

# Propositions as Pictures

## An unrestricted interpretation of the “picture theory” in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*

Joshua Eisenthal

April 22, 2026

### 1 Introduction

The *Tractatus* is centrally concerned with symbolic representation, in particular the way in which the declarative sentences of a natural language are representations of possible situations. Wittgenstein’s reflections on the nature of representation are often grouped under the heading of the “picture theory,” named as such because of Wittgenstein’s repeated and self-conscious use of the term *Bild*. For example, the first such occurrence of the term in the *Tractatus* is at 2.1: “We picture facts to ourselves.” (*Wir machen uns Bilder der Tatsachen.*) Later, at 4.01, Wittgenstein declares: “A sentence is a picture of reality.” (*Der Satz ist ein Bild der Wirklichkeit.*) And at 4.015 he writes: “The possibility of all imagery, of all our pictorial modes of expression, is contained in the logic of picturing.” (*Die Möglichkeit aller Gleichnisse, der ganzen Bildhaftigkeit unserer Ausdrucksweise, ruht in der Logik der Abbildung.*)

This paper is an exploration of what it means for a sentence to be a picture of a possible situation. My central claim will be that, according to Wittgenstein, *all* declarative sentences are pictures. This is contrast with the broad consensus that it is only Tractarian *elementary* sentences that are pictures in a direct sense. On the consensus view, non-elementary sentences only count as pictures because they are truth-functions of elementary sentences. Hence non-elementary sentences inherit their pictorial nature from the bottom up, so to speak.<sup>1</sup> On my view, no privileging of elementary sentences is necessary: the picture theory applies in the same way to all sentences, elementary and non-elementary alike. For want of a label, call this the *unrestricted* interpretation of the picture theory.

My first task in what follows is to give an initial account of the consensus view of the pictorial nature of elementary sentences, and the difficulty of seeing non-elementary sentences as pictures in the same way.

---

<sup>1</sup>This ties into a long-standing debate between “bottom-up” and “top-down” interpretations of the *Tractatus*. See Eisenthal (2021) and Eisenthal (2022) for some related discussion. In a more developed version of the present paper, I will draw out the connections.

## 2 The consensus view

According to the picture theory, a picture consists of pictorial elements arranged in a particular way. Each pictorial element stands for an object (2.13), and the way in which the elements are related to one another in the picture represents that the pictured objects are related to one another in a certain way in the world (2.15). If the pictured objects are related as the picture represents them, then the picture is correct.

It seems straightforward to apply this to Tractarian elementary sentences.<sup>2</sup> An elementary sentence consists of names — it is “a nexus, a concatenation”<sup>3</sup> of names (4.22). Each name stands for an object (3.22), and the particular way the names are arranged in an elementary sentence represents the particular way the named objects are related to one another in the world. If those objects are so related, then the elementary sentence is true, otherwise it is false. In this way, an elementary sentence is a picture of a possible state of affairs (4.21).

What about non-elementary sentences? The culmination of the *Tractatus* is the “general form of the proposition,” characterizing every proposition as a truth-function of elementary propositions (4.5, 5.3, 6). However, Wittgenstein also says that his “fundamental thought” is that the logical constants do not stand for anything (4.0312). This creates a difficulty for how to understand non-elementary sentences as pictures. A non-elementary sentence is by definition truth-functionally complex, hence contains logical constants which, according to 4.0312, do not stand for anything. How, then, should a non-elementary sentence be understood as a picture?

Among the logical constants, negation may be a special case. In order to represent that a situation does *not* obtain, we need to employ the same picture that we would have used to represent that it *did*, in fact, obtain. In other words, whether we are asserting or denying that a situation obtains, we still need to represent *that* situation. (As Wittgenstein writes at 4.0621, “The propositions ‘p’ and ‘ $\sim$ p’ have opposite sense, but there corresponds to them one and the same reality.”) Though there is much more that could be said about negation, we might think that, on its own, it doesn’t create a serious obstacle to the basic idea of how a proposition can be construed as a picture.

Conjunction may also be a quite special case. If an individual elementary proposition is a picture because the pictured objects are related to one another as the elementary proposition represents them, then a *conjunction* of elementary propositions simply represents *all* the objects named in the conjuncts as related to one another as each of the conjuncts represents them. According to the *Tractatus*, elementary sentences are logically independent: any one of them can be true or false without affecting the truth or falsity of the others (4.211). So if we are happy to grant that an elementary proposition is a picture, it seems easy enough to grant that a conjunction of elementary propositions is also a picture.

However, matters are not so straightforward with the other truth-functions. Take disjunc-

---

<sup>2</sup>In what follows I will use the terms ‘sentence’ and ‘proposition’ somewhat interchangeably to translate Wittgenstein’s term ‘*Satz*’. Most existing translations of the *Tractatus* typically use ‘proposition’, but an example that more often opts for ‘sentence’ is the recent translation by Stern, Schulte, and Saporiti.

<sup>3</sup>“*ein Zusammenhang, eine Verkettung*” (4.22)

tion. A disjunction is true if at least one of its disjuncts is true. Granting that the individual disjuncts are pictures, how is the disjunction itself a picture? It seems that we are forced to say something disappointingly uninformative: the disjunction is a picture in that it “pictures” that *at least one* of the situations represented by the disjuncts obtains. This notion of “picturing” is not the same as the notion of picturing that applied to the elementary propositions, which involved an arrangement of pictorial elements standing for objects. A disjunction of elementary propositions seems to be relying on the pictorial nature of its elementary disjuncts and then, in addition, “picturing” (somehow) that at least one of those represented situations obtains. Nothing in our sketch of the picture theory so far accounts for this additional step.

The difficulty only compounds when we consider other truth functions. With a conditional for example, we seem forced to say that it “pictures” (in a similarly uninformative way) that *if* the objects named in the antecedent are related to one another as the antecedent represents them, *then* the objects named in the consequent are related to one another as the consequent represents them. In the case of an arbitrarily complex truth-function (of some arbitrary number of elementary propositions), we seem forced to appeal to the brute fact that the proposition before us is, indeed, *some* truth-function of elementary propositions, and hence “pictures” in the way appropriate to that truth-function. A non-elementary proposition would then count as a “picture” only in the derivative sense that it inherits its pictorial nature by dint of being a truth-function of elementary propositions. Hence Wittgenstein’s picture theory would apply, first and foremost, to the elementary propositions.

The majority of commentators have accepted some version of this interpretation of the picture theory. According to Zalabardo, for example, a non-elementary propositional sign “contains a collection of facts playing the role of pictures of reality” — the elementary propositional signs — but it also contains, “in addition, a separate, non-pictorial component determining how the proposition represents things as being with the help of these pictures” (Zalabardo, 2015, 223). On Zalabardo’s view, then, although elementary propositions function as pictures, non-elementary propositions contain an additional, non-pictorial component corresponding to their particular truth-functional complexity.<sup>4</sup> Corresponding to its truth-functional complexity, a non-elementary proposition “will have to incorporate a non-pictorial component determining the way in which it uses the elementary propositions to represent things as being a certain way” (ibid).

There is some clear textual evidence in favor of Zalabardo’s interpretation early in Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks*. Most significantly, Wittgenstein records the following on 31 October 1914:

Isn’t it like this: The logical constants characterize the way in which the elementary forms of the proposition represent? ...

The way of representing [*Darstellungsweise*] does not picture; only the proposition is a picture.

The way of representing determines how the reality has to be compared with

---

<sup>4</sup>Zalabardo goes so far as to say, “on the account of non-elementary propositional representation that Wittgenstein endorses, a [non-elementary] proposition is not a picture of reality” (Zalabardo, 2015, 223).

the picture.

First and foremost the elementary propositional form must picture, all portrayal takes place through it. (Wittgenstein, 1998, 22)

Here we have an explicit prioritizing of elementary propositions over other propositions. Furthermore, in line with Zalabardo's view, Wittgenstein writes that non-elementary propositions contain a non-pictorial component: a "way of representing" that "does not picture." This way of representing determines *how* reality is to be compared with the picture — the disjunctive way, or the conditional way, or whatever way corresponds to the truth-functional structure of the proposition in question. Hence the role of the logical constants is to "characterize the way in which" elementary propositions represent when they occur in non-elementary propositions.

If these remarks from 31 October 1914 occurred in the *Tractatus*, it would be difficult to dispute Zalabardo's interpretation. But they do not occur in the *Tractatus*, and in particular the expression "*Darstellungsweise*" ("ways of representing") does not appear in the *Tractatus*. On the contrary, as Zalabardo himself notes, if taken at face value most of the canonical statements of the picture theory in the *Tractatus* apply in full generality to *all* propositions — there is no particular prioritization of the elementary propositions. Furthermore, as the *Notebooks* themselves proceed, Wittgenstein moves in a quite different direction to the kind of view he was considering in October 1914.

Before turning to that discussion, there is another interpretation of the picture theory which I want to consider here. This interpretation, proposed by Jaakko and Merrill Hintikka, observes that it is possible to accommodate arbitrary truth-functional complexity by just employing repeated iterations of negation and conjunction. Furthermore, the Hintikkas also point out that Wittgenstein exploits this fact in the general propositional form. After characterizing the general propositional form as a formal variable at 6, Wittgenstein immediately comments, "What this says is just that every proposition is a result of successive applications to elementary propositions of the operation  $N(\bar{\xi})$ " (6.001). Wittgenstein's  $N$  operator is a joint-negation operator: "the negation of all the values of the propositional variable  $\xi$ " (5.502). (Thus, "If  $p$  has only one value, then  $N(\bar{\xi}) = \sim p$  (not  $p$ ); if it has two values, then  $N(\bar{\xi}) = \sim p \cdot \sim q$  (neither  $p$  nor  $q$ )" (5.51).) In other words, Wittgenstein is exploiting conjunctive normal form — the fact that negation and conjunction are expressively adequate. As the Hintikkas put it:

what thesis 6 of the *Tractatus* says is that an arbitrary truth-function of elementary propositions can be represented as the result of the repeated use of one particular truth-function, which is the simultaneous denial of a number of given propositions. "Simultaneous denial" of course means here the conjunction of the negations of all the given (argument) propositions. (Hintikka and Hintikka, 1986, 107)

The Hintikkas point out that this makes the task of applying the picture theory to non-elementary propositions much more tractable insofar as it implies that we can leave the other truth-functions to one side. As we have already seen, negation and conjunction seem to be the easiest truth-functions to accommodate. So if we can accept that a negation of an elementary

proposition is a picture, and that a conjunction of elementary propositions is a picture, then perhaps we are done. This interpretation gives a special significance to Wittgenstein's use of negation and conjunction (instead of, say, negation and disjunction) when presenting the general propositional form. As the Hintikkas put it, "Even such idiosyncratic-looking details as his use of only one of two possible Sheffer primitives... turns out to be tailored precisely to his purported philosophical conclusion" (Hintikka and Hintikka, 1986, 109).

At a first pass, this is a promising proposal for how to account for the pictorial nature of non-elementary propositions, sidestepping a need to appeal to something like a notion of "ways of representing" that is absent from the *Tractatus*. Nevertheless, the Hintikkas' interpretation faces a serious difficulty of its own. This arises from Wittgenstein's distinction between essential and accidental features of a proposition, introduced and elaborated on in the remarks following 3.34:

3.34 A proposition possesses essential and accidental features.

Accidental features are those that result from the particular way in which the propositional sign is produced. Essential features are those without which the proposition could not express its sense.

3.341 The essential in a proposition is therefore that which is common to all propositions which can express the same sense.

And in the same way in general the essential in a symbol is that which all symbols which can fulfill the same purpose have in common.

The general thrust of the sequence of remarks following 3.34 is to emphasize what is common to different modes of symbolizing and to downplay the significance of particular modes of symbolizing. "Again and again," Wittgenstein writes, "the individual case turns out to be unimportant," even though "the possibility of each individual case discloses something about the essence of the world" (3.3421). This bears on the Hintikkas' argument because it is unclear that Wittgenstein can rely on conjunctive normal form in the way that they suggest. Doing so would amount to relying on a particular mode of symbolizing, not what is common among equivalent modes of symbolizing. Indeed, as it turns out, Wittgenstein highlights *disjunctive* normal form in the context of the 3.34s:

3.344 What signifies in a symbol is what is common to all the symbols that the rules of logical syntax allow us to substitute for it.

3.441 For instance, we can express what is common to all notations for truth-functions in the following way: they have in common that, for example, the notation that uses ' $\sim p$ ' ('not  $p$ ') and ' $p \vee q$ ' (' $p$  or  $q$ ') can be substituted for any of them.<sup>5</sup>

(This serves to characterize the way in which something general can be disclosed by the possibility of a specific notation.)

Wittgenstein's appeal to disjunctive (rather than conjunctive) normal form at 3.441 is clearly awkward for the argument that the Hintikkas want to make. But the more fundamental point is that neither of these forms, on their own, should bear philosophical weight. Each

---

<sup>5</sup>The emphasis is Wittgenstein's.

represents an *accidental* feature of a notation, a kind of conventional choice that is available. What is *essential*, by contrast, is “that which all symbols which can fulfill the same purpose have in common” (3.341). So there is a clear tension between Wittgenstein’s discussion here and the Hintikkas’ attempt to attribute importance to what is surely an accidental feature of the general propositional form, i.e. that Wittgenstein’s joint negation operator is a generalization of “neither nor” ( $\sim p \wedge \sim q$ ) rather than, as it might have been, “not both” ( $\sim p \vee \sim q$ ).

Taking a step back, the most immediate difficulty for any interpretation of the picture theory which attributes a primary role to elementary propositions (including both the Hintikkas’ and Zalabardo’s interpretations) stems from the many remarks in the *Tractatus* which suggest that the theory should be understood in full generality, applying in the same way to *all* propositions. Let us now turn to a survey of those remarks.

### 3 Propositions as pictures

In the *Tractatus*, the fundamental ideas of the picture theory are first introduced in the 2.1s. The theory is then applied to the sentences of a natural language in the 4.0s. The 4.0 sequence begins with the following declaration:

4.01 A proposition is a picture of reality.

A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it.

It is already worth noting that there is as yet no suggestion that elementary propositions play some special role here. Furthermore, Wittgenstein’s next remark clearly suggests that an ordinary sentence, formed of ordinary words, is a picture:

4.011 At first sight a sentence — 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.

As an elementary proposition is not something that we typically see “set out on the printed page,” it would be difficult to deny that 4.011 states that ordinary sentences are pictures of what they represent. The sub-sequence of remarks following 4.02 then begins as follows:

4.02 We can see [that a proposition is a picture] from the fact that we understand the sense of a propositional sign without its having been explained to us.<sup>6</sup>

4.021 A proposition is a picture of reality: for if I understand a proposition, I know the situation that it represents. And I understand the proposition without having had its sense explained to me.

---

<sup>6</sup>I read 4.02 as following 4.01, i.e. as following “A proposition is a picture of reality.” More generally, I agree with commentators who emphasize the importance of the “tree-structured” organization of the *Tractatus* (see Stern (2023)). However, if one prefers to read 4.02 as following 4.016 (the immediately preceding remark), this does not affect my argument here.

Wittgenstein is suggesting that the pictorial nature of a proposition can be seen from the fact that we can understand it immediately, “without it having been explained to us.” What this means is made clearer when he goes on to contrast sentences with individual words, focusing on the fact that the former are constituted by arrangements of the latter:

4.024 To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true...  
It is understood by anyone who understands its constituents.

4.025 When translating one language into another, we do not proceed by translating each *proposition* of the one into a *proposition* of the other, but merely by translating the constituents of propositions.

(And the dictionary translates not only substantives, but also verbs, adjectives, and conjunctions, etc.; and it treats them all in the same way.)

4.026 The meanings of simple signs (words) must be explained to us if we are to understand them.

With propositions, however, we make ourselves understood.

4.027 It belongs to the essence of a proposition that it should be able to communicate a *new* sense to us.

An unfamiliar word needs to be explained in order for it to be understood. By contrast, we are constantly operating with unfamiliar sentences; sentences which are easily comprehensible so long as we understand their constitutive words. All this is well and good, but one might wonder how this is supposed to help us see that propositions are pictures as 4.021 suggests. On this point, we can recall the earlier discussion of picturing in the 2.1s:

2.13 In a picture objects have the elements of the picture corresponding to them.

2.14 What constitutes a picture is that its elements are related to one another in a determinate way.

2.15 The fact that the elements of a picture are related to one another in a determinate way represents that things are related to one another in the same way.

Wittgenstein’s fundamental notion of a picture (*Bild*) or model (*Modell*) is an arrangement of sensible elements used as a representation of something else. This notion can be applied to the sentences of a language in a natural way: the relevant sensible elements are words (either spoken so that we can hear them, or written down so that we can see them) which are arranged to form sentences.<sup>7</sup> These words — the nouns and verbs and adjectives that we find translated in dictionaries — are the “constituents” of sentences, the “simple signs” out of which they are built. Words can be categorically distinguished from sentences by appealing to the fact that the meaning of a novel word has to be explained in order to be understood, whereas novel sentences are readily comprehensible. Hence the 4.02 sequence leads naturally to 4.03:

---

<sup>7</sup>Compare with 3.1431: “The essence of a propositional sign is very clearly seen if we imagine one composed of spatial objects (such as tables, chairs, and books) instead of written signs. Then the spatial arrangement of these things will express the sense of the proposition.”

4.03 A proposition must use old expressions to communicate a new sense.

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.

In sum, the textual evidence in this section of the *Tractatus* clearly supports the idea that Wittgenstein thinks of ordinary (non-elementary) propositions as pictures. If a picture is an arrangement of elements which stand for things, so that the whole can be used to represent some possible situation, then an ordinary *sentence* can be understood as a picture because it is an arrangement of *words* which stand for things, so that the whole can be used to represent some possible situation.

However, despite this weight of textual evidence, there are two serious challenges to seeing this idea through. The first challenge is to understand the notion of an *object* that a word is supposed to stand for. With nouns — words like “table,” “chair,” and “book” — it is relatively straightforward to perceive a sense in which they stand for objects. But what of other grammatical categories? Do verbs and adjectives “stand for objects” in some extended sense? And what about words corresponding to logical constants? This brings us to the second serious challenge facing the unrestricted understanding of the picture theory: how, after all, to accommodate truth-functional complexity.

## 4 Objects in the *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein introduces objects (“*Gegenstände*”) early. When proposition 2 declares, “What is the case — a fact — is the existence of states of affairs”, 2.01 comments, “A state of affairs is a combination of objects (entities, things).”<sup>8</sup> There then follows an extended series of remarks about these objects.

First and foremost, objects contain their possibilities of occurring in states of affairs; the possibilities must “already lie in them” (2.0121), so that to know an object is to know all its possibilities of combination (2.0123). As a result, “if all objects are given, then at the same time all *possible* states of affairs are also given” (2.0124). Objects thus “contain the possibility of all situations” (2.014). The possibilities of its occurrence in states of affairs is the *form* of an object (2.0141).

We are also told that objects are simple (2.02) and that they constitute “the substance of the world”:

2.021 Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite.

2.022 It is obvious that an imagined world, however different it may be from the real one, must have something — a form — in common with it.

---

<sup>8</sup>The parenthetical remark at the end of 2.01 suggests that Wittgenstein may have been happy to use these three terms — *Gegenständen*, *Sachen*, *Dingen* — somewhat interchangeably. Indeed, there are many occasions where Wittgenstein uses “thing” (*Ding*) where he might have used “object” (*Gegenstand*); see 1.1, 2.011, 2.012 ff., 2.013, 2.02331, 2.151, 3.1431, 3.221, 4.0311, 4.1272, 4.243, and 5.5351 f.

## 2.023 Objects are just what constitute this unalterable form.

Because objects contain the possibilities of *all* situations, they themselves are constant across them. (No matter what situation might obtain, it will correspond to some configuration of objects.) In this sense, the objects constitute an unalterable form — the objects “are what is unalterable and subsistent” while their configurations in states of affairs “are what is changing and variable” (2.0271). We are then given some further comments on the way in which objects occur in states of affairs, starting with the claim that they “fit into one another like the links of a chain” (2.03), standing to one another in a determinate way (2.031).<sup>9</sup> The remainder of the 2.0 sequence concerns the structure (2.032) and form (2.033) of the states of affairs themselves, and the fact that the totality of existing states of affairs is the world (2.04) or the sum-total of reality (2.063). We then arrive at the introduction of the picture theory at 2.1.

Let us return to the first feature of objects that Wittgenstein specifies — the way in which they contain their possibilities of combination, or, equivalently, the way in which they have different forms. As Colin Johnston has argued, this feature of Tractarian objects means that they can encompass an open ended variety of logical categories.<sup>10</sup> Logical categories can be thought of as differentiated in terms of combinatorial powers. Russell, for example, construes a predicate as the kind of term that combines with one particular to form an atomic complex, whereas a binary relation is the kind of term that combines with two particulars to form an atomic complex, and so on. (Predicates, along with relations of all orders, are Russell’s *universals*. Particulars, by contrast, are all the terms in atomic complexes that are not universals.) Wittgenstein does not contrast his notion of object with other kinds of entities of reference (such as predicates or relations): Tractarian states of affairs consist solely of objects, objects which “fit into one another like the links of a chain.” But different objects can have different logical forms; different possibilities of combining with one another. Hence the kind of logical categories that Russell differentiates by distinguishing particulars from universals, Wittgenstein bundles together by appealing to the notion of forms of objects. Thus Johnston writes: “As Wittgenstein uses them, one might propose, ‘object’ is a catch-all word meaning ‘entity of reference’, and ‘name’ a catch-all word meaning ‘referring expression’. The possibility will then be open of dividing up the objects into logical categories characterised by their combinatorial powers.” (Johnston, 2009, 151)

Wittgenstein tells us almost nothing about the forms of objects.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, they are left *completely* unspecified. We might hope to get some insight into the kinds of logical categories that Wittgenstein envisages by looking to his discussion of the forms of names and the elementary propositions that they constitute. But the forms of elementary propositions are left just as unspecified as the forms of states of affairs. Crucially, however, this is not an accidental feature of Wittgenstein’s approach. At 5.55 he directly poses himself the question: “We now have to answer *a priori* the question about all the possible forms of elementary propositions,” and continues:

---

<sup>9</sup>“*Im Sachverhalt verhalten sich die Gegenstände in bestimmter Art und Weise zueinander.*”

<sup>10</sup>See Johnston (2009), which I follow in some detail here.

<sup>11</sup>At 2.0251 we are told that “Space, time, and color (being colored) are forms of objects.” I hope to return to examine this remark later.

Elementary propositions consist of names. Since, however, we are unable to give the number of names with different meanings, we are also unable to give the composition of elementary propositions.

Here, we begin to see that Wittgenstein is reversing the approach taken by Russell. Where Russell posits a system of logical categories and claims that the ultimate analysis of propositions will reflect such categories, Wittgenstein insists that it is only the logical analysis of propositions that could possibly reveal what logical categories or logical forms there are. (We will only know “the number of names with different meanings” when we have completely analyzed our language.) The series of remarks following 5.5 makes clear that Wittgenstein thinks it is entirely misguided to attempt to say anything about the forms of elementary propositions in advance of this process of analysis.

5.553 Russell said that there were simple relations between different numbers of things (individuals). But between what numbers? And how is this supposed to be decided?—By experience? ...

5.554 It would be completely arbitrary to give any specific form.

5.555 ... And anyway, is it really possible that in logic I should have to deal with forms that I can invent? What I have to deal with must be that which makes it possible for me to invent them.<sup>12</sup>

The 5.55 sequence culminates in the claim that elementary propositions are only decided by the *application* of logic (5.557). The application of logic is the analysis of propositions in order to show their truth-functional structure, hence to make explicit the logical relations that they stand in.<sup>13</sup> But “what belongs to its application, logic cannot anticipate” (5.557). So where Russell lays out the kinds of entities of references that he envisages (particulars and the various kinds of universals) in advance of analysis, Wittgenstein rejects such a project as entirely unfounded, as “obvious nonsense” (5.5571).

To make further progress in understanding Wittgenstein’s notion of object, I now want to turn to the earlier discussion that we find in his *Notebooks*, in particular the notably high volume of remarks that are clustered in May and June of 1915.

## 5 Objects in the *Notebooks*

Wittgenstein’s central focus from the end of April to the end of June 1915 is the idea of the simple object. Beginning on 25 April, he writes:

...cannot any so-called thing be correlated in one and the same way with any other such? It is, for example, quite clear that the separate words of language are used as — and experienced as — logically equivalent units.

---

<sup>12</sup>Cf. 2.0121, “Nothing in the province of logic can be merely possible. Logic deals with every possibility and all possibilities are its facts.”

<sup>13</sup>Here I follow Johnston and Ricketts, amongst others. See Johnston (2009) 153-156 and Ricketts (2014) 274.

It always seems as if there were something that one *can regard as a thing*, and *on the other hand* real simple things.

It is clear that neither a pencil-stroke nor a steamship is simple. Is there really a logical equivalence between these two?

This is an issue that will repeatedly occupy Wittgenstein's attention for the following two months — the apparent contrast between “what one can regard as a thing” and “real simple things”. The former category ranges over relatively uncomplicated things, like pencil strokes, and highly complex things, like steamships. What unites all these cases is that we use individual words (such as “steamship”) to refer to them. As one might put it, they are all *regarded as things* in our language.

On 6 May, Wittgenstein writes the following:

...it is clear that I have before me a concept of a thing, of simple correlation, when I think about this matter. But how am I imagining the simple? Here all I can say is always “‘x’ has reference”.—Here is a great riddle!

The idea here is that a simple sign and a simple thing are related by the fact that the one stands for the other in an unmediated way (in contrast with a sign which signifies via a definition, where the definition is precisely that which mediates between the sign and what it stands for). On 9 May, Wittgenstein then writes, “*Obviously* propositions are possible which contain no simple signs, i.e. no signs which have an immediate reference. And these are really *propositions* making sense, nor do the definitions of their component parts have to be attached to them.” Propositions which contain definite descriptions, for example, contain signs which don't have an immediate reference. Wittgenstein goes on to remark that the components of such propositions “can be analysed by means of a definition, and must be, if we want to approximate to the real structure of the proposition.” One might wonder whether such a process of analysis will eventually terminate, and if so “what will the end be?” This introduces another central theme that will come up repeatedly in the ensuing weeks — the way in which analysis reveals the true structure of propositions. Here, on 9 May, Wittgenstein writes:

Analysis makes the sentence more complicated than it was, but it cannot and must not make it more complicated than its meaning was from the first.

When the sentence is just as complex as its meaning, then it is *completely* analysed.

But the meaning of our sentences is not infinitely complicated.

The idea that the analysis of a sentence is intimately tied to the meaning of that sentence, and that the complete analysis of a sentence cannot be more complicated than its meaning (however complicated that meaning might indeed be), is something that Wittgenstein will return to and clarify. Most immediately, on 11 May he ties this back to the notion of the simple object, writing “our simple IS: the simplest thing that we are acquainted with”.<sup>14</sup> He goes on: “The simplest thing which our analysis can attain — it need appear only as a prototype [*Urbild*], as a variable in our propositions — *that* is the simple thing that we mean

---

<sup>14</sup>“Unser Einfaches IST: das Einfachste, was wir kennen.”

and look for.” This is again an idea that will be returned to and developed — the idea that the logical analysis of our sentences is concerned with what *we mean* by those sentences, arriving at something that, in some sense, we still recognize as our own (“the simplest thing that we are acquainted with”).

Wittgenstein’s more immediate concern is the way in which ordinary objects, which are clearly complex in the sense of having internal structure, are “regarded as things” and referred to by individual words. On the 13 May Wittgenstein evidently feels unsatisfied with the thought that one could simply get rid of such “names” through an appeal to their definitions:

...it seems — at least so far as I can see at present — that the matter is not settled by getting rid of names by means of definitions: complex spatial objects, for example, seem to me in some sense essentially things — I as it were see them as things. — And the designation of them by means of names seems to be more than a mere trick of language. Spatial complex objects — for example — really, so it seems, do appear as things.

Returning to the idea of “simple correlation” from 6 May, it certainly seems that ordinary words can have a straightforward reference: “When I say “x” has reference’ do I have the feeling: ‘it is impossible that “x” should stand for, say, this knife of this letter’? Not at all. On the contrary.” (19 May) Wittgenstein feels a real pressure here to regard ordinary objects as entities of reference in an immediate way. “A complex just is a thing!” (20 May). What we are getting closer to is the idea that the expectations made of “really simple things” are already satisfied by the ordinary things that we talk about in an ordinary way:

The feeling of the simple relation which always comes before our mind as the main ground for the assumption of “simple objects”—haven’t we got this very same feeling when we think of the relation between name and complex object?

Suppose the complex object is this book. Let it be called “A”. Then surely the occurrence of “A” in the proposition shows the occurrence of the book in the fact. *For it is not arbitrarily resolved when it is analysed, so as, e.g., to make its resolution a completely different one in each propositional formation.*—<sup>15</sup>

And like the occurrence of the name of a thing in different propositions, the occurrence of the name of compounded objects shows that there is a form and a content in common. (23 May)

The distinction that was at issue at the end of April — the apparent contrast between “what one can regard as a thing” and “real simple things” — is becoming progressively more difficult to make out. The demands on the relation between simple names and simple things seem to be met by the ordinary functioning of ordinary words, standing for obviously complicated objects. More positively, however, this can be taken to reveal an improved understanding of the concept of a *name* altogether:

... is “name” so to speak a *logical* concept?

“It signals what is common to a form and a content.”——

---

<sup>15</sup>Compare with 3.3442, discussed below.

According to the difference in the structure of the complex its name denotes in a different way and is subject to different syntactical laws. ...

Names signalize what is common to a single form and a single content.— Only *together with* their syntactical use do they signalize *one particular* logical form. (30 May)

When a given name occurs in different sentences, it is possible to recognize that we are, after all, talking about the same thing. But if that thing is structured in a particular way, then this can affect what it makes sense to say about it. Wittgenstein will later give as an example the contrast between “the rod is leaning against the wall” (perfectly comprehensible) and “the ball is leaning against the wall” (perhaps nonsensical), observing that here the “internal nature” of rods and balls comes into view (see 22 June). The patterns evident in the sentences in which a name (a word) can and cannot occur in a meaningful way constitute the “syntactical laws” that the name is subject to.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of a name may therefore be a “logical concept” in the following sense: names are exhaustively characterized by their functional role in propositions — they *stand for objects* and they *have logical forms* (meaningful possibilities of combination with other names). Such a logical concept can be contrasted with, say, an *ontological* concept; one that must appeal to the *ontological simplicity* (i.e. lack of internal structure) of the entity it refers to. If this is correct — if the concept of a name is indeed a logical concept — then ordinary words that stand for ordinary objects may really be “names” in the full sense.

In the middle of June, Wittgenstein continues to probe whether there is anything about “really simple objects” that is relevant to the logical concept of a name:

What is my fundamental thought when I talk about simple objects? Do not ‘complex objects’ in the end satisfy just the demands which I apparently make on the simple ones? If I give this book a name “N” and now talk about N, is not the relation of N to that ‘complex object’, to those forms and contents, *essentially* the same as I imagined only between name and simple object?

For N.B.: even if the name “N” vanishes on further analysis, still it indicates a *single common* thing. (14 June)

The conclusion he arrives at is striking. With the logical concept of a name in view, it appears that there really is nothing that distinguishes “really simple objects” from ordinary objects:

It is quite clear that I can in fact correlate a name with this watch just as it lies here ticking in front of me... and I feel that that name in a proposition will correspond to all the requirements of the “names of simple objects.” (15 June)

The following day, Wittgenstein confronts the question of whether we would need to know the details of the composition of an object in order to know the syntactical treatment of a name that refers to it. If that were the case, “then the whole composition [of the object] is already

---

<sup>16</sup>According to the view of the *Tractatus*, grasping such syntactical laws would be essential to characterizing the form of a name, for that is what its form *is* (its possibilities of combination with other names in order to make meaningful sentences).

expressed even in the unanalysed proposition” (16 June). This would imply that the meaning of “this watch is shiny” depends on all the fine-grained details about the internal mechanism of the watch, which seems patently implausible. If any detail about the mechanism changed, then not only would “the sense of the sentence alters in its content”, but also “*what I am saying about this watch* straightway alters its sense.” Rejecting this possibility, Wittgenstein states: “If the proposition ‘this watch is shiny’ has a sense, it must be explicable HOW THIS proposition has THIS sense.” We should be able to fully characterize the claim made by a proposition like “this watch is shiny” without imagining that it somehow implicitly contains a reference to every detail concerning the watch. “There will, of course, also be something that it does *not* say — but what it does say it says completely and it must be susceptible of SHARP definition.”

If we have not found anything to distinguish the names of “really simple objects” from the words that refer to ordinary things, then, as Wittgenstein puts it, “it would now seem as if in a certain sense all names were *genuine names*. Or, as I might also say, as if all objects were in a certain sense simple objects.” All names are genuine names in the sense that all names satisfy the demands we imagined for the names of really simple objects. And all objects are simple objects in the sense that their *internal ontological complexity* is irrelevant from the perspective of propositions which *treat them as objects*.

On 17 June, Wittgenstein now returns to the idea that the analysis of a sentence is intimately tied to the meaning of that sentence, and that the complete analysis of a sentence cannot be more complicated than its meaning (recall his earlier remarks from 9 May). The following passage is worth quoting at some length:

All I want is only for *my meaning* to be completely analysed!!

In other words the proposition must be completely articulated. Everything that its sense has in common with another sense must be contained separately in the proposition. If generalizations occur, then the forms of the particular cases must be manifest—and it is clear that this demand is justified, otherwise the proposition cannot be a picture at all, of *anything*.

For if propositions *are left open* in the proposition, *just this* must be *definite*: *what* is left open. The generalizations of the form—e.g.—must be definite. What I do not know I do not know, but the proposition must show me WHAT I know. And in that case, is not this *definite* thing at which I *must* arrive precisely simple in that sense that I have always had in mind? It is, so to speak, what is hard.

In that case, then, what we mean by “complex objects do not exist” is: It must be clear in the proposition how the object is composed, so far as it is possible for us to speak of its complexity at all.—The sense of the proposition must appear in the proposition as divided into its *simple* components—. And these parts are actually indivisible, for further divided they just would not be THESE. In other words, the proposition can then no longer be replaced by one that has more components, but any that has more components also does not have *this* sense.

When the sense of the proposition is completely expressed in the proposition itself, the proposition is always divided into its simple components—no further

division is possible and an apparent one is superfluous—and these are objects in the original sense.

With the example of the proposition “this watch is shiny”, we saw how it was implausible to suppose that its meaning (what *we meant* when we said it) depended on all the details of the constitution of the watch. The logical analysis of the sentence should therefore not involve anything about this constitution. As Wittgenstein will put it the following day, “if, e.g., I say that this watch is not in the drawer, there is absolutely no need for it to FOLLOW LOGICALLY that a wheel which is in the watch is not in the drawer, for perhaps *I had not the least knowledge* that the wheel was in the watch, and hence could not have meant by ‘this watch’ the complex in which the wheel occurs” (18 June). At the same time, the analysis of the sentence may still reveal logically relevant structure; structure that we do in fact recognize in our talk of watches and our talk of things being shiny. This is the structure that is revealed in the body of readily comprehensible sentences that involve these terms, in contrast with sentences that strike us as nonsense. (Recall the examples of “the rod is leaning against the wall” and “the ball is leaning against the wall”, where we can see the internal nature of rods and balls coming into view.) This structure, in other words, is what can be characterized as the “syntactical laws” governing the uses of these words.

Here we are sharpening the logical conception of “simple objects”, and an insight into the eventual terminus of logical analysis. Once we have made a sentence completely articulate in the sense of fully characterizing the syntactical laws of the terms that occur in it, then it is *completely* analyzed. With regard to typical sentences which include the expression “this watch” (sentences like “this watch is shiny”), the internal structure of the watch is irrelevant. What is meant by “this watch” in such contexts is therefore *not* the entity which contains such and such a mechanism.<sup>17</sup> (Hence if we were to include a reference to that mechanism in our analysis of the sentence, we would have *changed the meaning* of the sentence.) We have before us a sentence in which the watch is being treated as a simple object. Such objects “are actually indivisible, for further divided they just would not be THESE. In other words, the proposition can then no longer be replaced by one that has more components, but any that has more components also does not have *this* sense.” So, indeed, a watch can be an object — a simple object — in Wittgenstein’s sense.

Summing up on 18 June:

If the complexity of an object is definitive of the sense of the proposition, then it must be portrayed in the proposition to the extent that it does determine the sense. And to the extent that its composition is *not* definitive of *this* sense, to this extent the objects of this proposition are *simple*. THEY *cannot* be further divided.——

The demand for simple things *is* the demand for definiteness of sense.

——For if I am talking about, e.g., this watch, and mean something complex by that and nothing depends upon the way it is compounded, then a generalization will make its appearance in the proposition and the fundamental forms of the generalization will be completely determinate *so far as they are given at all*.

---

<sup>17</sup>Contrast this with a sentence such as: “the gears inside this watch have rusted”.

If there is a final sense and a proposition expressing it completely, then there are also names for simple objects.

That is the correct designation.

If an object is *complex* in a way that affects the sense of a sentence, then its complexity must appear in the sentence itself, certainly once it has been made fully articulate through logical analysis. Any further (ontological) complexity — complexity that does *not* affect the sense of the sentence — is logically irrelevant. Hence we would have arrived at the logical simples and our analysed sentence would contain the names of simple objects.

And yet, with all that said, this is not the final word on the matter. Wittgenstein is still pulled back to the idea of things that really *are* simple. As he puts it on 21 June: “It always looks as if there were complex objects functioning as simples, and then also *really* simple ones, like the material points of physics, etc.” One important difference, recognizable to ordinary speakers as the discussion so far has already relied on, is the way in which a sentence referring to an ordinary object manifestly leaves much that is unsaid:

It can be seen that a name stands for a complex object from an indefiniteness in the proposition in which it occurs. This comes of the generality of such propositions. We *know* that not everything is yet determined by the proposition. For the generality notation *contains* a prototype [*Urbild*]. (21 June)

Terms like “watch” and “steamship” apply to classes of entities which vary enormously in their details. (Contrast this with the “material points of physics”.) Hence identifying the appropriate syntactical laws for such terms may be an extremely difficult task to carry out in practice. A discussion of this point constitutes the beginning of Wittgenstein’s last entry in this section of the *Notebooks*:

It is then also clear to the *uncaptive* mind that the sense of the proposition “The watch is lying on the table” is more complicated than the proposition itself.

The conventions of our language are extraordinarily complicated. There is enormously much added in thought to each proposition and not said. (22 June)

Nevertheless, Wittgenstein continues: “I only want to justify the vagueness of ordinary sentences, for it *can* be justified.”

We want to find our way to explaining the insight that ordinary words — words referring to ordinary (internally structured) things — seem to meet many of the central demands we might place on “names of simple objects”. We want to explore how ordinary objects can be treated in some important ways as simple objects but without collapsing the distinction altogether.

## 6 Back to the *Tractatus*

Recall that, in order to arrive at an understanding of ordinary propositions as pictures, we needed to see how ordinary terms could be regarded as pictorial elements. My proposal for how to do this is the following: we can regard many ordinary terms as *expressions* (or *symbols*).

The notion of an expression is introduced in the *Tractatus* at 3.31:

I call any part of a proposition that characterizes its sense an expression (or a symbol).

(A proposition is itself an expression.)

Everything essential to their sense that propositions can have in common with one another is an expression.

An expression is the mark of a form and a content.

An expression is a part of a proposition that plays a role in characterizing the proposition's sense while also being something the proposition can have in common with other propositions. Indeed, as the remarks following 3.31 flesh out, expressions can be identified by seeing how they occur across different propositions: we hold the expression itself constant while making everything else variable (3.312). Thus, "an expression is presented by means of a variable whose values are the propositions that contain the expression" (3.313).

Now, I think it is undeniable that ordinary words very often function as expressions in Wittgenstein's sense. Words obviously characterize the sense of the sentences they occur in.<sup>18</sup> (How else would a given sentence have any sense at all?) And words obviously occur in the relevantly same way in many different sentences, so that we might describe them as "common characteristic marks of a class of propositions" (3.311). Ordinary words are sometimes ambiguous of course — such as *bank* qua the side of a river and *bank* qua financial institution — but in such cases, as Wittgenstein notes, "they are *different symbols*" (3.323).

Recognizing that ordinary terms are expressions already takes us a long way to seeing the sense in which they function as pictorial elements. Recall that it is the arrangement of pictorial elements which represents that the corresponding objects stand in some relationship, and that the possibilities of rearrangement of those elements (in order to make new pictures) mirrors a set of corresponding possibilities for how the pictured objects can be related to one another. The possibilities of rearranging words to form meaningful sentences corresponds to a range of possible situations that we might want to represent. We have thus found a straightforward way to understand the arrangements of words in meaningful sentences as pictures of possible situations.

Note that nothing in what I have just said opposes the idea that ordinary sentences can also be analyzed into truth-functions of elementary sentences, themselves made up of concatenations of "names of simple objects". In recognizing ordinary terms as expressions I am *not* going so far as to collapse the distinction between them and names of simple objects. The latter are certainly expressions, but they are evidently a quite special kind of expression. In particular, they only occur in a special class of sentences: the elementary sentences (4.23).<sup>19</sup> Names of simple objects are the final expressions, so to speak. They are the symbols that we reach at the final stage of analysis.

---

<sup>18</sup>We can put to one side some interesting cases, such as modal particles in German, where it is unclear whether they characterize the sense of sentences (e.g. where their use is more akin to tone of voice or inflection).

<sup>19</sup>A sign of a sentence being elementary is its logical independence from any other elementary sentence (4.211).

Earlier, I said that the first major challenge facing the unrestricted interpretation of the picture theory was to understand the sense in which ordinary words “stand for objects” in some sense. We have now seen enough to recognize that ordinary words have at least the first feature of objects that is outlined in the 2.01s: they have various *logical forms* — different possibilities of combination with one another. As we have seen, Wittgenstein places the full burden of distinguishing different combinatorial powers on the notion of logical form, so that *object* is the only logical category he requires. This allows us to see that various grammatical categories besides nouns — predicates, adjectives, relational terms — can “stand for objects” too.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps this can suffice as an initial answer to the first major challenge facing the unrestricted interpretation of the picture theory. Note, however, that there are various ordinary words that don’t seem to play the role of “standing for objects”, even in the extended sense that I have just outlined. The word “is” used as a copula may be a good example. Logical terms, like “and” or “if”, may be particularly pressing examples. And this brings us to the second major challenge facing the unrestricted interpretation of the picture theory: how, after all, to deal with truth-functional complexity.

## 7 Truth-functional complexity

According to the *Tractatus*, every proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions. That is, every proposition is an expression of agreement and disagreement with the truth-possibilities of elementary propositions (4.4). Now, when Wittgenstein says that *every* proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions, he is including the elementary propositions too. An elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself (5).<sup>21</sup> With this in mind, we can also regard the elementary proposition as itself an expression of agreement and disagreement with the truth-possibilities of elementary propositions. An elementary proposition is a proposition that simply expresses agreement with its own truth and disagreement with its own falsity.

Note that the sense of every proposition (elementary and non-elementary alike) is characterized exhaustively by its agreement and disagreement with such truth-possibilities:

4.431 The expression of agreement and disagreement with the truth possibilities of elementary propositions expresses the truth-conditions of a proposition.

A proposition is the expression of its truth-conditions.

Following Wittgenstein’s lead, we can imagine the truth-conditions of a proposition as captured in a truth-table, with the final column of the table showing which truth-possibilities of elementary propositions are agreed and disagreed with. If two sentences which are su-

---

<sup>20</sup>As we might put it: just as the word “chair” determines a particular form and content (the possibilities of combination with other words in meaningful sentences, as well as the particularities of “chair” that distinguish it from any other terms that share the same form), so too do “taller than”, “red”, “delightful”, etc. See 2.0233 and 3.31.

<sup>21</sup>We can think of this as something like the trivial “identity” truth-function, or the result of the trivial identity truth-operation (cf. 5.3).

perfidiously different in fact have the same truth-conditions, then they are one and the same proposition (cf. 5.141). Conversely, any propositions which do not have the same truth-conditions and which cannot be expressed by the same truth-table are different propositions. Now, if we consider altering a manifestly truth-functionally complex proposition by changing some of its logical constants (such as substituting conjunctions for disjunctions) we will typically alter its truth-conditions of course. We will have changed the final column of the corresponding truth-table. And this means that we are now looking at a quite different proposition.

The point I am pushing here is that we should see truth-functional structure as simply part and parcel of what it is for a sentence to be a picture of a possible situation. This can be applied to the elementary proposition too, for the elementary proposition is still a truth-function (of itself). From this perspective, truth-functional complexity does not arise as a special problem for non-elementary propositions, and as somehow undermining the pictorial nature of those propositions. Truth-functional structure is endemic to all propositions. Indeed, in his commentary on why “it becomes manifest that there are no ‘logical objects’ or ‘logical constants’ (in Frege’s and Russell’s sense)” (5.4), Wittgenstein writes at 5.47:

An elementary proposition really contains all logical operations in itself. For ‘ $fa$ ’ says the same thing as

$$‘(\exists x).fx.x = a’$$

Wherever there is compositeness, argument and function are present, and where these are present, we already have all the logical constants.

One could say that the sole logical constant was what *all* propositions, by their very nature, had in common with one another.

But that is the general propositional form.

The general propositional form helps us to recognize the common form of all propositions with sense, again including the elementary propositions. In considering calling the general propositional form “the sole logical constant”, Wittgenstein is suggesting that nothing important turns upon the occurrence of a particular conditional, or a particular disjunction, and so on. Indeed, “When a truth-operation is applied to the results of truth-operations on elementary propositions, there is always a *single* operation on elementary propositions that has the same result” (5.3). Everything that can be achieved with the familiar logical constants can also be achieved with a generalized negation operator (5.502, 5.503), and the significance of the particular “logical constants”, in Frege’s and Russell’s sense, falls away.

Wittgenstein told us that his fundamental thought was that the logical constants — the signs that we use for conjunction, disjunction, negation, and so on — do not stand for anything (4.0312). Nevertheless, this does not speak against the idea that a proposition is the proposition that it is because it has the particular truth-functional structure that it has. If we change nothing about a proposition except its truth-functional structure, thereby changing its truth-conditions, we will still have changed the proposition. One might wonder how this can come about given that we haven’t changed any of the names, but in fact this

should not strike us as particularly mysterious. After all, it is the *particular arrangement* of names that allows them to represent a possible situation. In changing the logical structure of a sentence, we have of course changed the (logico-syntactic) arrangement of its names.

Let this suffice as an initial answer to the second main challenge facing the unrestricted interpretation of the picture theory. To recapitulate, my claim has been that all propositions — elementary and non-elementary alike — function as pictures in a full sense: they consist of pictorial elements which stand for objects arranged in a particular way (and with various possibilities of rearrangement), thereby representing possible situations. I have argued that the truth-functional structure of a proposition should be seen as an aspect of that arrangement (indeed, an aspect that can be made clearer and more explicit through a process of logical analysis). And I have argued that ordinary words typically function as pictorial elements in the relevant way, and in particular can be recognized as “standing for objects” in an extended sense. Now, however, I want to say a little more about the “objects” that would correspond to ordinary words.

## 8 Complexes

We have seen that, despite how close Wittgenstein comes to abandoning the distinction between “objects treated as things” and “really simple objects” in May and June of 1915, that distinction is retained in the *Tractatus*. There are a particular class of symbols that only occur in elementary sentences at the final stage of analysis, and it is only these symbols that are “names” properly so called. At the same time, any part of a proposition that characterizes its sense (3.31) and that is a common characteristic mark of a class of propositions (3.311) is also a symbol. Hence many ordinary words often function as symbols. But if the names occurring in elementary sentences stand for simple objects, one might still wonder what the symbols occurring in non-elementary sentences stand for. Complex objects, perhaps?

This brings us to the notably brief discussion of complexes that we find in the *Tractatus*. After stating that “objects are simple” at 2.02, Wittgenstein writes:

2.0201 Every statement about complexes can be resolved into a statement about their constituents and into the propositions that describe the complexes completely.

Then, at 3.24, we have the following:

A proposition about a complex stands in an internal relation to a proposition about a constituent of the complex.

A complex can be given only by its description, which will be right or wrong. A proposition that mentions a complex will not be nonsensical, if the complex does not exist, but simply false.

When a propositional element signifies a complex, this can be seen from an indeterminateness in the propositions in which it occurs. In such cases we *know* that the proposition leaves something undetermined. (In fact the notation for generality *contains* a prototype.)

The contraction of a symbol for a complex into a simple symbol can be expressed in a definition.

A little later, in the second comment on 3.344 (“What signifies in a symbol is what is common to all the symbols that the rules of logical syntax allow us to substitute for it”), we find:

3.442 Nor does analysis resolve the sign for a complex in an arbitrary way, so that it would have a different resolution every time that it was incorporated in a different proposition.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, we are given a concrete example of a complex: the Necker cube which is depicted at 5.5423.

I now want to show that Wittgenstein’s remarks about complexes can be seen to fit well with the unrestricted interpretation of the picture theory. To begin, I want to return to one of the main themes in the May and June 1915 section of the *Notebooks* — the idea that the analysis of a sentence is intimately concerned with the meaning intended by, and recognizable by, the speaker. Analysis would lead to a more detailed version of the original sentence, a more explicit statement of what the speaker had intended to convey. As Wittgenstein emphasized on 17 June, “All I want is only for *my meaning* to be completely analysed”, and on 22 June, “I only want to justify the vagueness of ordinary sentences, for it *can* be justified.” This idea then helped to clarify the way in which analysis reveals *logically relevant* structure, not ontological structure.

I propose that these ideas are retained in the *Tractatus*; that the notion of logical analysis in the *Tractatus* follows through on the conception of analysis that Wittgenstein sketches out in June of 1915. According to the *Tractatus*, the complete analysis of a sentence would make the sense of that sentence fully explicit — that much is uncontroversial. What I am suggesting is that, even if the sense of an ordinary sentence relies on enormously complicated tacit conventions (4.002), it is not something totally mysterious. The sense of a sentence is not “far-reaching”, extending to some alien metaphysics.<sup>23</sup> Rather, the sense of a sentence depends on something as familiar as the definitions of our words; definitions that we acknowledge as reflecting what we meant to say.

To flesh this out, let us consider one of Wittgenstein’s earliest examples of a proposition as a picture: the image of two people fencing that he jotted down on 29 September 1914, a picture that might be used to assert “A is fencing with B”. It is worth noting, by the way, that this sketch follows immediately on Wittgenstein’s reference to the model of a car accident that was used in the Paris court room — the model that evidently served as a key inspiration for the picture theory altogether. In regard to that model, Wittgenstein remarked “This must yield the nature of truth straight away (if I were not blind).” And with regard to the sketch of two people fencing, he remarked “It must be possible to demonstrate everything essential by considering this case.”

Back to “A is fencing with B”, how might this help us to understand complexes in the *Tractatus*? Note that, by the lights of the *Tractatus*, “A is fencing with B” would obviously

---

<sup>22</sup>Compare with Wittgenstein’s similar remark in the *Notebooks* on 23 May 1915, discussed above.

<sup>23</sup>The descriptions of senses as “far-reaching” is due to David Pears; see for example Pears (1987) 70.

not be an elementary proposition. It stands in a multitude of logical relationships with other propositions. More importantly for present purposes, “A is fencing with B” provides a helpful example of a sentence containing *symbols for complexes*. Indeed, presumably “A”, “B”, and “fencing” are *all* symbols for complexes. Let us take “fencing” in particular. At 3.24, Wittgenstein notes that “The contraction of a symbol for a complex into a simple symbol can be expressed in a definition.” On the view I am proposing, such a definition is something like an ordinary dictionary definition,<sup>24</sup> perhaps:

**Fencing:** the sport of sword fighting with foils, épées, or sabers, according to a set of rules in order to score points against an opponent.

This means that one step of analyzing our sentence — of making its logical relationships with other sentences more explicit — would be to rewrite it as:

“A and B are engaged in the sport of sword fighting with either foils, épées, or sabers in order to score points.”

This version of the sentence already makes several things more explicit. First, for example, we have made more explicit that the activity is mutual, that “fencing with” is a symmetrical relationship. (“A is fencing with B” and “B is fencing with A” imply one another.) Second, we have made more explicit that they are not actually fighting, i.e. trying to hurt or kill one another (as a misunderstanding of the picture might have led someone to believe). No: they are playing a *sport* and are *trying to score points*. Finally, we can also see that it is possible to infer from “A is fencing with B” to “A and B are using either foils, épées, or sabers.”

On this last point, it is worth pausing to note that this depends, on my view, on the intended meaning of the speaker. If the speaker knows enough about fencing to know that it involves the use of foils, épées, or sabers — such that they would both accept the proffered definition of “fencing” as *capturing what they meant*, and (in the same breath, so to speak) would also accept the implication that A and B must be using either foils, épées, or sabers — then the step of analysis that we have just given is indeed a correct analysis *of their sentence*. In contrast, if the speaker of “A is fencing with B” knows very little about fencing, and in particular does not know that it involves either foils, épées, or sabers, then we would have failed to analyze *their* sentence.<sup>25</sup> And their sentence is indeed a *different* sentence according to the *Tractatus*. It stands in different logical relationships with other sentences; it has different truth-conditions.

To make our sentence even more explicit, we would presumably have to introduce further definitions (for “sport” and “point” and so on). However, such a procedure for analyzing symbols for complexes may seem doomed, because all such dictionary definitions appeal to further words with further definitions. Hence there may appear to be no prospect that such a procedure will terminate. The idea that the appropriate definitions will only go so far as to spell out the intended meaning of the speaker provides some constraints on the level of

---

<sup>24</sup>See 3.343 and 4.025.

<sup>25</sup>Another possibility is that the speaker is not talking about the “official” sport of fencing, as it appears in the Olympic Games say. Perhaps the speaker is describing two actors performing as pirates fighting with cutlasses, or some other notion of “fencing”.

detail involved. But it is still unclear (to me at any rate) exactly how the analysis bottoms out. On this point, it may be worth remarking that it never seems to have been particularly clear to Wittgenstein either. His confidence that such analysis *must* terminate — indeed, his understanding of what, at a high level of abstraction, that final level of analysis must look like — stemmed rather from his conception of the demand of definiteness of sense. We do, after all, mean something by our sentences, — we manage to describe possible situations. And these descriptions, vague as they typically are, can still prove to be true or false. In Wittgenstein’s thinking (both in the *Notebooks* and in the *Tractatus*), recognizing this fact seems all that is necessary in order to know that there is *some* definite analysis of our sentences, an analysis that eventually terminates even if we have only the most abstract understanding of what that terminus will be. As Wittgenstein remarks on 18 June, “The demand for simple things *is* the demand for definiteness of sense... If there is a final sense and a proposition expressing it completely, then there are also names for simple objects.” Or as he remarks in the *Tractatus*, “The requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate” (3.23).

This remark at 3.23 immediately precedes 3.24 — the passage that contains the most detail about complexes. That passage begins: “A proposition about a complex stands in an internal relation to a proposition about a constituent of the complex.” If we attend to the way in which the analysis of a given complex is sensitive to the intended meaning of the speaker, and in particular what the speaker would acknowledge as what they meant, then we can indeed describe an “internal relation” between a proposition about a complex and a proposition about a constituent of the complex. I have suggested that, for certain speakers at least, “A is fencing with B” implies “A and B are using foils, épées, or sabers.” This logical relationship would then be an example of the internal relationship at issue at the beginning of 3.24.<sup>26</sup>

3.24 continues: “A complex can be given only by its description, which will be right or wrong. A proposition that mentions a complex will not be nonsensical, if the complex does not exist, but simply false.” In our example, if there were *no such thing* as fencing, our definition of fencing (which describes it) would not relate to anything, and the sentence “A is fencing with B” would have to be false. Alternatively, imagine that I was under the misconception that fencing involved cutlasses, and that what I meant by “A is fencing with B” was that “A and B are engaged in the sport of sword fighting with cutlasses in order to score points.” My description of the complex was wrong, and my original proposition *as I meant it* was false (because, let us imagine, A and B were in fact using sabers).

The next line of 3.24 is the following: “When a propositional element signifies a complex, this can be seen from an indeterminateness in the propositions in which it occurs. In such cases we *know* that the proposition leaves something undetermined. (In fact the notation for generality *contains* a prototype.)” This is again easy enough to apply to our example involving A fencing with B, in particular with the indeterminateness of the particular swords (of the three allowable ones) that they might be using. More generally, Wittgenstein is suggesting that *every* sentence which includes a symbol for a complex will have this feature. Even if we know that the sentence is true, there will be plenty of details about the pictured

---

<sup>26</sup>On the notion of “internal” in the *Tractatus*, see 2.01231, 4.014 f., 4.122 ff., 5.131, and 5.2 ff.

situation that we don't yet know. When Wittgenstein then comments in parentheses that “the notation for generality *contains* a prototype [*Urbild*]”, he is referring to the fact that the notation for quantifiers ( $\forall x$  and  $\exists x$ ) must contain a variable.<sup>27</sup> As we have seen, Wittgenstein entertains the possibility of a great multitude of different logical forms, and declares that it is deeply confused to attempt to specify such forms in advance of the process of analysis (5.55 ff.). Hence, for Wittgenstein, there is a much richer significance to the “ $x$ ” in “ $\forall x$ ” than at first appears.

The final remark in 3.24 is “The contraction of a symbol for a complex into a simple symbol can be expressed in a definition.” Again, this is not difficult to accommodate in our example. We have a simple symbol — *fencing* — to describe that particular sport, and an adequate definition makes this clear. The issue that is more difficult, as we've already seen, is to try to imagine terms that do *not* have such definitions. Wittgenstein is clear that the names of simple objects, whatever those turn out to be, would not have definitions: “A name cannot be dissected any further by means of a definition: it is a primitive sign” (3.26). Although every term with a definition “signifies *via* the signs that serve to define it”, names “cannot be anatomized by means of definitions” (3.261). Names, as “primitive signs”, can only be explained by means of *elucidations* — “propositions that contain the primitive signs” (3.263). But as we have not carried out a complete analysis of any of our sentences, we must admit that we have no concrete examples of such primitive signs.

Be that as it may, I hope to have said enough to make the case that the few remarks about complexes that are contained in the *Tractatus* fit with the interpretation of the text that I am putting forward. On my view, most ordinary terms function as symbols for complexes. Their definitions should be thought of on the model of dictionary definitions, though always bearing the intended meaning of the speaker in mind. Our ordinary sentences manage to describe situations in the world, even while they leave a great deal that is unsaid. But none of this undermines the fact that our ordinary words also function as pictorial elements, standing in particular logico-syntactic relationships in meaningful sentences, thus representing possible situations.

## 9 Conclusion

To conclude, let me briefly contrast the consensus view of the picture theory with the unrestricted interpretation that I have been defending. On the consensus view, it is only elementary sentences that are pictures in an immediate sense. An elementary sentence is nothing other than an arrangement of names which stand for (simple) objects, thus representing a possible state of affairs. The non-elementary sentences, in contrast, contain logical constants which don't stand for anything. A disjunction of elementary sentences, for example, consists of various pictures of states of affairs — one for each of its disjuncts — but then somehow asserts that *at least one* of those states of affairs obtains. From this perspective, it can be difficult to see how a truth-functionally complex sentence is a picture in the same way as an elementary sentence. Indeed, it looks as if it counts as a picture just *because* it

---

<sup>27</sup>If they did not, then the notation would not have the right “logical multiplicity”. See 4.0411. For some discussion, see Kremer (1992) and Eisenthal (2022) §4.

is a truth-function of elementary sentences. It inherits its pictorial nature from the bottom up.

On the unrestricted interpretation of the picture theory, by contrast, all sentences are pictures in the same way: all sentences consist of an arrangement of pictorial elements, thus representing a possible situation. On this view, it was misleading to concentrate on the particular logical constants and the apparently non-pictorial role they play in a non-elementary proposition. Instead, we should regard all propositions — including the elementary propositions — as having “truth-functional structure” insofar as they all express agreement and disagreement with truth-possibilities. The only essential difference is that the elementary propositions do this in the simplest way, expressing agreement with their own truth and disagreement with their own falsity. Still, with both elementary and non-elementary sentences, we can simply regard this structure as an aspect of the *arrangement* of the relevant pictorial elements, thus allowing them to represent possible situations.

Let us return, finally, to the two examples of pictures that Wittgenstein discussed when he first began to articulate the picture theory in September of 1914 — the model of the car accident used in a Paris court room, and the sketch of two people fencing. As I have presented the consensus view, these examples would be seen as crude depictions of how an *elementary sentence* is a picture. The elements of the picture (the models of the cars or the drawings of the two figures) would correspond to names of simple objects, and nothing corresponds to a logical constant. Such depictions must be acknowledged as “crude”, however, because of the further demands that Wittgenstein comes to place on elementary sentences. Toy models of cars and pencil sketches of figures are not actual examples of names of simple objects of course, and the assertions that these examples might be used to make (such as “A is fencing with B”) are not actual examples of elementary sentences. But on the unrestricted interpretation of the picture theory, Wittgenstein’s early examples of pictures do, after all, correspond to the claims that we might make using ordinary sentences. The examples help us to see the essentially pictorial nature of *any* proposition. Indeed, Wittgenstein was right when he said “It must be possible to demonstrate everything essential by considering this case.”

## References

- Joshua Eistenthal. Review: Representation and Reality in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, by José Zalabardo. *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*, 9(6), 2021.
- Joshua Eistenthal. Models and Multiplicities. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 60(2): 277–302, 2022.
- M. Hintikka and J. Hintikka. *Investigating Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Colin Johnston. Tractarian Objects and Logical Categories. *Synthese*, 167:145–161, 2009.
- Michael Kremer. The Multiplicity of General Propositions. *Nous*, 26(4):409–426, 1992.
- David Pears. *The False Prison: A Study of the Development of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy*, volume 1. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987.

Thomas G Ricketts. Analysis, Independence, Simplicity, and the General Sentence-Form. *Philosophical Topics*, 42(2):263–288, 2014.

David G Stern. Tree-structured Readings of the *Tractatus*. *Nordic Wittgenstein Review*, 11, 2023.

Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Notebooks, 1914-1916*. Blackwell, 2nd edition, 1998.

José L Zalabardo. *Representation and Reality in Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Oxford University Press, 2015.