

Metaphysics // Fall 2026

Handout 5

Picture theory: Wittgenstein, White

Example 1 (Drawing). Suppose you're shown a drawing of a face with a moustache, and nobody tells you whose face it is. Is the drawing accurate? You can't tell, though, suppose further, you can tell exactly what it shows. Now you learn that it's the police sketch of last night's bank robber, drawn from a witness's description, and that the robber has no moustache. The drawing turns out to be wrong, and yet nothing in it has changed. Then another twist: there's the innocent Carl who looks exactly like the sketch. Is it a picture of Carl? If looking alike decided whose picture it is, the sketch would be an accurate picture of Carl. Then no sketch could ever be wrong: each would be a correct picture of whoever it happens to look like.

Example 2 (Islands). In 1876 a whaling ship reported the location of Sandy Island in the Coral Sea. It stayed on charts for over a century, also on Google Maps, until a research ship found open sea in 2012. Now Tolkien's map of Middle-earth shows land that isn't there either. But only the first map is wrong. There's nowhere to sail to check the second. What would you have to do to Tolkien's map to make it wrong?

So two things about a picture are fixed separately: what it shows, which you can read off it, and what it's compared with, which you can't. 'The robber has a moustache' is wrong in the same way as the sketch.

How does language latch onto the world? A sentence is a string of shapes and noises, and yet it says how things are. How does it do this? how, that is, does it represent the world? A name stands for something that exists: the object, we can say, is its meaning. A proposition can't work like that. Instead, it represents by its pictorial form, whether or not it's true, so its sense is not tied to a situation that exists. You can't read truth off a picture, no picture is true a priori. 3.203 2.22 2.224-225

Russell's ONTF addressed this worry by making judgment a multiple relation, so that a false judgment wouldn't need a false fact to be about. Wittgenstein's answer is that a sentence latches on like a picture: its elements are correlated with things, it has the same form as the pictured entity. A picture 'represents' a possible situation: that is its *sense*, and you can read it off the picture alone. It 'depicts' reality, the actual state of things it's compared with. So we should say, somewhat perversely (I think): 2.1514-2.17 2.202-221

(5-1) A picture showing Socrates clean-shaven *represents* his being clean-shaven and *depicts* Socrates as bearded.

2.17 So a false picture still depicts reality, only incorrectly. It is 'true' if what it represents 'agrees' with what it depicts. W49-50

Question 3. Point at nothing and try to name it. Then say something false: YSB is asleep. Only the first act needed the world to cooperate. So if the proposition 'Socrates is clean-shaven' is false, what is it about? Not a fact, since there's no such fact, and not Socrates alone, since he isn't what is claimed.

A picture is a fact, not a thing. A picture isn't the canvas with paint on it. It's a fact: its elements relate to one another in a certain way. And that fact represents things as relating to one another in the same way. The picture is the sum of those facts about the physical object that carry representative significance. 2.141-2.15 W47-48

Example 4. Take a picture of a molecule. Two pink ping-pong balls wired to a blue one model water. Nothing in the molecule is pink or blue. Modelling is done by the balls arranged 'as' the atoms are. W48

How does such a fact reach the world? Wittgenstein's image is a ruler laid against an object: only the end-points of the graduations touch it. The correlations of the picture's elements with things are its 'feelers', and the picture includes them. On this view it's the feelers, not the likeness, that tie the police sketch to the robber and not to Carl. The drawing alone isn't yet the picture. 2.1512-1515

Question 5. Who decides which features of a picture are representative and which idle? Is a portrait's colour idle, and can one canvas be two pictures?

Question 6. Where do the feelers come from? Wittgenstein says that we use the sign as a projection of a possible situation, and what projects it is our thinking its sense. But a thought is itself a logical picture. So what ties the thought to the robber and not to Carl: a further thought, a causal chain running back through the witness, or nothing beyond the thought itself? 3, 3.11

The sentence is a fact, too. The same goes for a propositional sign. It's the fact that its words are assembled in a determinate way. Only facts can express a sense. A set of names can't. Suppose I write 'John', 'loves', 'Mary' as a list, then write: 3.14-3.142 W52

(5-2) John loves Mary.

I get the same complex object both times, but only the second expresses one thought, because this time we pick out a fact: the words' being arranged so. That, White says, solves the unity of the proposition. Wittgenstein's own thought experiment: a propositional sign built of tables, chairs and books, where the spatial arrangement of the furniture expresses the sense. Then the claim most often read backwards. 3.1431

> Instead of, 'The complex sign "*aRb*" says that *a* stands to *b* in the relation *R*', we ought to put, 'That "*a*" stands to "*b*" in a certain relation says that *aRb*.' 3.1432

The sign '*R*' doesn't name a relation-object. What says that John loves Mary is a fact about the sentence, that 'John' and 'Mary' sit on either side of 'loves'. W72

Question 7. Build a furniture language in which the chair left of the table says one thing and right of it another. What must you stipulate, and does anything you place stand for 'left of'? Does 'it's the fact, not the object' explain the unity of (5-2), or rename it?

Scores, grooves and hieroglyphs. A proposition is a picture of reality, a model of reality as we imagine it. A score doesn't look like music, nor the alphabet like speech, and yet these sign-languages prove to be pictures 'even in the ordinary sense'. The record, the musical idea, the score and the sound-waves all stand in the one internal relation of depicting that holds between language and world. What makes them one is a general rule that takes the musician from score to symphony, and from groove to symphony and back to score. Hieroglyphs show the essence of a proposition, since they depict the facts they describe. Alphabetic script grew out of them without losing what's essential to depiction. According to White, Wittgenstein takes 'picture' in its most general sense, yet denies that he's stretching the word. Think about what we ordinarily mean by it, Wittgenstein argues, and the score has to count. So do shading for colour and a mediaeval king painted larger than the other figures, since all a picture needs is a rule of projection and, however artificial the technique, a shared minimal logical form. Wittgenstein's other name for it is 'logical multiplicity': there must be exactly as much to tell apart in a proposition as in the situation it represents. 4.01 4.011 4.0141 4.016 W49, 70 4.04

Example 8. What's told apart needn't be a separate word. Wittgenstein's 'Ambulo', Latin for 'I walk', is one word, yet its stem with another ending says something else, and so does its ending with another stem. So there are two things to tell apart in it, and two in what it says: who, and doing what. And what's told apart needn't be an element at all. White's timeline shows that multiplicity is more than a list of elements: a line can represent a chronology only because a line and a sequence of events are related with 'between'. Now go down the chain: sound-waves, score, groove. At each step say what must survive for the next to be recoverable. 4.032 W74

Question 9. If any rule of projection will do, is everything a picture of everything under some rule? Is a tube map a picture in this sense, and is (5-2) one in the same sense as the king painted larger?

What a picture can't say. A picture can depict any reality whose form it has, but it can't depict its own pictorial form. It displays it. It represents its subject from outside, and it can't place itself outside its own representational form. Likewise a proposition shows how things stand if it's true, and it says that they do stand that way. 2.171-174 4.022

Example 10. A soldier sets out the cruet to explain a battle. The salt is the enemy artillery, the pepper his own tanks, and their positions on the tablecloth say where the forces are, rightly or wrongly. Whether he's right or wrong, he must put the cruet in some spatial relation, since he represents spatial relations by spatial relations. That the forces are spatially related isn't something the layout says, rightly or wrongly. The technique presupposes it, so it's shown by the method, not said by the layout. W48-49

We can't think anything illogical, and we couldn't say what an 'illogical' world would look like. Representing in language something that 'contradicts logic' is as impossible as giving the coordinates of a figure that contradicts the laws of space. We can represent spatially a state of affairs that breaks the laws of physics, but not one that breaks the laws of geometry. 3.03-031 3.032 3.0321

Question 11. Is Escher's staircase a picture of something illogical, or a picture of nothing?

Understanding without being told. We understand a sentence we've never met without having its sense explained. To understand it is to know what's the case if it's true, so we can understand it without knowing whether it's true. A proposition is a picture, since if I understand it I know the situation it represents, and I understand it without having had its sense explained. White supplies the step between: the sign must then embody a rule for deriving the situation from it, and that comes to its being a picture of the situation. A proposition must use old expressions to communicate a new sense. It communicates a situation, so it must be essentially connected with it, and the connection is that it's the situation's logical picture. White adds that Frege, like Wittgenstein, needed compositionality to explain how we understand new sentences, but that Wittgenstein also needs it for truth and falsity. A sentence has to make sense whether or not it's true, so only a compositional language can express propositions that are true or false. A proposition builds a situation by way of experiment. One name stands for one thing, another for another, and combined they present a state of affairs. 4.02 4.024 4.021 W71 4.03 W71 4.031-0311

Example 12. Here's a sentence you've never encountered:

(5-3) A pink giraffe is asleep on top of YSB's car.

You understood it at once, and you didn't have to look out of the window first (you won't see anything there, anyway). Now imagine it staged: one person stands in for the giraffe, another for the car, and they arrange themselves as the sentence says. Anyone watching can read off what's being said. To find out whether it's true, they'd still have to look out of the window.