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Free Will, Twin Earth and a Grand Unified Theory? A scientist's introduction to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein

Dr Philip Southey (Stellenbosch University)

DATE: Monday, 16 March 2026 | 16h00–17h00 SAST

- VENUES:**
- **Stellenbosch University:** Neelsie Cinema
 - **University of the Witwatersrand:** Room P215, 2nd Floor, Physics Building
 - **North-West University:** Seminar Room K310, Physics Building G5
 - **Online**

--- A recording of the talk will be published on the NITheCS YouTube channel afterwards ---

ABSTRACT

This talk aims to introduce the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein to someone trained in the natural sciences. Some philosophers would argue that contemplating issues such as “free will” and “consciousness” without reading Wittgenstein is a little like contemplating biological systems without reading Darwin. Yet most contemporary discussion of these topics – particularly within the scientific community – ignores what might be called the “Wittgensteinian turn”: the idea that the meaning of our words should not be sought in what they refer to, but in how they are used in our social practices. Using Hilary Putnam’s twin earth thought experiment as an entry point, I will argue that it is not useful to think of our language (or scientific practice) as mirroring or representing reality. Anticipating subsequent objections of the inevitable backslide into relativism/idealism/anti-realism I will introduce the therapeutic subtleties of the later Wittgenstein – particularly as developed in Rortyan anti-representationalism. I will conclude by considering the implications for the issues of free will and the search for a grand unified theory of physics.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Philip Southey is a physics lecturer on the Extended Curriculum Programme at Stellenbosch University. He obtained his PhD in Tertiary Physics Education from the University of Cape Town (UCT) after completing a BSc Astrophysics (UCT) and a BA PPE (Oxford). His research interest lies at the intersection of science, education and philosophy, particular the tension between cognitive linguistics and ordinary language philosophy. He has taught Drama and English in a rural village in the Himalayas, played bagpipes for the queen, and performs a one-man musical comedy about quantum physics as Doktor Soutie.



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