

Propositions as Pictures in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: A Sketch of a New Interpretation

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Abstract

Although there is a great deal concerning the *Tractatus* that is controversial, the following line of interpretation is not controversial: Wittgenstein's picture theory of representation applies primarily to elementary propositions, and only derivatively to non-elementary propositions. Despite the broad consensus on this matter, I challenge this interpretation of the picture theory. I first gather some of the evidence showing that Wittgenstein consistently treated the picture theory as applying to all propositions, rather than specifically or especially to elementary propositions. I then begin to sketch a proposal for how the picture theory can be understood in light of this fact.

1. Introduction

As is well known, Wittgenstein's inspiration for the picture theory seems to have been a model of a car accident that was used in a Paris court room. On 29th September 1914, Wittgenstein recorded in his notebook, "In the proposition a world is as it were put together experimentally. (As when in the law-court in Paris a motor-car accident is represented by means of dolls, etc.)" (TB 1998, 7; see Sterrett (2017), p.116, for a reproduction of the image that Wittgenstein himself might have seen). The standard way to interpret this remark is to think of the courtroom model as capturing, albeit somewhat crudely, the pictorial nature of an elementary proposition. According to the *Tractatus*, an elementary proposition is a nexus of names with each name going proxy for a simple object. The way in which the names are related to one another in the elementary proposition represents the way in which the named objects are related to one another in a state of affairs. In the standard interpretation of the courtroom model, the elements of the model (the dolls) function as names, and the ways they are related to one another in the model represents the actual spatial relationships among their real-world counterparts. In this way, the courtroom model is taken to demonstrate how an elementary proposition is a picture (*Bild*) of a possible situation.

The reason that this can only be a crude approximation of the pictorial nature of an elementary proposition is because of the further features of elementary propositions that are fleshed out in the *Tractatus* (TLP 1989). In particular, the names in elementary propositions stand for objects which "make up the

substance of the world”, entities which “cannot be composite” (2.021). Furthermore, the elementary propositions themselves are logically independent of each other (2.061, 4.21). Hence the vehicles and pedestrians represented by the dolls in the courtroom model are not Tractarian objects, and the claims that the model is used to make about how the accident occurred are not the kinds of logically independent claims asserted by elementary propositions. Nevertheless, so the thought goes, the courtroom model manages to convey some of the central features of the pictorial nature of elementary propositions.

What about other propositions? According to the *Tractatus*, non-elementary propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions (5). Famously, Wittgenstein described his claim that the logical constants do not go proxy for anything as his “fundamental thought” (4.0312). The question thus arises: if non-elementary propositions are truth-functionally complex, and the logical constants do not go proxy for anything, how, then, do non-elementary propositions function as pictures?

It is easy enough to see how the pictorial nature of elementary propositions can be carried over to a *conjunction* of elementary propositions. The conjunction simply represents all of the objects named in the conjoined propositions as related to one another in the ways they are represented as being in those conjoined propositions. However, it seems that we can only appeal to a derivative and not particularly illuminating sense of how other truth-functionally complex propositions are pictures of possible situations. A disjunction, we might think, represents objects as related to one another in *at least one* of the ways that one of the disjoined propositions represents them; a negation represents objects as *not* related to one another in the way that the negated proposition represents them; a conditional represents that, *if* objects are related to one another as they are represented in the antecedent, *then* some further objects are related to one another as they are represented in the consequent. With regard to more complex truth-functional structure, perhaps all we can do is gesture in a vague way to the fact that logical analysis bottoms out in elementary propositions.

Despite its limitations, there is a broad consensus around the idea that the picture theory applies primarily to elementary propositions, and only in a

derivative way to non-elementary propositions, in the way just outlined. Nevertheless there are some straightforward reasons to challenge such an account. The first is that Wittgenstein's initial development of the idea of the picture theory in the *Notebooks* preceded the account of elementary propositions that is worked out in the *Tractatus*. The second is that in many of Wittgenstein's canonical statements to the effect that propositions are pictures, the claim is put forward in complete generality—there is no prioritization of elementary propositions. Finally, there is the difficulty, indicated above, of understanding how non-elementary propositions function as pictures.

The goal of this paper is to begin to present some of the textual evidence that indicates that the picture theory applies in the same way to all propositions, rather than primarily to elementary propositions, and to begin to sketch a proposal for how the picture theory can be understood with this in mind. Instead of regarding the courtroom model as a crude approximation of the pictorial nature of an elementary proposition, I suggest that we should rather see it as illustrating the essentially pictorial nature of any proposition.

2. Some textual evidence

Let us begin with the remarks surrounding the appeal to the courtroom model in the *Notebooks*:

"The general concept of the proposition carries with it a quite general concept of the co-ordination of proposition and situation: The solution to all my questions must be *extremely* simple.

In the proposition a world is as it were put together experimentally. (As when in the law-court in Paris a motor-car accident is represented by means of dolls, etc.)

This must yield the nature of truth straight away (if I were not blind).

Let us think of hieroglyphic writing in which each word represents its meaning. Let us think also of the fact that *actual* pictures of situations can be *right* and *wrong*." (TB 1998, 7)

The basic idea behind Wittgenstein's appeal to the courtroom model can be put as follows. The proposition, like the model, is a proposal that can be assessed as to its correctness, and the elements of the proposition, like the dolls in the model, can be rearranged to represent that things might be otherwise. For present purposes, the most immediate point to note is that there is nothing in Wittgenstein's remarks here that gestures at the particular significance of an elementary proposition; rather, he is explicitly talking about the "general concept" of the proposition. The references to hieroglyphic writing and "*actual pictures*" reinforce the idea that the relevant notion of picturing applies to all propositions. Indeed, in the following remarks (on the same day) Wittgenstein sketches a picture of two people fencing and writes, "It must be possible to demonstrate everything essential by considering this case."

In the ensuing days Wittgenstein repeatedly gives voice to the idea that all propositions are pictorial in the relevant sense. On 2nd and 3rd October he writes "We can say straight away: instead of this proposition has such and such a sense, this proposition represents such and such a situation" and "The proposition *only says something in so far as it is a picture!*" (TB 1998, 8). Given that versions of these remarks occur in the *Tractatus* at 4.031 and 4.03 respectively, Wittgenstein appears to have latched onto core elements of the picture theory before he has worked out the details of Tractarian elementary propositions. Indeed, there is no indication that anything depends on the idea that ordinary propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions.

Wittgenstein is also linking the conception of a proposition as a picture to the fact that, in contrast with a name, a proposition is logically articulated. Where the function of a name is to stand for an object, the function of a proposition is to represent that such and such is the case. Hence "a *name* is *not* a picture of the thing named!"; a simple sign "can be neither true nor false" (Wittgenstein 1998, 8). In sum, some of the central ideas that can be extracted from Wittgenstein's earliest construal of propositions as pictures are the following. Propositions involve elements that can be rearranged to represent possible situations; they can be correct or incorrect; and their function of representing how things are depends on their being logically articulated.

All of these ideas are still present in the *Tractatus*. Here, the picture theory is introduced in the 2.1s, beginning with 2.1 itself: "We picture facts to

ourselves”. At 2.13 and 2.14 we are told that “objects have the elements of the picture corresponding to them” and that what constitutes a picture is that “its elements are related to one another in a determinate way”. The idea of *pictorial form* is then introduced, “the possibility that things are related to one another in the same way as the elements of the picture” (2.151). Here we have in view the possibility of rearranging the elements of a picture in order to represent a range of possible situations. Hence, on a first pass at least, we are recovering the same operative features that are present in the *Notebooks*.

In the section of the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein applies the picture theory to propositions—the 4.0 sequence—we find again that there is no particular emphasis on elementary propositions. The sequence begins at 4.01 with the declaration, “A proposition is a picture of reality. A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it.” The immediately following remark then leaves little room to doubt that this is intended to apply to propositions in complete generality: “At first sight a proposition—one set out on the printed page, for example—does not seem to be a picture of the reality with which it is concerned. But neither do written notes seem at first sight to be a picture of a piece of music, nor our phonetic notation (the alphabet) to be a picture of our speech. And yet these sign-languages prove to be pictures, even in the ordinary sense, of what they represent.” (4.011) Wittgenstein is evidently asserting that ordinary sentences, such as the ones set out on a printed page, are pictures “even in the ordinary sense”.

Given all this, it may seem surprising that a consensus has formed around the idea that the picture theory applies primarily to elementary propositions. The explanation for such a consensus stems from features of the *Tractatus* that are not present in the *Notebooks*. In particular, 2.11 asserts that “A picture presents a situation in logical space, the existence and non-existence of states of affairs.” This is what links the picture theory in the *Tractatus* to the notion of logically independent states of affairs (2.061-2.062). Indeed, when 2.13 states that “objects have the elements of the picture corresponding to them,” this is naturally interpreted with reference to the Tractarian notion of simple objects presented in the 2.0s; objects which “make up the substance of the world” (2.021). As noted above, if the elements of a picture are supposed to correspond to Tractarian simple objects, then the items used in the model of the car accident would not count as pictorial elements. Here, then, we have

textual evidence that seems to speak in favor of the idea that the picture theory applies especially to elementary propositions.

On the interpretation that I will sketch below, the picture theory does still apply to elementary propositions. Furthermore, given the central Tractarian claim that all propositions with sense are truth-functions of elementary propositions, there will be no problem in accepting the idea that a picture “presents a situation in logical space, the existence and non-existence of states of affairs” (2.11). The novel feature of my interpretation is simply that the picture theory does not apply *primarily* to the elementary propositions. The main obstacle for such a proposal stems from the difficulty in seeing how truth-functionally complex propositions could count as pictures in Wittgenstein’s sense, especially bearing in mind the “fundamental thought” that the logical constants do not go proxy for anything. Hence in what follows I hope to provide some indication of how this obstacle can be overcome.

3. A sketch of a new interpretation

Let us examine the apparent difficulty with regarding non-elementary propositions as pictures more closely. A simple proposition which lacks any overt truth-functional complexity—such as “the cat sat on the mat” or what have you—appears to make a specific claim about the world. Although a conjunction of such propositions makes a number of such claims, the other logical constants seem to function in a notably different way. For example, because a disjunction asserts that *at least one* situation obtains, this evidently fails to be a *specific* claim analogous to the claim made by a simple proposition. In general, an arbitrary truth-function functions similarly to a disjunction: ruling out some possibilities but leaving open, to some degree, what in fact obtains. It is largely for this reason that it is difficult to see how truth-functionally complex propositions can be understood as pictures.

However, here we should note that, according to the *Tractatus*, an apparently simple proposition such as “the cat sat on the mat” really masks a great deal of truth-functional complexity. This can be seen from the fact that it has many logical relationships with other propositions: it implies that there was a mat and that it was placed somewhere such that the cat could sit on it; it denies that the cat was standing outside in the garden, and so on. On the Tractarian

account, this multitude of logical relationships—this “place in logical space” (3.4)—is what will be revealed by logical analysis.

With this in mind we can recognize that an apparently innocent proposition such as “the cat sat on the mat” does not make such a specific claim about the world after all. Indeed, perhaps it is best understood as a long disjunction of the various specific ways that the cat could be sitting on the mat such as to make the proposition true. The point generalizes easily: an ordinary proposition will typically assert that at least one of a range of more specific situations obtains.

The crucial implication of this idea for interpreting the picture theory is to recognize that the generic case, including the kind of case Wittgenstein had in mind when referring to the Paris courtroom model, was always a truth-functionally complex proposition. Furthermore, if an ordinary picture is already truth-functionally complex in this way, then there is no special problem of how to interpret the picture theory so that it can accommodate truth-functional complexity. Recall the central components of the picture theory that we identified as already present in the *Notebooks*: propositions involve elements that can be rearranged to represent possible situations; they can be correct or incorrect; and their function of representing how things are depends on their being logically articulated. My proposal is simply that all of this applies just as immediately to truth-functionally complex propositions as it does to elementary propositions.

This proposal depends on interpreting the elements of a picture more broadly than as names in elementary propositions. Indeed, the proposal is that Wittgenstein's original courtroom model should be thought of in comparison with an ordinary sentence: the various ways of arranging the dolls to represent different situations corresponds to the various ways of arranging ordinary words to form different sentences. Hence it will be important to note that such an interpretation is supported by many of the remarks in the *Tractatus*, particularly when Wittgenstein identifies the constituents of propositions as *words* at 4.026, contrasting the meanings of words (which “must be explained to us”) with the meaning of a proposition (with which “we make ourselves understood”). Indeed, when Wittgenstein writes that a proposition “must use old expressions to communicate a new sense” (4.03), he

is talking about the construction of unfamiliar sentences from familiar words. This then leads into a canonical statement of the picture theory: “A proposition communicates a situation to us, and so it must be *essentially* connected with the situation. And the connection is precisely that it is its logical picture.”

It will be evident that more needs to be said to fully flesh out this proposal for how to interpret the picture theory and to defend it from possible objections. Hence my goal here has simply been to draw attention to some of the textual evidence in favor of such an interpretation, and to recommend that we pursue it.

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Acknowledgement

An earlier version of this work was presented as part of a symposium on “Representation and Logic in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*” at the meeting of the *Society for the Study of the History of Analytical Philosophy* in July 2021. My thanks to the members of the audience, and my particular thanks to the other symposium participants Sophia Arbeiter, Mahmoud Jalloh and Sanford Shieh, for their input on this project.



The Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society
in cooperation with the Vienna Circle Society,
with the support of the Federal Government of Lower Austria, section Science and Research,
and the municipalities of Kirchberg, Otterthal, and Trattenbach,
are pleased to present the

44th International Wittgenstein Symposium

August 6–12, 2023

100 YEARS TRACTATUS

Organised by
Esther Heinrich-Ramharter (Vienna), Alois Pichler (Bergen)
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BEITRÄGE CONTRIBUTIONS



100 YEARS *TRACTATUS*

Contributions of the 44th International Wittgenstein Symposium
August 6 – 12, 2023
Kirchberg am Wechsel

Volume XXIX

Editors

Esther Heinrich-Ramharter
Alois Pichler
Friedrich Stadler

in cooperation with Joseph Wang-Kathrein

Disclaimer: All contributions in this volume have been selected and peer-reviewed, but not copy-edited.
Any formal errors are therefore the sole responsibility of their authors.

Produced with the support of the
Department for Science and Research (K3)
of the Province of Lower Austria

WISSENSCHAFT · FORSCHUNG
NIEDERÖSTERREICH 

Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2023
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society

Verleger | Publisher

Österreichische Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society

Markt 63, A-2880 Kirchberg am Wechsel
Österreich/Austria

www.alws.at

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ISSN 1022-3398 | ISBN 978-3-9505512-1-1

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Die Redaktion dankt allen Gutachtern für ihre äußerst hilfreichen Rezensionen.

The editors are grateful to all referees for their most helpful reviews.

Die Beiträge und das Abstracts-Heft wurden mit Unterstützung einer von Joseph Wang-Kathrein, Universität Innsbruck, erarbeiteten Datenbank erstellt. Kontakt: joseph.wang@uibk.ac.at

The *Contributions* and the booklet of *Abstracts* were compiled with the support of a database developed by Joseph Wang-Kathrein, University of Innsbruck. Contact: joseph.wang@uibk.ac.at

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