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Picture Theory and Complex Realities

Abstract: This essay examines Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'Picture Theory' and the modes of reality presented by logical atomism. Simply this theory argues that the world can be understood by simple entities which can be broken down to substances that do not belong to anything else. This essay will illustrate that the Picture Theory cannot ultimately portray an accurate account of reality based on simples. To contrast this claim, I will use René Descartes as a means of countering my claim against Wittgenstein. Yet this will only strengthen my argument regarding simples. Ultimately, this demonstrates that the Picture Theory is unable to accurately depict a complex reality.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'Picture Theory' cannot portray an accurate account of the world because it is unable to appropriately adapt to complex modes of reality. This is because it constrains our modes of thinking and limits our minds to images. I will illustrate Bertrand Russell’s implementation of logical atomism and how he examines the physical world and propositions. This will show Russell’s influence on the Picture Theory. In addition, I will illustrate the Picture Theory by elucidating Wittgenstein's take on logical atomism and the connection between propositions and states of affairs. René Descartes will be examined to illustrate why the Picture Theory could be applicable to reality. However, this will demonstrate why this explanation of propositional reality is not wholly adequate, despite its convenience. Ultimately, this demonstrates that the Picture Theory is unable to accurately depict a complex reality.

Russell states that logical atomism is “the view that you can get down in theory, if not in practice, to ultimate simples, out of which the world is built, and that those simples have a kind of reality not belonging to anything else” (Russell; 2010, 111). Logical atomism declares that reality can be broken down into simple entities and enables us to fully analyze our perception of the world using facts. A fact is a kind of complex entity, and its existence depends on simpler entities (Klement, 2019). These simpler entities cannot be further separated or broken down, according to Russell’s explanation of logical atomism. Indeed, these entities are alone in themselves, yet when connected to others they create a way to perceive reality. This is an important distinction for the Picture Theory since it demonstrates how Wittgenstein can use Russell’s account and construct his version of logical atomism. Ultimately, logical atomism argues that reality may be accurately described by a simple number of easily characterized entities.

An example of a simple entity within logical atomism is the idea of ‘white’ (X). This simple entity has no other sense datum attached to it other than the quality of being white. Here, a simple entity possesses no more information other than the one quality of reality it represents. Wittgenstein later explains how an atomic fact differs from simple entities. “An atomic fact is a combination of objects (entities, things). It is essential to a thing that it can be a constituent part of an atomic fact” (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 2.01-2.011). While "white" is a simple concept, statements like "snow is white" (Y is X) show how snow can be a component of white. Snow being white is an atomic fact because it connects two components to create a fact about the world. This relationship exists within the sentence but is made true by the connection with reality. This is an important distinction for the Picture Theory as it demonstrates how Wittgenstein creates his version of logical atomism.

This can be shown further when combining additional atomic facts with simple entities to create language. “Snow is white and is the crystalized composition of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen” (Y is X, L and P). These three fundamental entities tied to this discipline are combined in the most crucial sense. Philosophical language here can only explain what the logical form possesses. Simply for all Y’s (snow), it is the case that Y is X, and also L and P. This allows us to decipher what the form is because we can understand the basic structure of reality.

This use of language demonstrates how objects in the world can be composed in different senses. To implement language in the world we must connect simples through the use of atomic facts and objects. Indeed, Wittgenstein states that “Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent; their configuration is what is changing and unstable” (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 2.0271). More precisely, objects are the static substances of the world, while their formation in the world is dynamic. An atomic fact can be fully analyzed when it can grasp objects, presumably while cognizant of their complete analysis.

For example, if I am sitting at my desk, it is true since it depicts reality. This fact can be fully analyzed because it can explain the relationship between myself and my desk. To put it simply, my desk and I are both objects, and the only fact relevant to reality is that I sit in front of it (A sits in front of B). The purpose of language is to explain this relationship using states of affairs. To illustrate the world, we can examine this claim; it is either the case that I sit at my desk (A), or I do not (~A). This allows us to investigate the nature of reality so long as we can decipher the structure of language (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 3.50). This technique is employed in the state of affairs of the world and is further implemented in The *Tractatus.*

Wittgenstein begins *The Tractatus* by arguing that the ‘world is everything that is the case’ (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 1). The world is composed of simple entities that interact with objects and states of affairs. In this case, the situation reveals the relationship between atomic facts and simple entities. Wittgenstein states that it would “appear as an accident, when to a thing that could exist alone on its own account, subsequently a state of affairs could be made to it. If things can occur in atomic facts, this possibility must already lie in them” (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 2.0121). This argues that the world consists of a combination of facts rather than just simple entities. The world, although made up of simples, must be connected by the state of affairs between them to define what is the case in reality.

Furthermore, as argued at the beginning of Wittgenstein’s work, “the world is the totality of facts, not of things” (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 1.1). Wittgenstein does not dispute the existence of both things and facts. More precisely, he argues that the totality of facts is something different from the mere collection of entities or things. Collections of simple entities such as “shoe, ball, fort” have no meaning without context. If it was stated that the aforementioned collection was a list of words that followed the word 'snow' (snow-shoe, snow-ball, snow-fort), then they possess facts about the world rather than a simple collection of entities. Indeed, the world is the totality of these facts rather than just the collection of entities.

This is a crucial component to consider when analyzing how we frame language since it includes statements that have the potential to characterize the world in a logical place. Logical place, simply put, is the area where all possibilities can occur. While Wittgenstein did not truly define this term, we can make an inference from *The* *Tractatus.* “The propositional sign and the logical coordinates: that is the logical place. The geometrical and the logical place agree in that each is the possibility of an existence” (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 3.41-3.411)*.* This exemplifies the capacity to demonstrate what is and is not true in the real world. It is, in essence, a reflection of the linguistic portrayal of reality.

 The Picture Theory is how Wittgenstein explains his interpretation of logical atomism. This theory asserts that the combination of simple entities or atomic facts can be represented through pictures that form models of reality. The Picture Theory argues that the function of language is to form these models to exemplify how language obtains meaning. Further, since something can only be considered true if it can be depicted, we can utilize these images to interpret language. Indeed, we use this method to describe how the world is; reflections of the world around us. The Picture Theory encourages us to perceive language as a depiction of reality despite its underscoring of complex language. Wittgenstein aims to illustrate how language gets its meaning while developing an account of how language works therein.

The Picture Theory is based on how we think about images in a logical place. Here we examine general principles about the world rather than every minute detail. However, Wittgenstein declares that the picture theory is not constrained by visual images alone. He declares that a sentence can also be deemed a picture in his argument. A sentence has a logical structure and the capability to mirror the world. Using the example of snow; for all Y’s, it is the case that Y is X, and Y is L and P. Simply, every Y that is X will also be L and P. This allows sentences to be constructed as pictures in conjunction with the world. Since a sentence has a logical form, it can mirror the proposition and reality allowing one to picture the other.

Wittgenstein begins his picture theory by declaring that “we picture facts to ourselves. A picture presents a situation in logical space, the existence and nonexistence of states of affairs'' (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 2.11). More specifically, this aims to demonstrate what is and is not the case in the world. A picture can exist in the space of all logical possibilities; it does not just illustrate the true state of affairs. The use of images by Wittgenstein is merely an analogy to better portray our understanding of the propositional picture of reality. Using this theory, he aims to demonstrate how language derives its meaning from the representation of possible states of affairs in logical space.

Although the images are considered simple, we are able to create language from them without the use of complex variants. This relates to the declarations about facts and objects because it allows one to understand Wittgenstein’s argument using the totality of facts. This is because we can place facts together and form images that correspond to reality and explain language. An example of how to apply the Picture Theory can be illustrated with the following image (Fig, 1).



**Figure 1: Map Image Example**. Drawn depiction of Princess Street and University Avenue. Used to illustrate Wittgenstein’s Picture theory.

Using the Picture Theory, I can explain how to arrive at Metro from Oil Thigh Designs. If a person wished to travel to this destination, they would first leave Oil Thigh Designs on University Avenue and make their way to Earl Street. Then they would turn toward Division Street ensuring that they walk past Starbucks toward Princess Street. Lastly, they turn right onto Princess Street until they reach the Metro.

Despite the visual simplicity of this map, we still have the ability to communicate how to get from Oil Thigh Designs to Metro. Roads that are marked with yellow are considered significant, and unmarked roads are not. As previously stated, the theory is used to illustrate general principles rather than minute details. Further, landmarks and other defining objects can also aid a picture to help the observer navigate the image. Since “a picture is a model of reality” it can show facts contained in the world, as portrayed in the map image (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 2.12). This theory is an example of what could be the case, rather than being limited by what is the case. In an analogous way to how we generate pictures and sentences, the world is what we make it out to be. Simply, the navigator could have taken an alternate route to get to the destination, for example, they could have gone down Earl Street (A) or they could not have (~A). The theory is merely an instance of what possibilities reality can possess.

 Indeed, since the picture represents the space of all possibilities it is not just the actual situation of how things are. “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*;* 2010*,* 2.15). Wittgenstein argues that the elements in the picture relate to one another to form the image. Moreover, a picture represents a possible situation when the picture can reflect the current state of affairs. A sentence also has this capability since it can mirror propositions in reality. He further illustrates this connection in an example.

“The gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to one another in that pictorial internal relation which holds between language and the world. To all of them the logical structure is common. (Like the two youths, their two horses and their lilies in the story. They are all in a certain sense one)” (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 4.014).

Here, individual simples cannot illustrate reality. Yet, when combined like the gramophone record, they can produce a song, an internal relation. If we were to move the musical notes, it could illustrate a different state of reality. He argues that we can only get a song if we place the notes in a certain way. If they were considered on their own in isolation there would not be a song. Indeed, we know that the score represents the place in which the notes are placed. This is a crucial component of picture theory since it demonstrates our capacity to depict reality using simples and states of affairs (simples becoming particulars).

He argues this by stating “what a picture must have in common with reality, in order to be able to depict it - correctly or incorrectly - in the way that it does, is its pictorial form” (Wittgenstein*,* 2.18). The way that the picture shows reality reflects the given situation in the real world. This theory is utilized to show how language can be represented in pictorial propositions. A proposition, argues Wittgenstein, “is whatever can be true or false. For instead of "This is how things are" I could have said "This is true". (Or again "This is false".) But we have 'p' is true — p [...]'p' is false = not-p” (Wittgenstein; 1958, 52). Propositions refer to the main ideas of the sentences; there is only one authentic meaning despite various expressions. Wittgenstein states that “expressions are everything essential for the sense of the proposition that propositions can have in common with one another (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 3.31). What classifies something as an expression is that it conveys information. This can be contrasted with the musical symbol above. A symbol on its own does not convey anything in the same sense that the word ‘one’ does not convey anything. It could just be a collection of shapes or a reference to a single person. Insofar as it is interpreted as one it is an expression of something.

For instance, when examining a sentence that possesses meaning, we refer to it as an expression and all of the components that contribute to that expression. “I am sitting at my desk” expresses something in virtue of my desk expressing something. For Wittgenstein, expressions need to possess a logical form; they need to possess a predicate-name. Here, you combine a variable with a predicate such as “*something* is brown” or a name with a predicate “*that* *desk* is brown.” Entities can become expressions when they have these logical structures and can illustrate components of reality. Ultimately, an expression illustrates the way things come together to convey information; they represent a situation in a logical space.

The Picture Theory aims to show us how simple entities are used in language and how only factual entities are significant when expressing reality. The Picture Theory attempts to portray a one-to-one correspondence between the asserted entities. It illustrates that the logical picture must relate to the world to possess meaning. Indeed, the world is composed of a combination of generals and particulars. Here, you need a predicate or something that can be multiply instantiated with something particular which is the unit instantiating it. Previously mentioned, words like "shoe," "ball," and "fort" are unable to depict reality; instead, they require an instantiating unit to convey atomic facts about the world. Indeed, to properly portray language we need to obtain this logical structure in expressions and apply it to picture theory.

In order to completely apply the Picture Theory, one must assess an images’ a posteriori and a priori aspect. The a priori aspect of the Picture Theory argues that just as symbols have to come together in the right form to become expressions, that logical form is also the form of reality. Yet, a posteriori, Wittgenstein aims to locate the predicates that we truly need to describe this world. “The agreement or disagreement or its sense with reality constitutes its truth or falsity” (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 2.222). Regardless of what reality is, we can argue that it is a collection of logical structures manifested by empirical entities. Expressions then follow these forms which have logical structures allowing them to possess the one-to-one correspondence to reality. However, to locate the exact number of predicates needed to explain reality one needs to evaluate the world empirically.

We can utilize this theory to understand how an image can possess meaning and truth. Since the meaning and the truth of an image are two different elements. The meaning is the image it represents whereas the truth or falsity must be examined empirically. This does not mean that we need to memorize an infinite number of meanings or images to examine if it is true. As previously stated, lines and red dots can exemplify roads and buildings and we can tell what this means by simply observing the map image. However, “in order to tell whether a picture is true or false we need to compare it with reality” (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* *2.223*). Therefore, we must investigate whether or not the image accurately depicts the situation while examining logical components a priori. He argues that we can understand that reality and properly formulated words will have a similar foundation.

The Picture Theory presents a means of obtaining language by understanding the truth of reality through Wittgenstein’s account of pictures. Likewise, language is a means of capturing reality in the same sense that pictures can. According to Wittgenstein, language functions similarly to picture theory, as it is impossible to decipher the truth from an image alone. In other words, the world will create itself in the same way that a meaningful expression requires a predicate and particular to make a meaningful unit; that is, it will consist of objects that are encompassed by properties. However, only formal sciences can provide answers regarding which simple entities we require to illustrate the world. Nevertheless, we will continue to use logical atomism to break these elements down into simpler forms.

As previously mentioned, pictures represent possible states of reality, yet we may find instances of confusion within pictures, as we may also find in language. Suppose the map image did not possess written indications of street names. One may be mistaken in believing that the yellow lines represent streets in which traffic only moves in one direction. Further, the navigator may hold the image in a different orientation, causing the buildings to appear to be in false locations. In both of these circumstances, the meaning of the image would change, and it would not fulfill an accurate representation of reality. Due to the possible states of affairs that the map image now presents, the navigator would now require an alternative route towards their destination.

Moreover, the Picture Theory cannot portray commonplace statements, rather, it can only focus on the state of affairs within reality. Commonplace statements do not reflect a relation between objects and do not depict anything in our reality therein. An example of a commonplace statement is: “Bring my laptop.” This statement does not tell us anything factual about the world. In contrast, a relation between objects describes how the world is, such as in the phrase “my laptop is on my desk”. This relational phrase describes how the world is and can be illustrated with the Picture Theory. Wittgenstein argues that commonplace statements are not important when attempting to understand reality. This is because, in contrast to the relation of objects, they do not illustrate the fundamental idea of a sentence and do not add any information to the picture of reality.

 This is a vital distinction when analyzing Picture Theory as employing facts instead of statements illustrates how reality connects to images. Language that contains statements has the potential to make the Picture Theory a simple method of analyzing language. In this way, statement-containing language is considered irrelevant and therefore nullified. The sentence “bring my laptop” is not necessary in understanding reality and cannot be represented in the Picture Theory.

Although Wittgenstein presents a compelling account of how to understand language, the Picture Theory is ultimately not successful in portraying how we perceive reality. Indeed, Wittgenstein declared that the Picture Theory cannot possess a one-to-one ratio of how we perceive reality because of the inability to possess complex facts. He makes this argument against his theory in a later work *Philosophical Investigations* where he states “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (*Philosophical Investigations,* 115). This shows that the Picture Theory puts constraints on our minds and does not allow us to think beyond that which is pictorial. This limits our abilities to think about complex problems that cannot be represented pictorially.

Further, if we remove simple entities, we declare that the combination of objects only possesses internal relations, and therefore cannot illustrate language. “A proposition about a complex stands in internal relation to the proposition about its constituent part” (Wittgenstein; 2010, 3.24). The map created is an extremely generalized image. This cannot depict reality because, unlike Wittgenstein’s assumption, reality is not simple. The map represents a part of reality, not the whole of it. If I illustrate the route of how to travel to Metro, I will have been looking at only one possible instance. If I were to be looking at the whole, I would be considering states of affairs such as the flow of traffic, and car accidents that may have happened in the area. However, the map image does not consider these additional circumstances. The Picture Theory requires one to look at the generalized simple image instead of complex reality as a whole, which ultimately causes the Picture Theory to fail. This is because it merely reveals the generality of what is the case in the world. Therefore, one cannot fully examine the complex nature of the Picture Theory because it cannot show all of reality; it is too simple.

 More precisely, a complication of uncertainty arrives when more than one account of reality can be true; a proposition can be deemed ambiguous if there are multiple ways in which it could be true. This contends that a proposition cannot exist since there is not one true description of reality that can be confined to a single picture. Therefore, we are left with expressions of reality that cannot portray our accounts of language.

For instance, suppose, I write a sad song about losing my pet. The proposition that is presented ought to be expressed as sadness (true account). However, if we remove the proposition, one may understand the song as a joyous homage to my pet even though it is still upsetting (false account). This then contends that the song's representation has multiple expressions or multiple modes of conveying reality. However, because expressions cannot identify any form of relation, they are unable to depict reality in themselves. This sentence implies indeterminacy, which corresponds to the idea that the song may reflect sorrow.

 Ultimately, this reflects the Picture Theory because it shows how the misrepresentation of propositional statements can influence a disconnect with reality. An accurate account of reality cannot be objective since everyone is exposed to it and interprets it differently. As a result of individuals experiencing a different subjective truth, there is not one single true objective account. Thus, even a fully analyzed notion is a disjunction of basic premises since it would be ambiguous in this definition of the world. Indeed, we cannot accurately depict the truth or falsity of an image based on expressional notions due to there being no single objective truth. Therefore, we cannot illustrate reality using the Picture Theory because of the presence of subjective experiences of reality. This theory is unable to adequately investigate the complex accounts of communication, hence it is unable to address language.

 Conversely, I believe that one may argue that images can depict a true reality because we can draw real elements from our reality and portray them in images. This can be further illustrated using Descartes' painting analogy shown in *The Meditations on the First Philosophy.* Similar to the Picture Theory, Descartes uses paintings to show that we must draw some real aspect of reality into our images. Painters can create something new on a canvas like nothing ever seen before.

For instance, mermaids or centaurs can be seen as imaginary creatures, yet they are composed of pre-existing elements from reality. This shows that images must contain simple elements that already exist in the world. Further, they “cannot give them natures which are new in all respects; they simply jumble up the limbs of different animals. Or if perhaps they manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before” (Descartes; 2020, 77). This can be a valid criticism because it shows that images cannot be made up, and we must draw on simples in the real world.

Nonetheless, even if the images can be seen as false, Descartes insists that a painter at least has to use colours drawn from reality; the composition must be real. “It must at least be admitted that certain other even simpler and more universal things are real. These are as it were the real colours from which we form all the images of things, whether true or false, that occur in our thought” (Descartes; 2020, 77). This can be seen in support of the Picture Theory arguing that we can use simples, seen in colours, to illustrate an account for reality. Since you are already pulling from some real aspect of reality, it can be argued that the picture theory does not need to be empirically verified. Rather it automatically illustrates reality based on the elements we use to create images.

 Although this argument may be compelling by reintroducing simple entities into pictures, it cannot depict an accurate account of reality. Indeed, this is an account of existence rather than a method of proving the Picture Theory. I believe that the counterargument has the ability to illustrate that simple entities can be displayed in an image. However, I do not think that it has the ability to accurately depict reality because it solely displays simple universals. Furthermore, since colours alone cannot illustrate how language can be understood using images, I find the counterargument underwhelming and believe that Wittgenstein’s initial issue to abandon his theory is correct. Ultimately, it is argued that whether true or false, colours can occur in thought, making them able to illustrate reality. Yet, even if this argues that it does take *some* real aspect of reality, we still cannot consider deeper meanings in the world. This further declares that the Picture Theory ignores complex relations in reality.

 In this case, Wittgenstein considered this method of reasoning to be grammatical. Later on, he came to believe that language is an elastic, social, and occasionally confusing structure whose extent and complexity make it impossible to define in a straightforward way (Barraclough, 2004). Indeed, this complex nature makes language impossible to confine in pictures. Furthermore, he held that the meaning of language is not determined by any underlying logical structure, but rather by how it is utilized in everyday situations (Barraclough, 2004).

This criterion states that a proposition must be able to be empirically confirmed to have meaning; we need to relate the image with reality to ensure its validity *(Ayer on the Criterion;* 2007, 8).Therefore, empirical verification of the Picture Theory is required. Wittgenstein asserts that “we could only know a priori that a thought is true if its truth was to be recognized from the thought itself (without an object of comparison)” (Wittgenstein*;* 2010*,* 3.05). If we can only know something a priori we cannot determine the truth of an argument just based on its representation. Rather, we must conduct an empirical comparison of the proposition with reality to confirm its accuracy. Hence, we must relate to the external world for evidence of our truth. The criticism claiming that we can obtain understanding from the picture theory a posteriori can therefore not be accepted.

Ultimately, Wittgenstein's 'Picture Theory' cannot portray an accurate account of reality because it cannot accommodate complex entities. Indeed, this explanation of propositional reality is not wholly adequate, since Wittgenstein stated meaning is understood in simples. Descartes was implemented to illustrate a possible theory to reconcile the Picture Theory’s connection to the world. However, it cannot illustrate reality beyond since it does not have the ability to represent complex elements in reality. Thus, the Picture Theory is unable to accurately depict modes of language within reality.

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