

# Analytical Philosophy, Idealism and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

## I) Introduction

Is it possible to be an analytical philosopher and at the same time to be an idealist? *Prima facie*, there's no problem about it, that is, there seems to be no internal or essential incompatibility between idealism, which is a philosophical stance or doctrine, and analytical philosophy, which is a special way of doing or practicing philosophy. Nonetheless, the right answer doesn't seem to be as simple as that, apart from the fact that it would depend to some extent upon how one actually applies the relevant terms. At any rate and contrary to what could be seen as the most spontaneous or candid answer, from my own point of view and for reasons I'll be adducing later on, the pair <idealism-analytical philosophy> is logically incoherent. This coincides with things said by Wittgenstein and scattered throughout his work. For instance, in the *Philosophical Remarks*, he says: "From the very outset 'Realism', 'Idealism', etc., are names which belong to metaphysics. That is, they indicate that their adherents believe they can say something specific about the essence of the world".<sup>1</sup> This raises problems with respect to our understanding of the *Tractatus* for, on the one hand, it seems undeniable that as a book it is a major representative of analytical philosophy but, on the other hand, distinguished scholars have pointed in the book to what according to them were idealist theses. As instances of idealist views held in Wittgenstein's work are his transcendental solipsism and the doctrine of showing. Now I should say in advance that I don't intend to discuss such views, for in my opinion even if their presence can be noticed in the philosophy contained in the book, they nevertheless don't have to be classified as 'idealist'. There is, however, another potential line of argument which could lead to the same conclusion, namely, the ascribing to the *Tractatus* an idealist position, which I'd like to explore and eliminate once and for all. I have in mind a particular reading of what Wittgenstein has to say about scientific knowledge and theories. For my part, I think that were this reading to be true the *Tractatus* would be patently incoherent. In my view, such an interpretation couldn't possibly be right, but I also think that the reading in question is worth examining. Accordingly, I shall proceed as follows: I shall examine rather quickly the links which hold between analytical philosophy and Wittgenstein's philosophy, then I'll consider a couple of idealist theses in order to determine whether or not they belong to the philosophy of science

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<sup>1</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), sec. 55.

contained in the book, and finally I'll put forward some ideas concerning the evolution of Wittgenstein's thought and his each time more and more radical rejection of all philosophical stances, idealism included.

## II) *Analytical Philosophy and Wittgensteinian Philosophy*

It is a platitude to say that, due to a variety of both historical and philosophical considerations, the label 'analytical philosophy' came to mean practically everything and, therefore, practically nothing. The difficulties to grasp the essential features of this modality of philosophizing has made professional philosophers feel the need to think again the nature of analytical philosophy by examining its roots, styles, methods and goals. Now although with regard this rather wide range of topics a huge number of high quality and really clarifying texts have been produced, it is nevertheless true that there remain lots of misunderstandings and we are still far from a generalized agreement. It is not one of my goals in this paper to contribute with any detailed meta-philosophical discussion, although naturally I'll have something to say about what in my view analytical philosophy **was**. This is important because I wish to maintain that analytical philosophy is essentially Wittgensteinian philosophy. Once we have cleared up the ground we'll be in a position to tackle our main subject-matter. What I want to do is to determine in what sense, if any, we would be entitled to speak of an idealist perspective with respect to scientific languages and knowledge as Wittgenstein deals with them in his book.

Let us then ask: what is or what was analytical philosophy? Although naturally the answer can be refined as much as one would wish to, I'll understand by 'analytical philosophy' in the first place and following M. Dummett (*inter alia*) that trend or school of thought which gives priority to the philosophy of language over the rest of the branches of philosophy. But what in turn does that mean? It simply means that traditional philosophical problems, regardless of the area of philosophy they belong to, are to be focused in the first place from the perspective of their corresponding language. For instance, philosophical problems of physics or of music are approached and considered not as substantial metaphysical or epistemological problems, but as difficulties which arise, in one way or another, from the language of physics or from musical notation. But then it can be asked: what would the interest of this approach, which a century ago was a new philosophical proposal, could possibly consist in? The central insight **had** to be the idea that *au fond* philosophical problems are not only vaguely connected with language or with symbolism in general, but rather that in one way or another they are caused, provoked or induced by it. And this is crucial, for one of the most important consequences of this approach, one which at the beginning was merely tacit but about which the different members of the school became more and more aware of as time went on, was that since philosophical problems are problems

derived from language, problems related to words and therefore pseudo-problems, problems which have to do with the speakers' misunderstandings concerning the logic or the grammar of our sign-systems. In other words, given that language in itself is of no more interest for philosophy than the world or God or numbers or the human mind, the option in favour of the philosophy of language wasn't just a caprice, but a stance which engaged those who accepted it in a particular direction, namely, that of denying that philosophical problems are genuine, substantial or real ones. Hadn't been for this connection, the choice of the philosophy of language would have been utterly arbitrary.

It seems to me that what I've just said is from a historical point of view sufficiently documented. I accept, once again following Dummett, the idea that the systematic reflection on language (and thereby, analytical philosophy itself) started off with Frege. Thus the Fregean idea of a "conceptual notation", for instance, was precisely the idea that at least some problems which nowadays would be classified as belonging to philosophical logic have their roots in a defective language, as natural language was for Frege, a language which according to him couldn't possibly be of any use in the sciences. The logical improvement of language meant philosophical progress. With the Theory of Descriptions, that beautiful paradigm of analytical reasoning, Bertrand Russell made a step further in the same direction and, as everybody knows, in his deservedly famous essay "On Denoting" he offers a concrete list of perplexities or puzzles which thanks to the new theory just disappear. But it is with Wittgenstein that this tendency is generalized to the whole of philosophy, to all philosophical problems. Thus in the *Tractatus*, and indeed already in the *Notebooks*, the idea that philosophical discourse as such is absurd and that philosophical problems, regardless of the philosophical area we could think of, are always the outcome of logical misunderstandings, is present and applied even if only as a broad programme.

What was Wittgenstein's strategy in that first great book? The central project was the paradoxical one of stating the rules of logical syntax, that is, the implicit rules of any possible meaningful language, rules which at the same time fix or set the limits of meaningfulness. The idea was that once this rule-system valid for all possible language had been stated we would be in a position to make clear why and how any philosophical assertion was nonsensical. So it is understandable that reflection about the nature of representation, names, meaning, structural isomorphism, logical multiplicity, propositional signs, thoughts, propositions, logical form, and so on, would constitute the backbone of the book. It is then evident that the *Tractatus'* fundamental platform had to be what could be called 'philosophical semantics', that is, philosophy of language. And once the general conception of linguistic representation, of what it is to say something, had been established, the next task **had** to be the rejection of traditional philosophy as such, *in toto* and the dismantling of concrete philosophical problems, one after another.

Although I won't go into the details, I wouldn't like to pass unnoticed the fact that these fundamental insights according to which the philosophy of language has priority over the rest of the branches of philosophy and that philosophical problems are the outcome of misunderstandings, of confusions, are not only present in the work of the so called 'second' or 'mature' Wittgenstein, but that they were reinforced and became still more radical. Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion or philosophy mathematics, aesthetics or theory of knowledge **are** always philosophy of language, that is, it always take the form of grammatical elucidations and result from the analysis of notions like those of God, natural number, musical mistake or human knowledge that Wittgenstein carried out. Thus it can be maintained that Wittgensteinian thinking can only materialize as philosophy of language and always aims at the same thing, *viz.*, the dissolution of the conceptual knot one is trying to disentangle. In this sense, therefore, we can confidently affirm not only that Wittgenstein was indeed an analytical philosopher, but something much stronger than that, namely, that he is **the** analytical philosopher *par excellence*. Now if what I've said is right, then we can assert that analytical philosophy finds in Wittgensteinian philosophy its best **possible** expression.

What I've said has some philosophical consequences two of which I would like to emphasize:

- a) as an analytical philosopher, Wittgenstein assigns a new mission to philosophy, which is not the making of discoveries, the building of systems or the inventing of theories, but the clarifying of our thoughts, and
- b) analytical philosophy, in **this** sense, is an intellectual activity which is totally neutral with respect to the different philosophical schools or trends of thought. The analytical philosopher is neither a materialist nor an idealist nor a pragmatist nor a realist nor any other "... ist".

This is relevant for our subject and thus what I'll do now will be to say a few words about idealism.

### III) *Idealism*

Just as with "analytical philosophy", the concept of idealism stands in need of constant clarification, simply because (among other reasons) it is as a matter of fact connected to a variety of topics. As I already said, regarding Wittgenstein's philosophy, we find in the literature exciting discussions in which the general theme of idealism is connected to issues like solipsism or the doctrine of the limits of meaningfulness and of what can only show itself. I should perhaps immediately

recall that I'll concern myself with these questions only superficially. My goal will be rather to discuss what could perhaps be called 'linguistic idealism' basically in relation to scientific languages and to examine the *Tractatus*' position in this respect. At first sight, Wittgenstein's position is ambiguous, but it seems to me that once the ambiguity is dispelled his general stance ceases being problematic.

To avoid excessive verbiage and tracing of meanings, I'll adopt to begin with the simple definition of 'idealism' that Russell offers in his *Problems of Philosophy*. Now what he holds is that idealism is the philosophical doctrine according to which the world, what there exists, is in some sense mental.<sup>2</sup> This may be understood in various ways. One would be to say, à la Berkeley, that things external to us are themselves nothing but collections of ideas. Now in this sense of 'idealism' it is evident that the philosophy of the *Tractatus* is **not** idealist. The only possible way to interpret Wittgenstein as an idealist would be that his defense of solipsism would commit him to an idea of objects of knowledge as objects of the mind, as *sense-data* for instance. But we can be sure that such a view is **not** defended in the *Tractatus*. Let us recall that what Wittgenstein does defend there is rather the idea to the effect that "solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism".<sup>3</sup> The obvious implication of this thought is that in immediate experience one knows directly real objects, *i.e.*, objects which are independent of us and of their being or not known by someone.

A slightly different way of understanding idealism would be to see it as a thesis not so much about the nature of things or of reality as about our knowledge of it. From this perspective, the idea would simply be that we just can't have a coherent view of an unthought of world, *i.e.*, a world which would haven't passed through the prism of the human mind, its categories and operative principles. It isn't implied by it that things we have experience of should have the same *status* or nature than, say, a pain or an image, but it does affirm that somehow our mind gets hold of them, wrap them up and in so doing hide them from us. Idealism doesn't necessarily deny that objects are real, but it highlights their unintelligibility if considered independently of the human mind.

In this sense of 'idealism', it is evident that the *Tractatus* does **not** either advocate any idealist view. Indeed the Picture Theory is rather an antidote against idealist temptations like these. This can easily be shown. Putting aside logical form, the shared isomorphism of picture and the depicted situation and the unavoidable requirement of the same logical multiplicity in order for representation to be possible, what the Picture Theory asserts is that the meaning of a name in an elementary proposition **is** an object. In other words, the user of language has a **direct**

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<sup>2</sup> B. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 5.64

**access** to an item of reality. If he knows the meaning of a name, then he applies the name, as if it were a label, **on** or **upon** the object itself. There is here no intermediary whatsoever. So that had we to find a way to qualify Wittgenstein's point of view, it certainly wouldn't be 'idealist', but rather 'formal realist'. The *Tractatus* is realist because the reference of names, although known directly, that is, by acquaintance, are not *sense-data*, but things which are independent of the subject, and it is formal because we can't determine in advance what objects we are speaking about; that's something we can do only after we are given their names. Thus, I know that I speak of persons if the names I use are 'Napoleon', 'Attila' and 'Leonardo', I know that I speak of animals if the names I can have recourse to are 'Rocinante', 'Fido' and 'Bucephalus', that I speak of colours if I employ 'red', 'green' and 'yellow', and so on. We cannot say in advance what the application of logic will be. At any rate, there isn't any kind of veil involved here. It could of course be argued that Wittgenstein still was in the *Tractatus* under the spell of mentalism, for instance that his conception of what thoughts are is still mentalistic, but it is clear that at least in principle the Picture Theory makes it redundant. Wittgenstein gives clear indications in this sense: "Doesn't my study of sign-language correspond to the study of thought-processes, which philosophers used to consider so essential to the philosophy of logic? Only in most cases they got entangled in unessential psychological investigations, and with my method too there is an analogous risk".<sup>4</sup> To sum up: in the classical sense of the expression, it would not only be absurd to try to find idealist positions in the *Tractatus*, but as a matter of fact what Wittgenstein stands for is a view which simply annihilates idealism.

Now, and this is the possibility which most interests me to scrutinize, one could wish to adopt this second version of idealism and apply it not within the context of natural language, but in the context of scientific language and explanations. It could then be seen that once more idealist positions reappear. Seen in this light, the view put forward would neither be that the stuff upon which science operates is itself mental nor that its objects are themselves unknowable. What would be insisted upon would be that, although the stuff science is about is not ontologically dependent upon us, we nevertheless never have a direct access to it. The idea in this case would be not that reality itself is created by science, but that what science gives is, so to speak, a version of it. If we understand idealism in **this** way, one perhaps would be committed to accept that the *Tractatus* does advocate a view which could be called 'idealist', but only with respect to scientific knowledge. Now it is debatable whether or not that stance is idealistic in character and at any rate I would hold that even if it were it would be a harmless one. So the most we could say is that Wittgenstein's position represents an attack on the metaphysical conceptions of scientific realism. But if Wittgenstein rejects scientific realism it is not to adopt an alternative metaphysics, that is, idealism. It could nevertheless b e

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<sup>4</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 4.1121 (c).

argued that his description of what science does **can** be seen as a form of linguistic idealism. But then I would stress that this would-be idealism is philosophically innocuous, for in fact it isn't strictly speaking a doctrine; it just amounts to a rejection of scientific realism. To make this clear, I'll say a few words about what is involved in such realism and then I'll state what Wittgenstein has to say about scientific theories.

#### IV) *The Tractatus and Science*

The common idea is that science is a continuation of common-sense knowledge, though it is about, other kinds of objects, as real as the things of common-sense or even more. Scientific knowledge is expressed in a technical language, in which mathematics is all important, provided with strict definitions and so on. In its search for causal explanations, what science investigates are the deep structures of substances but in so doing it discovers new ones, which are as real as stones or persons. Technical scientific terms don't denote particular objects but natural kinds of objects. Although they obviously have a logically different behaviour than proper names, terms for natural kinds have a referring function as well. Reality does contain all those things science speaks about: magnetic fields, genes, chemical substances, etc. The function of science is to describe reality, which it deals with, and statements are scientific in virtue of facts which verify or disconfirm them.

Wittgenstein radically rejects the very idea of continuity between natural language and scientific languages, just as he rejects the idea of continuity between common-sense knowledge and the theoretical knowledge science provides us with. But it is here that the problem arises, for it would seem as if Wittgenstein were asserting two different, not to say incompatible, things at the same time. Taking physics as the representative of science in general, Wittgenstein's view is that if physics is an empirical science, it's because it is **about** reality, that is, because it speaks of the world. "The laws of physics, with all their logical apparatus, still speak, however indirectly, about the objects of the world".<sup>5</sup> The unavoidable question here is: **how** does physics manage to speak about reality given that its logical apparatus is, so to say, separated from objects, cut off from natural language? About this, Wittgenstein suggests an answer which doesn't seem to fit with the previous one. Let's see why.

A scientific law is a formulae which belongs to a theory, but what is a scientific theory? The first thing to get rid of is the idea according to which a scientific theory **describes** reality in exactly the same way a sentence like 'the dog is barking' would describe the possible fact of a dog barking. Even if a scientific

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<sup>5</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 6.3431.

theory **may** be seen propositionally, what it really is is rather a sort of **net**. What this means is that a scientific theory is first of all a tool which enables us, depending upon its finesse, a better or a worse **manipulation** of the objects of the world. Therefore, even if in last analysis scientific theories are about objects, they can only be about them **indirectly**. The link between theoretical language and natural language is established by treating scientific language **as if** it were a normal, natural language. To put it in another way: nets are conferred a linguistic *status* and we take scientific formulations as if they were propositions, that is, pictures of facts. The problems is that nets, *i.e.*, scientific theories, are **conventional** systems. Their truth takes shape in their making or not easier for us the manipulation of objects. Wittgenstein, therefore, would seem rather to be advocating here an instrumentalist view of science. But then our question is: is it because Wittgenstein is not a realist that he is an idealist? Does the idea that scientific theories are nothing but symbolic structures built up to deal, through its technical and logical apparatus, with what constitutes reality (the objects we are acquainted with in experience), amount to an idealist conception of scientific knowledge?

Idealism has always been associated to the idea of a veil which prevents us from a direct access to reality. We simply don't know how reality is in itself. Traditionally, this veil has been conceived as being mental in character, whatever that means. So at first sight it is not a mistake to say that it is precisely that what Wittgenstein asserts: scientific theories are like a veil which help us to deal, more or less successfully, depending upon their theoretical quality, with the stuff of the world, the objects. The significant difference with traditional idealism would be that this veil is not of a mental nature, but of a linguistic one. Taking Newtonian mechanics as a prototype, he says: "Similarly, the possibility of describing the world by means of Newtonian mechanics tells us nothing about the world: but what does tell us something about it is the precise *way* in which it is possible to describe it by these means. We are also told something about the world by the fact that it can be described more simply with one system of mechanics than with another".<sup>6</sup> Scientific theories are like a veil because in the end they are nothing but symbolic constructs that we impose upon facts. Nevertheless, what is not at all clear in the *Tractatus* is the connection which holds between the propositions of natural language and scientific propositions, or alternatively between theoretical entities and the objects of immediate experience.

Our question, therefore, is the following: does or doesn't the *Tractatus* contain, with respect to scientific knowledge, an idealist point of view? The first thing we should clarify is in what sense, if at all, scientific theories, understood as nets, do or don't constitute a veil interposed between reality and us. Since all links with mentalism have been discarded, the only possible basis to assert a connection

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<sup>6</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 6.342 (b).

with idealism is the idea that science is about reality but only indirectly. It is just on this particular point that it could be asserted that idealism and Wittgenstein's thought touch each other. In this sense it could be thought that the answer is positive. It is by identifying the idea of a net with the idea of a veil that Wittgenstein can be saddled with an idealist conception of scientific knowledge. Science certainly gives us knowledge, but not direct knowledge: we don't see atoms, feel protons or smell energy. The language of sciences is, so to speak, "behind" natural language, and speaks of objects, to put it some way, "at a distance". It is through its theories that science tells us something about the ultimate nature of objects, but this can be achieved only **indirectly**. It doesn't seem to be absurd, therefore, to see this as a variant of linguistic idealism. Now the point I want to make is that this supposed idealism, which apparently could be ascribed to the *Tractatus*, is philosophically harmless, since in fact it is not strictly speaking a philosophical doctrine or conception; it rather means the rejection of a particular philosophical theory, namely, scientific realism. What at all events should be clear is that what in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein puts forward is just a **description** of the ways science works and is not the outcome of any kind of postulation. Seen in this light, it would be not only misleading but actually mistaken to speak of idealism in the *Tractatus*. Nevertheless, what no doubt should be acknowledged is that it is never sufficiently clear in the *Tractatus* how propositions of natural language and scientific propositions connect up, or else how theoretical entities and the objects of immediate experience combine with each other.

It could be suggested that, given that Wittgenstein works in the *Tractatus* with a mentalistic conception of thought, he is an idealist, since what he sketches is a kind of conceptualism, *i.e.*, the idea that it is with a determinate conceptual machinery, namely, ours, that we face the world and deal with it. From this perspective, we simply cannot know how objects in themselves are. But this suggestion, apart from constituting a completely mistaken reading of Wittgenstein's position, would mean a regress to the already discarded mentalistic point of view. The very text indicates that such an interpretation is unacceptable. Wittgenstein rejects the tasks normally ascribed in philosophy to, say, the mind, and replaces them by functions of language. What he tells us with respect to the theory of knowledge, for example, namely, that it is just "philosophy of psychology"<sup>7</sup>, can be equally said of the philosophy of mind. Although it is a fact that the *Tractatus'* philosophy of science is openly Hertzian (and anti-Russellian), it is also true that Wittgenstein got rid of the mentalism which pervaded Hertz' philosophy.<sup>8</sup> The *Tractatus* simply doesn't need the idea of representation as a mental construction. Actually, the conceptualist interpretation would be acceptable were we to admit the

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<sup>7</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 4.1121 (b).

<sup>8</sup> There's here an interesting similarity between Wittgenstein's and Hertz's relationship, on the one hand, and Wittgenstein's and Brouwer's, on the other. In both cases Wittgenstein takes advantage of those thinkers' ideas, but rejects their respective mentalism and Kantianism.

idea that to have a concept is to have acquired the mastery of a technique, *viz.*, the technique of properly applying a word and properly reacting upon its utterance. But then we would be back to our linguistic view of scientific language. It is then clear that there's no place in the *Tractatus* for any mentalistic kind of conceptualism and, therefore, of idealism. Indeed, we are almost forced to see in the *Tractatus'* philosophy of science a sort, a modality of instrumentalism.

That the *Tractatus'* conception of science is the outcome of a description is an important fact, because it prefigures what will be if not the method at least Wittgenstein's general strategy after 1929. What by means of accurate descriptions of situations we achieve is to avoid the grandiose although sterile philosophical theorizing. It could even be the case that the description of scientific theories that Wittgenstein offers as "nets" would be not false but incomplete, merely metaphorical, etc. That doesn't transform it into one more philosophical theory. It follows that, regardless of the truth value one wishes to adjudicate to Wittgenstein's thoughts on science in the *Tractatus*, these are not traditional philosophical propositions, but elucidations which pertain to the new kind of investigation that Wittgenstein inaugurates. The *Tractatus'* philosophy of science are elucidations about science. It is, therefore, analytical philosophy. Now if what I have been saying is right, then we could conclude both that the *Tractatus* is a paradigmatic text of analytical philosophy **and** that it does **not** contain views which could be sensibly described as idealist, in the sense in which idealism is understood in conventional philosophy.

In spite of the undeniable tensions it is possible to point to in the *Tractatus*, I think it would be an odd anachronism and an unfair criticism to accuse Wittgenstein of not giving us a well shaped view of science, at least for two reasons: first, because science was not his primary concern and because he touches on it rather tangentially and, secondly, because what he says does throw light upon multiple aspects of the scientific enterprise: the *Tractatus* has important thoughts about the presuppositions and the principles of science, about the nature of theories, causality and causal laws, induction, theory construction, etc. I'm convinced, therefore, that even if we admitted that there is a real conflict between realism and instrumentalism in the *Tractatus*, we would still learn a lot about science and it certainly contains thoughts which did inspire from many points of view the best philosophers of science of the XXth Century.

#### IV) *The New Functions of Philosophy*

Something I find specially interesting and philosophically exciting in the *Tractatus* is that for the first time since philosophy was acknowledged as an autonomous discipline it was assigned new functions. There can hardly be doubts about it.

Philosophy, from this new point of view, is not continuous with science; philosophy is that intellectual activity which has as a goal the clarification of our thoughts, judgments, propositions. It's only classical or traditional philosophy which looks after theories. Wittgenstein has often been accused of elaborating philosophical theories disguised as sets of "elucidations" or of "grammatical remarks". This is a complete misunderstanding, for he consciously moves in the opposite direction. Such an appraisal of his work is possible because it wasn't understood that with him a new way of thinking and of doing philosophy had been devised, one which more than any other deserved the title of 'analytical philosophy'.

One last point: it is obvious that between the first and the second of Wittgenstein's philosophical periods remarkable changes took place with respect to a variety of issues, but the views concerning the function of philosophy remained untouched. The *Tractatus*' stance was simply adjusted to a new vocabulary and to the new conceptual framework which Wittgenstein created. In that sense it was reshaped. Surely it is not the same thing to say that philosophical problems are generated by misunderstandings concerning the logic of our language than to say that they emerge from confusions about its grammar. Nevertheless, the outlook is the same as well as the underlying insight. Thus what young Wittgenstein lacked in order to give the most accurate statement of his view was the conceptual apparatus that some years later he would coin. And thus what he has to say about science in the *Tractatus* can be easily retrieved and this helps us to see that to be an analytical philosopher and at the same time to defend idealist positions can only broad out into contradictions or absurdities.