

WITTGENSTEIN'S PICTURE THEORY OF MEANING

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The picture theory of meaning is central to the structure of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. It presents a high point of development of an historic line of thought. The idea that the proposition is an interweaving of simple names representing an interweaving of simple elements is to be found in Plato's *Theaetetus*.¹ But what concerns us here is not the historic background of the picture theory itself as it crystallized in the *Tractatus*. In this short essay I would try to state the theory first, and then see whether or not it actually faces what David Keyl calls the paradox of the picture theory.

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

This passage from the *Tractatus* constitutes Wittgenstein's central argument for his picture theory of meaning. Wittgenstein seems to believe that it belongs to the essence of a picture that we understand it without having had it explained to us. Propositions have the same character and hence they are also pictures. Once we know the meaning of names or simple signs that constitute a proposition, we can immediately understand their sense. "A proposition shows its sense" (4.022).

Basically Wittgenstein has elementary propositions in mind and what they portray are atomic facts or states of affairs in the world. "The world is the totality of facts, not of things" (1.1). An atomic fact is a concatenation of simple objects and is not analysable as a function of other facts. Simple objects are the substance of the world and constitute all the atomic facts in the world. It is these atomic facts that are pictured by elementary propositions. As for molecular propositions they are truth-functions of elementary propositions and, upon analysis, resolve into a number of elementary propositions plus some logical constants.

As defined in the *Tractatus* elementary propositions do not contain any logical constants or words like "not", "and" or "all". "An elementary proposition consists of names. It is a nexus, a concatenation, of names" (4.22). And names in their turn stand for simple objects. "A name means an object. Object is its meaning" (3.203). Also "configuration of objects in a situation corresponds to the configuration of simple signs in the proposition sign" (3.21). Furthermore elementary propositions are logically independent of each other (4.211, 5.134); and they assert the existence of a possible state of affairs (4.21). In what sense then is a proposition a picture of reality? How does it portray an atomic fact? Wittgenstein's central idea here is that a proposition shares its logical structure with the atomic fact it portrays. In other words in order for a proposition to portray an atomic fact they must both have the same logical form. "Pictorial form is the possibility that things are related to one another in the same way as the elements of the picture" (2.151). And "What a picture must have in common with reality, in order to be able to depict it - correctly or incorrectly - in the way it does, is its pictorial form" (2.17). Wittgenstein speaks of a "logic of depiction" or a "law of projection" which makes it possible for a proposition to picture reality. "There is a general rule by means of which the musician can obtain the symphony from the score, and which makes it possible to derive the symphony from the groove on the gramophone record, and, using the first rule, to derive the score again. That is what constitutes the inner similarity between these things which seem to be constructed in such entirely different ways. And that rule is the law of projection which projects the symphony into the language of musical notation. It is the rule for translating this language into the language of gramophone records" (4.014). Given this law of projection a proposition can portray an atomic fact whose structure it shares.

1. G.E.M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (London, 1959), p. 78.

It is important to note that a proposition is a logical picture of reality. "A picture whose pictorial form is a logical form is called a logical picture" (2.181). And "A picture depicts reality by representing a possibility of existence and non-existence of states of affairs" (2.201). An elementary proposition then, is a logical picture of a possible state of affairs. Being a picture of a possible state of affairs is what constitutes the sense or meaning of a proposition. It's truth and falsity, on the other hand, are to be determined by whether or not it portrays an actual state of affairs. Every elementary proposition must have a sense but it may or may not be true. The problem of false, elementary propositions is a crucial one. It hinges upon Wittgenstein's distinction between simple signs or names and a propositional sign. "A name means an object. The object is its meaning" (3.203). Clearly a name would be meaningless if it does not have an object as its referent. On the other hand a propositional sign signifies only a possible state of affairs. It would be meaningful even if such a possible state of affairs does not exist. It may be asked: how can a proposition be false without being meaningless? Answer to this question in the Tractarian picture theory is that an elementary proposition basically is articulate and composite (3.141), and each name in the proposition may signify something existent; but the whole articulate proposition may not signify anything at all. It may not have an actual state of affairs as its referent. In that case it would be false. It can further be asked how can a proposition possibly portray a state of affairs which does not exist at all? Wittgenstein would say that a proposition can simply be an arrangement of names rather than an arrangement of objects signified by the names (4.0311). And in that case it, obviously, would be a false picture.

THE PARADOX REVISITED

David Keyt in one of his articles² formulates what he calls the paradox of the picture theory of language. He asks us to consider the proposition "Seattle is West of Spokane". He grants that this is not an elementary proposition but asks us to suppose that an elementary proposition would be something like this one. He goes on to say:

This proposition is composed of three parts (giving a logical rather than a grammatical analysis): two proper names and the predicate "is west of". Now pictured by the proposition is an arrangement of two ~~dises~~ but the proposition itself is an arrangement of three parts. Thus the fact and the proposition do not appear to have the same number of parts. But Wittgenstein holds that they must: "In a proposition there must be exactly as many distinguishable parts as in the situation that it represents. The two must possess the same logical (mathematical) multiplicity" (4.04). Suppose we preserve the one-to-one correspondence between the fact and the proposition by dropping the predicate and writing the proposition simply as "Seattle Spokane". But if this arrangement of names pictures the fact that Seattle is west of Spokane, how will we picture the fact that Seattle is north of Portland? Well, we can do this by writing "Seattle" over "Portland":

Seattle
Portland

This gives us the second part of the puzzle. For this is no longer a proposition but a map".³

2. David Keyt, "Wittgenstein's Picture Theory of Language", *Philosophical Review*, 73, (1964), pp. 493-511.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 496-7.

Wittgenstein was concerned with the construction of "an adequate notation" (6.122)11. Now given this particular Copi-Anscombe orientation, I do not think that Keyt can reject their understanding of an elementary proposition simply on the ground that it violates some special characteristic of ordinary language. If Wittgenstein of the Tractatus is concerned with the conditions for a logically perfect language, how can we put his notion of an elementary proposition on the procrustean bed of "ordinary language"? Indeed, there is no reason for Keyt's paradox to arise if we accept Copi-Anscombe interpretation of an elementary proposition.

Keyt's own solution of his paradox takes predicates in a proposition on the analogy of marginal arrows on a map. But as he concedes himself it is not possible to reconcile the notion of an elementary proposition containing a predicate with Wittgenstein's view that "an elementary proposition consists of names. It is nexus, a concatenation of names"(4.22). I think it is safe to conclude that, whatever its other shortcomings, the picture theory of language as propounded in the Tractatus certainly does not face Keyt's paradox. Only we should check our tendency to read the characteristics of ordinary language in the Tractarian notion of an elementary proposition.

11. Copi and Beard, op. cit., p. 168.