

Wittgenstein's Theory of Representation

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In the *Notebooks* 1914-16 Wittgenstein writes:

"The difficulty of my theory of logical portrayal was that of finding a connection between the signs on paper and a situation outside the world. I always said that truth is a relation between the proposition and situation, but could never pick out such a relation"

The fundamental question Wittgenstein is addressing is what exactly does it mean for a proposition to represent a situation? How can an elementary proposition say or state anything? There is another problem associated with this: How is it that we can express and understand new propositions. It is noticeable aspect of all the significant languages that while we cannot understand the meaning of terms unless we are told, we understand new propositions which use familiar termsⁱ. How to explain this peculiar phenomenon?

Wittgenstein makes an effort to solve these puzzling features of language by his doctrines that the proposition must be a picture of the situation it describes. To understand the sense of a proposition is to know the situation it describes. I can 'read off' the sense of a proposition from the proposition itself if, and only if, the proposition is a picture of the situation.

*A proposition is a picture of reality, for I know the state of affairs presented by it, if I understand the proposition. And I understand the proposition, without its sense having been explained to me.*ⁱⁱ

This remark contains the heart of the picture theory: what is central to calling a proposition "a picture of reality"ⁱⁱⁱ is that I can understand a proposition (hence know the situation it represents) without its sense having been explained to me. A proposition contains its own resources for putting me in touch with the situation it represents. As Wittgenstein puts the points in the *Notebooks* :

"The proposition presents a situation as it were off its own bat."^{iv}

This seems to be reasonable answer. As I can 'read off' the sense of a proposition itself, so can I know the situation depicted by the picture merely by looking at the picture. Wittgenstein thus maintains that proposition says something just because it is picture :

The proposition asserts something only in so far as it is a picture^v.

Now if we grant the view that proposition says something only because it is a picture of the situation it represents, the first and the foremost question still needs to be answered: If an elementary proposition is merely a series of names- a medley of names, how can it picture a fact. This view seems to be absolutely impossible that a mere list of names could be a picture. Wittgenstein is fully aware of this objection and goes ahead to examine essential features of a picture. What is the most important thing for any picture to represent a situation? What is it precisely and exactly that makes a picture to depict something?

Here it would be favorable to throw light on the ordinary notion of a picture before heading towards Wittgenstein's concepts of picture. It is not an unnecessary digression, seeing how the critical remarks of even able philosophers have gone wide of the mark, simply because they interpreted the term 'picture' in its ordinary sense. For example, Urmson says: "Wittgenstein was surely wrong in claiming that even perfect sentences were pictures 'even in the ordinary sense of the word.' To say that this is so, involves taking accuracy of projection as the criterion for perfection in representational portrait. But this is not sufficient. However, accurately our childish drawing obeyed some discoverable law of projections; we would not say that it was a portrait by Napoleon- good or bad. We in fact call things pictures because of recognizable likeness, not because of fidelity to some unknown role of projection."^{vi} The last sentence puts the point well. It is the recognizable similarity or the first sight likeness that makes anything picture of something.

This is clearly implied in the expression- a picture of Napoleon, a picture of cat, a photograph of child's face, a photograph of Qutab Minar. In the language of Wittgenstein they are all spatial pictures^{vii}. They are iconic pictures. A proposition according to Wittgenstein is not a picture in this sense. The proposition 'The red ball is on the white table-cloth' or the more precise expression 'bRt' is quite unlike the red ball and the white table cloth. Wittgenstein never meant that a proposition could be a picture of the situation it represents in this sense. Hence the criticism stands misdirected if it interprets proposition to be picture in this sense. But if this is

the case then on what grounds does Wittgenstein maintains that proposition is a picture of certain state of affairs? To answer this question, it would be advantageous to state a possible objection Wittgenstein could hold against first sight similarity view of pictures. Wittgenstein could say that : if surface resemblance is taken to be the essence of a picture, then no picture is an adequate representation of the situation it purports to depict. Not all the features of original object are exactly represented by even the most faithful photographs. The essential feature of the picture, Wittgenstein may say, is not the external similarity, the first sight similarity, but the internal similarity i.e. the similarity of the form.

The notion of internal relation is important in Wittgenstein's thought. By an internal relation he means one between two things which is given as soon as two things are given: one which holds independently of external assistance and in this sense 'takes care of itself'- a relation which holds solely in virtue of the structures of those two things, and therefore obtains automatically as soon as the two things exists. The concept arises in Wittgenstein's discussions of the relation between elementary sentence and elementary fact, and also in his treatment of logical relations which hold between one sentence and another; and in both cases what is involved is a relation between structures.

Later on, Wittgenstein himself raises objections relating to how the picture theory claims to explain the concept of representation by revealing some underlying structure common to all forms of representation. In his later thought he question, why this must be the case, because upon observation, it becomes apparent that there is actually a much greater diversity within representation than he first thought. Take for example, in a toolbox Wittgenstein's states that all the tools are obviously very different and have very different purposes, yet we still assume that there must be something that they all have in common. He argues that we have no reason to assume this, which seems plausible given that no evidence has been provided as to why we should assume it- it is simply something that we believe out of habit. Apart from this we also know that later on Wittgenstein is notably anti-theory. But picture theory is clearly a philosophical theory and so by its very nature is rejected by Wittgenstein himself in his later philosophy.

ⁱ TLP, 4.02

ⁱⁱ TLP, 4.021

ⁱⁱⁱ Proops, 1, *Logic and Language in Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, p. 61

^{iv} NB, P. 26

^v TLP, 4.034

^{vi} Urmsom, J.O., *Philosophical Analysis*, pp. 89-90.

^{vii} TLP, [2.171 (2)]