells us as much with repeated praise for Aristotle, including in the lecture on Comte.¹

At the same time, it is also true that Brentano wanted to *retain* metaphysics and natural theology, contrary to Comte's ideal of positive science, and that when he did so – in the lectures on God's existence, including dictations he made late in life² – his reliance on empirical data varied quite a bit and was increasingly superseded by rational reflection and a priori reasoning.³

Nevertheless, it is true that subsequent philosophers, both Husserl and the phenomenologists, as well as analytic philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition, have focused on and upheld the idea of philosophy as a science, and as noted above, even

¹ See VS: 23: "According to the greatest theist of antiquity, Aristotle, heaven and Earth are borne by the one divine intelligence. Nevertheless, he established the rule that when asking about the cause of a phenomenon, its proximate principles must be given, the proximate matter, the proximate efficient cause and so on with regard to the others." See also VS: 27: "And so [the early history of philosophy] goes on until Aristotle who, though he was a theist, was not a theological thinker in the pejorative sense, although (even his greatest admirers cannot deny this) he was not entirely free of metaphysical conceptions in much of what he taught, e.g., about potency and act, substance and accident, etc. But his fundamental character was already that of a positive researcher."

² See Brentano (1987: in particular 308-337, "The Train of Thought in the Proof of God's Existence (1915)")

³ See Tiefensee (1998: 465): "The a priori tendency of his thought that is increasingly evident in the last years of his life is prevalent [in his philosophy of religion]" (my translation.)

Wittgenstein on occasion refers to grammar as a science, grammar doing duty for philosophy, in his view.

Writing in German, both Brentano and Wittgenstein commonly use the term ‘*die Wissenschaft*,’ of course, but the connotations of this term in German are not exactly the same as the connotations of ‘science’ in English. As a result, it sounds quite a bit less odd in German to say that philosophy is “*eine Wissenschaft*” than it does in English to say that philosophy is “a science.” Both ‘*Wissenschaft*’ and ‘science’ have the core meaning of a “systematic body of knowledge,” and both terms are also used sometimes in a narrower, sometimes in a broader sense. Apparently, Wittgenstein is using *Wissenschaft* in the narrower sense when he says that philosophy is not a *Wissenschaft*, since he does not avoid calling grammar a *Wissenschaft*. I believe, however, that Brentano also uses *Wissenschaft* in the narrower sense when he insists that philosophy *is* a science, or *ought to be*, since he associates it with Comte’s positive science. Wolfgang Huemer concludes that Brentano was a systematic philosopher although not a “system philosopher” (see Huemer, 2021). The distinction is illuminating because, although Brentano arguably did not build a system along the lines of Kant’s transcendental idealism, for instance, he was nevertheless a systematic – and in that sense scientific – thinker. By contrast, Wittgenstein appears to be deliberately non-systematic. His aphoristic style, which verges on stream-of-consciousness, indicates an aversion to the application of scientific method, even in the broad sense of it, to philosophical questions. Indeed, he tells us, “People sometimes say they cannot make any judgment about this or that because they have not studied philosophy. This is irritating nonsense, because the pretense is that philosophy is some sort of science.” And again, “Wisdom is cold and to that extent stupid. (Faith on the other hand is a passion.) It might also be said: Wisdom merely conceals life from you. (Wisdom is like cold grey ash, covering up the glowing embers.)” And, “Philosophy hasn’t made any progress? – If somebody scratches the spot where he has an itch, do we have to see some progress? Is it not genuine scratching otherwise, or genuine itching? And can’t this reaction to an irritation continue in the same way for a long time before a cure for the itching is discovered?” (Wittgenstein, 1980: 29e, 56e, and 86e-87e, respectively). What counts as progress in philosophy for Wittgenstein is clearly less than what Brentano would expect.

Interestingly, the upshot seems to be that when Brentano says that philosophy is, or should be, a science, he means to grant philosophy a fair amount of power, so to speak, when it comes to knowing or gaining knowledge. By contrast, when Wittgenstein says that philosophy is not a science, when he relegates it to “a fight against the fascination which forms of expression

exert upon us,” he is making the opposing claim that philosophy is *not* a means of knowing or gaining knowledge. For Wittgenstein, “the nimbus of philosophy has been lost,” and we are just “tidying up a room,”¹ or scratching an itch, that is, getting the grammar of a given term straightened out so as to clear up a “muddle.”²

My inclination is to reject both claims. On the one hand, philosophy is not an empirical science, *pace* Brentano, and the method of natural science is not exactly the method of philosophy. But on the other hand, philosophy is not merely a matter of dispelling linguistic fascinations, *pace* Wittgenstein. For that matter, philosophical theology in Brentano’s sense of it is not a pointless “running against the walls of our cage,” but nor is philosophical theology religious.³ Yet it seems to me that there is also truth in what each of these philosophers says. Let us see if we can sort it out.

Brentano’s point, that philosophy is a *Wissenschaft* in the broader sense, is correct and should be taken seriously. There is knowledge to be gained and systematized, not only by philosophizing now, but also by engaging with philosophers of the past. Moreover, there are differences among philosophers with regard to the shedding of light – Plato and Aristotle illuminate many matters, as do Brentano and Wittgenstein, but not all do so to the same extent or on the same topics. Likewise, Wittgenstein’s point that philosophy is not one of the natural sciences is also correct and should be taken seriously. As he might put it, the language-game of philosophy is quite distinct from the language-games of chemistry or of physics.⁴ If I claim to have found direct evidence of God’s existence (or of the distinction between substance and accident, or of final causality) in a cloud chamber or in a psychology lab or through a telescope, for example, then similarly to making a category mistake, I have violated the rules of the philosophical language-game. Likewise, if a physicist were to claim that all existents are material, she would have violated the rules of the language-game of physics.

¹ See G.E. Moore, “Wittgenstein’s Lectures,” in PO: 114. See also Monk (1990: 288-289).

² Wittgenstein, “The Language of Sense Data and Private Experience” (notes taken by Rush Rhees of Wittgenstein’s Lectures, 1936), in PO: 366. See also G.E. Moore, “Wittgenstein’s Lecture’s,” in PO: 114.

³ There is a tendency today to regard any discussion of God’s existence, or immortality of the soul, or the problem of evil as a “religious” discussion. But these topics, which form the subject matter of natural theology, i.e., philosophical theology (or even metaphysics), are not religious topics and their treatment is not religious. Brentano inherited from Aristotle and from Thomas Aquinas a clear sense of the distinction between philosophy and religious thought (or theology in the ordinary sense of the term, based on revelation). Philosophy is based on experience and reason alone, whereas systematic religious thought relies on revelation as well as experience and reason. When Brentano is doing natural theology, he is not doing religion. Thus I disagree with Johannes Brandl’s conclusion that Brentano’s two goals of 1) renewing philosophy in the spirit of science, and 2) retaining topics in natural theology, are incompatible. But see Brandl (2018).

⁴ Here I rely on Kober (1996: 414, 418), whose concept of an “epistemic or discursive language-game” I find quite useful. Academic disciplines count as examples of this.

I believe this is an illuminating way to look at the difficulty of categorizing philosophy *vis à vis* natural science, though I must add that it only takes us so far. That is to say, inasmuch as clear writing is a function of clear thinking, we cannot impute to Wittgenstein any perspicuous articulation of the distinct purposes of these two “games,” philosophy¹ and natural science.

By the same token, philosophy is not art, or literature, or history, or any of the other humanities disciplines with which it is often grouped together in academia. In the spirit of Wittgenstein, we can say that the language-games of art, literature, history, and the other disciplines differ from each other and from the language-game of philosophy, just as the language-games of the natural sciences differ from each other and from philosophy. Among the natural sciences there may be more language-game-overlap, or as Wittgenstein might say, more family resemblance than there is between philosophy and natural science.

Nevertheless, philosophy can surely make use of the results from natural science and has actually done so at least since the time of Aristotle or even Thales. It also behooves philosophy not to fly in the face of, or disregard, the results from natural science where these have a bearing on its discussions.² Thus we find that Leibniz and Brentano, for example, both rely on the scientific knowledge of their respective times to support arguments that are not part of natural science *per se*, concerning for instance the existence of God and the problem of evil.³ Philosophy also goes beyond natural science to draw conclusions – using both induction and deduction, as well as conceptual insight – advancing topics that transcend the scope of natural science. For, again in Wittgenstein’s terms, there is some family resemblance between philosophy and mathematics – as Plato knew – in that both fields have a capacity (lacking in many other areas) to arrive at truths which predate and anticipate their application. Think of Leibniz’s theory of space and time, which is said to open up topics in relativity theory,⁴ or

¹ A study of grammar is not the discovery of new facts, granted. But the study of grammar is also not the way to discover that philosophy is “the descriptive science of grammar.” In my opinion, Wittgenstein’s “linguistic turn” is problematic, because even if it were true that philosophy reduces to the study of grammar, that would not be a grammatical fact.

² As is often noted, the science of Aristotle’s day led him to make certain mistakes. No doubt, science today is also not infallible. But Brentano is right to hold that respect for the facts, as we know them, is important in philosophy.

³ See for instance Leibniz (1990: 172-173, and elsewhere where he invokes the work of Leeuwenhoek); and Brentano (1987: 213-248, where Brentano’s teleological argument relies heavily on the work of Darwin).

⁴ See Agassi (1969). See also Hyder (2018). Einstein himself did take an interest in philosophy and was influenced especially by Kant (Leibniz’s view of space and time in turn influenced Kant) and also Hume. See Isaacson (2007: 20, 82-83, 238).

Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena, which is said to function in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.¹

True, Wittgenstein considered logic to be empty of content,² and regarded the task of philosophy as trivial.³ For his part, Brentano dismissed speculative philosophy as mere fantasy and considered his proposed Psychological Institute with a lab for psychological research to represent a more truly philosophical enterprise than does anything written by Hegel or Schelling.⁴ I suggest that Wittgenstein and Brentano are both wrong here. First of all, philosophy does have a speculative side as well as a critical side, its insights are progressive as well as corrective, expansive *and* explicatory (to borrow a phrase).

Secondly, though, I want to say that philosophy's propositions are not necessarily trivial or merely grammatical, despite Wittgenstein's insistence that

[. . .] we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (PI: §109)

When Wittgenstein says this, one can hear the kind of despair that also echoes in his disgust at the "scientism" of the post-war world. All of us are to some extent children of our times, and the periods immediately following two world wars were easily more than enough to tempt anybody to give up on the ancient Greeks' confidence in the intelligibility of the cosmos.

¹ See Camilleri (2005). See also Palmquist (2013). Heisenberg himself did not take an interest in philosophy, having read only a few Platonic dialogues in school, and considered Kant's work as well as that of Ernst Mach "not beautiful." Whereas Einstein once took a copy of Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* with him to read on vacation (Isaacson, 2007: 238), Heisenberg on vacation thought himself "too tired" to deal with Kant's first Critique and admitted that he had no clear philosophical positions. See Cassidy (1992: 36, 46-47, 256-257).

² "All the propositions of logic are generalizations of tautologies and all the generalizations of tautologies are propositions of logic. There are no other logical propositions" (from a letter of Wittgenstein to Bertrand Russell, November or December 1913, quoted in Monk, 1990: 95).

³ See PI: §119: "The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language."

⁴ See Brentano (1889: 103-132). See also Brentano (1895).

But 20th century *Weltschmerz* is a kind of sickness, the cure for which Brentano actually anticipated in his so-called “*Eintritts Vorlesung*,” “On the Reasons for a Loss of Confidence in the Area of Philosophy,”¹ where he encourages his audience:

No matter how often philosophy may have misjudged her boundaries, she retains a sphere of questions to which answers must not be renounced and, in the interest of humankind, cannot be avoided. Therefore, philosophy has without doubt a role to play among the sciences, and her future is assured. Thus, the loss of confidence in philosophy, which in our day has taken hold far too widely, proves to be entirely unfounded.

[. . .]

It seems, then, if we are not misled, that this resignation in our day is not unlike that of Columbus’s fellow sailors who were ready to give up entirely just when the land they sought was on the verge of rising up out of the sea in front of them. (VS: 74)

Brentano here shows us his abiding belief in the humanistic value of philosophy, something Wittgenstein must have accepted in some sense but did not venerate in the same way. For Brentano, it is clear that Columbus was right not to give up. For Wittgenstein the issue seems to remain open. Look what our confidence in natural science has led to in so many ways. Yet at the time Wittgenstein was writing, in the early- to mid-20th century, the loss of confidence in philosophy was still operative and comparison with the beneficial effects of the natural sciences still contributed to philosophers’ discouragement.² Brentano, too, in attempting to counter this, put too much emphasis, in my opinion, on empirical scientific method as somehow the salvation of philosophy. Nevertheless, his defense of philosophy as a science, understood in the broader sense, is precisely right. Yes, philosophy is an area of systematic study and knowledge; yes, philosophy “retains a sphere of questions to which answers must not be renounced and, in the interest of humankind, cannot be avoided.” These are questions, as Brentano notes in the larger lecture, which are raised by natural science and by social science and, generally, by human life. Insofar as grammatical precision has a place in this picture, it is important to realize that only a cramped and limited view could take it for the whole scene. The

¹ Brentano’s inaugural lecture upon accepting a position as professor of philosophy at the University of Vienna, 22 April 1874 (Brentano, 1874).

² See Russell (1997: 141-161); first published in 1912, Ch. XIV, “The Limits of Philosophical Knowledge,” and Ch. XV, “The Value of Philosophy” are of particular interest in this connection.

ideas themselves (which grammar can sometimes help us to clarify), as well as the realities they disclose, need to be pursued systematically.¹

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¹ My thanks to Dr. Ion Tănăsescu for very helpful comments and editorial corrections. Any remaining errors are mine.

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