

# 4

## Reasons and Causes: Wittgenstein versus the Myth of Causal Explanation in the Social Sciences

---

**Pierre Bouda**

According to the normal way of looking at things, science is an activity with the objective of bringing to light the causes of phenomena. In this sense, a scientific law is a formula which establishes a causal link between phenomena of type A and phenomena of type B, the former being considered as the cause for the latter. Scientific research protocols are, therefore, procedures thanks to which we first discover the causes of the determined phenomena, and we then verify that they are the real causes of the phenomena considered. That would explain the relevance and effectiveness of science. We cannot then be surprised if the social sciences are sometimes tempted by the desire to develop on their turf an exact reply to the causal explanation in force in the natural sciences. To what extent is that justified? Is the concept of cause, more or less relevant to render an account of what happens in nature, a judicious point of view to observe and understand human action? Wittgenstein, who before devoting himself to philosophy first practised science, considers that the idea of causality leads to an erroneous perspective in the attempt to understand human fact.

### **What is Cause?**

The idea of cause is originally a legal idea in the exact sense that the search for the cause is, originally the process which leads to assigning responsibilities. Designating the cause means denouncing the guilty party, the author of an act. We, therefore, understand that the primary meaning of the idea of cause is the strong or metaphysical meaning. Literally, we can say, the phenomenon which is the cause of another is the

one which is “responsible” for it insofar as it produced it. The effect is the work of the cause which is thus recognized as having a creative power, a certain virtue. The analyzed fact is explained from the moment when one is able to indicate by particular procedures that it comes from another such fact which is its substantial origin. We understand how the concept of cause thus understood was considered to be metaphysical. In the spirit of positivism, the idea that a fact produces another is based on the belief in occult powers which operate in phenomena, since the causation thus understood is an extrapolation based on the experience of the regular succession of two series of events. It is then clear that if experience shows us the succession, it does not show us causation if this implies something other than a constant relationship of precedence. In accordance with phenomenalism<sup>1</sup> which defines it, positivism denies all epistemological relevance to the notion of the cause understood in the metaphysical sense, and proposes another concept which brings causality back to the idea of regular succession. A phenomenon A is the cause – in this weak sense or positivity – of a phenomenon B if a substantial series of observations shows that A is regularly followed by B. The norm here is experience thanks to which the affirmation of the existence of a causal relationship can be monitored and authenticated. We are thus dealing with an idea which is really operative insofar as it enables the construction of sufficiently precise criteria of validation of scientific statements. This is the *de facto* importance of induction as an effective procedure for the establishment of scientific propositions which confers on the positivist concept of cause its epistemological dignity. Inversely, the limits of induction from the view point of logical analysis affect the philosophical value of this weakened causality which comes, as a result, in the form of a fully assumed modesty. Wittgenstein, who has a tendency to discount the empirical and the factual in favor of the transcendental and the formal, the contingent in favor of the inexorable, and thus the natural sciences in favor of logic and mathematics, always refers to the positivist concept of cause when he speaks of causal explanation.<sup>2</sup> And he considers this mode of approach to reality as more or less relevant to the study of the phenomena of nature, where it has produced an attitude and results in accordance with the spirit of the time and his civilization which he judged to be in decline. But he persists also in thinking that the generalization of the causal explanation to the study of the human fact is fundamentally excessive, and constitutes a permanent source of errors and blatant mistakes that he spots in Freudian psychoanalysis and in anthropology *à la* Frazer.

### Wittgenstein’s General Attitude towards Science

Wittgenstein’s intellectual adventure began with engineering studies, and particularly by a marked interest in aeronautical issues. Then his curiosity turned towards mathematics which made up this “foundation” of physics. From there, he was

attracted by discussions on the foundations and logic of mathematics. And he ended up, in a more or less predictable way, with philosophy. This allows us to understand in a way Wittgenstein's attitude towards science: an almost natural critical detachment. Nothing was farther from his mind than this bewitchment that some philosophers undergo with respect to science.<sup>3</sup> Since he has practiced science, he is less susceptible than others to being bewitched when he reflects on its spirit and value.

And contrary to the most widespread opinion, he does not see in science, its spirit, its method and its results, the quintessential substance of reason, the most complete product of a reason which has reached maturity and illuminating reality for man, driving away obscurity, ignorance and error, and cheerfully bearing the effort of man marching towards happiness.<sup>4</sup> In his mind, science unmistakably contains something which is headed in the direction of the good. But, on the one hand, this aspect is unfortunately fairly misunderstood; and on the other hand, it is suicidal to see nothing but this. This is the way that he writes about the scientific method:

Science: enrichment and impoverishment. A unique method sets aside all the others. Compared to them, they give the impression of being indigent, of making up at most preliminary stages. You have to go back down to the sources, to see them all next to each other, those which were neglected and those which were preferred (Wittgenstein 1984:74).

In other words, the hypothetical-deductive explanation has an obvious heuristic power, and its use was indisputably fruitful in that it has produced a considerable amount of precise knowledge on facts; but its quasi-exclusive culture is, in a completely obvious way, an intellectual impoverishment, insofar as other spiritual sources of understanding of the worlds were unfortunately sapped. The task of philosophy is precisely to maintain, in a way, the memory of these forgotten methods. Indeed, for Wittgenstein, philosophy cannot have the objective of the justification of possibilities that were realized; what it should do is to open the largest space possible of possibilities within which it shows what has come true as a simple particular case which has only one completely relative privilege which is essentially contingent on the other possibilities. With respect to the spirit of modern science, what he wrote in the *Tractatus* can be considered to be his most consistent opinion on the subject:

At the basis of all vision of the world of the moderns, there is the illusion that the laws of nature, as they are called, are the explanation for natural phenomena. Thus, the laws of nature remain as something intangible, just as the Ancients did with God and Destiny. And both are, in truth, right and wrong. The Ancients are, in any event, clearer insofar as they recognize a

clear stopping point whereas with the new system we should have the impression that all is explained (Wittgenstein 1993:63-72).

What science made the mind of the moderns get used to was considering that the transparent world can, *de jure*, be explained. In other words, our relationship with things and beings is one of triumphant arrogance. We have the tendency to see in the laws that science formulates absolute knowledge of phenomena. And we think that nothing can withstand the methods of investigation that we have created to study and understand the world. Yet, Wittgenstein, in his stubbornness, feels that this attitude is far from being wise. In any event, it is not the only possible one. And in his mind, the Ancients were much wiser insofar as their attitude translated a clear awareness of the limits of knowledge. As a result, Wittgenstein stressed the fact that if today we believe that if we have the positive, effective, and absolute explanation of the world in scientific laws, this is not so much because of the proven relevance of our scientific theories but because of a new attitude vis-à-vis reality, a new point of view on knowledge, on man, etc; a new form of life. What has changed then is not the extent to which science has become effective, it is our relationship with the world. We should thus not think, when Wittgenstein contests the relevance of the explanatory model in the social sciences, that he is establishing implicitly or explicitly a hierarchy in favor of those who study nature; we should not think that he considers anthropology as a discipline which outlines knowledge of less value or less interest than physics, for example.

### **The Denunciation of Physicalism**

We should clarify certain aspects of Wittgenstein's attitude with respect to causal explanation. Concerning the concept of cause as the expression of a simple relationship of regular coincidence between two phenomena, Wittgenstein stresses the Humian<sup>5</sup> character of the procedure which leads to the assignment of a cause. From the moment when it is only the repeated observation which validates a proposition of this type, the causal explanation cannot have the type of necessity which we generally grant it. This illusion explains the prestige which the classical model of scientific explanation enjoys, such as it is applied in a paradigmatic way in physics. In a certain sense, we can say that what motivates Wittgenstein's in-depth intervention in the social sciences is the constant desire to denounce the characteristic obsession of our time, that is to import everywhere the procedures of validation used in mathematical physics – physicalism. Schematically, the model in question here consists of observing a certain phenomenon which poses a particular problem (the objective of the observation being to define and clarify the problem), to generate a hypothesis which clears up the difficulty by indicating the cause of the phenomenon; and finally testing the hypothesis by conclusive experiments. Thus, the explanatory hypothesis is the supposition of an unapparent

mechanism which renders an account of what is apparent; we assume a phenomenon which was not perceived (and perhaps which cannot be observed directly), but the effects of which correspond to what is observed; we assert a fact of which the phenomenon is the effect; a cause is assigned to the observed phenomenon. And experience is a test of the hypothesis which is thus confronted with the facts, and is validated only to the extent that the facts do not formally invalidate it. In these conditions, Wittgenstein considers, as we have already noted, that the attitude which consists in adhering in an unconditional way to scientific theories, and considering that all the other positions on nature are nothing but the expression of ignorance is unfounded. Particularly, the uncontrolled wonder vis-à-vis scientific discoveries, and the belief that “it should necessarily be so,” all of that is nothing but mythology. Physicalism is thus an ideological tendency which is eminently misleading.

### **The Myth of Causal Explanation in the Human Sciences**

Wittgenstein does not dispute the idea that causal explanation is an extremely powerful practice which leads to considerable knowledge of phenomena. He does not deny the merits of a procedure which has proven itself in the natural sciences and, oddly, in physics. But what he does say is that the idea that we have of it is largely mythological. With respect to this idea, there are two observations which are particularly significant to Wittgenstein’s mind. The first is that we take the causal explanation for what it is not: as the unique source of knowledge of any object. According to the author of *Philosophical Research*, the causal explanation is only one sort of relationship with the world among so many others. The second observation is that we consider fairly complacently scientific knowledge thus accumulated as intangible truths, as the only valid knowledge of the world, the other forms of knowledge thus being necessarily permanently rejected as errors without any importance. Wittgenstein attributes the root of these two attitudes to the seduction that absolute, encompassing and definitive explanations work on the human mind. This is the way we are: our mind is uncontrollably attracted to systems; all knowledge that is presented as reductive syntheses says: “all comes back to this”.<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein first points out this detrimental fascination for causal explanation in psychoanalysis, and he diagnoses confusion in Freud’s work between reasons and causes. Freud was constantly concerned with presenting psychoanalysis as a science in the classical sense of the term. For example, he wrote in *Resistance to Psychoanalysis* that psychoanalysis “is based on the patient and laborious observation of facts pertaining to the world of our perceptions” (Clément, Bruno and Sève 1977:24). He states and repeats that psychoanalysis is a scientific psychology (and not philosophical or speculative) which uses the canonical procedure of science. He claims to update the cause of human action in a completely experimental way:

- a) He observes the individual, particularly an individual suffering from any neurosis;
- b) He puts forward the hypothesis that a given unconscious desire the “action” of which explains the pathological behavior of the patient;
- c) He verifies this hypothesis by efforts, which he admits are sometimes substantial, to obtain the agreement of the patient.

In the 1930-1933 lectures, Wittgenstein asserts that by attitudes of this sort, Freud is creating confusion between the reasons and the causes, at the root of a “terrible waste” (Clement, Bruno, Sève 1977:316). He understands the difference which exists in his mind between a cause and a reason in *The Blue Notebook*: “The suggestion according to which your action has such or such a cause is a hypothesis. The hypothesis is well founded if one has a certain number of experiences which, on the whole, are in agreement to show that your action is a regular series of certain conditions that we then call the causes of the action. To understand the reason that you had for formulating a certain statement, to act, etc., no number of corroborating experiences is necessary, and the statement of your reason is not a hypothesis” (Clément, Bruno and Sève 1977:15). In other words, the cause is a hypothesis which means:

- a) it is never known immediately, but always in an inductive fashion, after a number of substantial corroborating experiences;
- b) that it is never certain since it is derived not from a logical procedure put from an empirical process.

On the contrary, the reason for an action can be known immediately, and with certainty. As a result, if Freud discovered the causes for the behavior of individuals, and not reasons, he could not consider the acceptance of a subject as proof of the fact that the explanation which he proposed for the problem is accurate. If it is in the nature of a cause not to be known by the subject, we can obviously not take as proof of the accuracy of an alleged cause the fact that the individual recognizes himself that such was not the cause of his behavior. On the other hand, if the explanation of the action of the subject can be recognized as accurate by him, and if this recognition can be considered to effectively prove the explanation, this means that it is not an explanation by the cause but by the reason which can be known with certainty by the individual. The result of this confusion between reason and cause is a sleight of hand that Freud allows himself: when the subject agrees with the explanation given by the psychoanalyst, this acceptance is considered to be a confirmation (exactly as if it were a matter of a reason that the agent intuitively knows); but when the subject disagrees with the psychoanalyst’s suggestion, this disagreement, instead of appearing as an invalidation, passes on the contrary for being of no importance, and even normal, since a cause cannot

be recognized. Freud analyses reasons as causes which can be the object of a hypothesis (as in the experimental method) which is tested on the subject, and which is confirmed if he or she accepts it as the real explanation of his or her problem. Unconscious psychic entities are characterized by the fact that they are both unknown and can remain unknown by the subject (in the same way as the cause), and recognized immediately by the individual who convinces himself that this was indeed the reason for which he acted in a particular way. For Wittgenstein, this constitutes a deception because the causes and reasons are not discovered by the same procedures.

Another time, Wittgenstein has the chance to denounce the unfortunate tendency to transfer the model of causal explanation from the natural sciences into the human sciences. An analysis of myth by Frazer provides him with an occasion to denounce this tendency. What he contests is the idea, implicit in the theory of causality, that the action has one cause and necessarily one cause. For him, men are beings capable of acting for various reasons. Identical human behaviors are not necessarily related to identical causes. It is this idea, false to his mind, which supports the idea of the possibility of a general theory of the human fact as Frazer thought he was able to provide with respect to myths.

Frazer analyzes myth in terms of erroneous knowledge. Myth, according to him, is the science of primitive peoples. Man, faced with natural phenomena, is necessarily overcome by a desire to know, a curiosity which is satisfied among advanced people by science and philosophy and among primitive people by myths. These are, thus, erroneous explanations of a phenomenon, whether they be about human life or those of external nature. Ignorance and incomprehension in which men find themselves vis-à-vis events and facts explains that the way in which they understand the world initially is incorrect. On the other hand, Frazer considers ritual practices as a means of indirectly reaching mental states which carry them, and because of this he believes that identical attitudes are related to identical mentalities, that identical customs can be explained by identical psychological motives. Besides the fact that this theory of the myth clashes head on with Wittgenstein's antipsychologism, it is also disputable on three points in the view of the author of the *Tractatus*. In the 1930-1933 lectures, he considers that:

- Frazer is mistaken when he posits one and only one "reason" in the sense of "motive" which leads men to complete a particular action;
- Frazer is committing an error when he affirms that "the motive is always to obtain something useful";
- It was a mistake to suppose that the reason for which, for example, the tale of Beltane's fete "made such a great impression on us" is that it "evolved out of a party during which a real man was burned" (Moore 1997:129-130).

We can thus see from this critique that Wittgenstein reproaches Frazer for approaching the human fact with the way in which the physicist studies phenomena in mind. According to him, it is only the confusion of reasons and causes that explains why Frazer believes in the existence of a unique and general explanation for a kind of customs. Only the false analogy between the analysis of human action and that of phenomena of nature allows us to understand what Frazer is doing when he interprets myth in a one-dimensional way in terms of knowledge and error; when he thinks that for customs each time there is an explanation which is the only explanation, when he considers that there are customs which should allow a single explanation. On the other hand, Wittgenstein considers that the use of causal thought sometimes surpasses the weakened meaning to assume the strong meaning. He denounces, for example, the causal theory of the sign which he sometimes terms as magic: it is the idea that the sign (i.e. the symbol in the broad sense, for example, a rule) “would act as a drug” to push men to action. The symbol, the rule would necessarily cause the action, the practice in such a way that the theory of causality would be perfectly sufficient to render an account of a human fact. Yet, Wittgenstein maintains that the rule is always the subject of an interpretation linked to use. Like direction signs, the rule only means something because there is a constant use which consists in giving it such or such meaning. Can we really say that the path leads somewhere even if no one goes there? Does a rule do such and such a thing even if no one follows it? At the beginning then, there is a use, a “form of life.” And we do not have to try to explain hypothetically, but to understand, i.e. describe. The meaning of a practice is there, in the practice itself. What we seek to understand is there, under our noses: we have only to adopt a certain perspective, to arrange in a clarifying order the elements which have always been there.

### Conclusion

According to Leibniz, reasons, unlike causes, influence without necessity. For Wittgenstein, necessity is already lacking at the level of the cause. The idea that the causal explanation contains an effective necessity is already a myth for him. In the analysis of reasons, it is *a fortiori* incorrect to expect an absolute necessity. The description that Wittgenstein considers as a more relevant method than the causal explanation of human facts is meant to take into account the essential presence of meaning in the action of man. In Wittgenstein’s thought, a practice is a meaning, and this is a function of a form of life in which it is integrated. That is why the interpretation to which it should be submitted is not a subjective comprehension *à la* Dithley, but an objective comprehension which is the ability, as Jacques Bouveresse says, to participate in a form of life. To describe a human fact, to understand it in Wittgenstein’s meaning, is then to construct an enlightening configuration of elements of the form of life in which this fact acquires a given meaning.



## Notes

1. The phenomenon is, etymologically (the Greek *phainomenon* designates what appears to the senses), the appearance. Thus, phenomenism is the conception of science as an undertaking to describe appearances. And, according to positivism, the objective of science is to provide schemas, models which effectively give an account that what we perceive, in being careful to avoid all conjecture on powers, hidden entities which might be the origin of facts. In the domain of the social sciences, we sometimes see a conception of positivism which defines it as an attitude or thought which consists in considering that the social sciences should adopt at least the spirit of the natural sciences, if not the methods. This assimilation of positivism to methodological monism can obviously be explained by the historical fact that the name of Auguste Comte is associated both with positivism in the social sciences and methodological monism. It is, however, clear that there is not a necessary link between phenomenism and methodological monism.
2. He writes that “causation is (–) what we observe by experiences, by observing the regular coincidence of process” (Wittgenstein 2004:196).
3. “Scientific questions can be of interest to me, but never really captivate me. Only conceptual and esthetic questions can have this effect on me. I am basically indifferent to the solution to scientific problems; but not to problems of the latter sort” (Wittgenstein 1984:94).
4. In *Culture and Value*, he writes: “It is not devoid of meaning, for example, to believe that the scientific epoch is technical and the beginning of the end of humanity; that the idea of great progress is self-delusion, as is as well the idea of complete knowledge of the truth, that in scientific knowledge there is nothing good or desirable, that humanity which aspires to this knowledge is falling into a trap. It is not absolutely clear that that is not the case” (Wittgenstein 1980:56).
5. It was David Hume who brought up what is called the problem of induction. He asserted that there is no logical relationship between factual observations already made and an observation to be made. Thus, induction has a psychological, and not a logical basis. It is the habit of seeing things happen in a certain way which leads us to think that they should always happen in the same way. Therefore, it is only the habit of seeing the sun rise each morning that makes us say that it will rise tomorrow morning. From this perspective, nothing allows us to claim that, narrowly speaking.
6. Wittgenstein has a developed sensitivity to understand the differences, to, as Kraus says of himself, separate and distinguish. Characteristically, he confided in Drury with the following: “Hegel always seems to mean to say that things which seem different are in reality the same, whereas what I am interested in is showing that things which seem to be the same are in reality different.” (Bouveresse 1991:10) He considers that the philosopher’s task is to resist the terrible tendency to theorize.

### References

- Bouveresse, Jacques, 2000, *Wittgenstein, la modernité, le progrès et le déclin* [*Wittgenstein, Modernity, Progress and Decline*], Marseille: Agone.
- Bouveresse, Jacques, 1991, *Philosophie, mythologie et pseudo-science* [*Philosophy, Mythology and Pseudo-Science*], Combas: Éditions de l'Éclat.
- Clément, Catherine, Bruno, Pierre et Sève, Lucien, 1977, *Pour une critique marxiste de la théorie psychanalytique* [*Towards a Marxist Critique of Psychoanalytical Theory*], Paris: Éditions sociales.
- Moore, Georges, 1997, *Les cours de Wittgenstein en 1930-1933* [*Wittgenstein's Courses in 1930-1933*], Cometti: Trans Europ Repress (TER).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 2004, *Recherches philosophiques* [*Philosophical Research*], Paris: Gallimard.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1999, *Les cours de Cambridge 1930-1932* [*Cambridge Courses 1930-1932*], Paris: Gallimard.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1996, *Le cahier bleu et le cahier brun* [*The Blue Notebook and the Brown Notebook*], Paris: Gallimard.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1993, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1984, *Remarques mêlées* [*Mixed Comments*], Paris: Gallimard.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1980, *Culture and Value*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1952, *Remarques sur « the Rameau d'or »* [*Comments on "The Golden Branch"*], Paris: l'Âge d'homme.