

A Note on a Cold Case: Wittgenstein's Allusion to a Fairy Tale

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Ludwig Wittgenstein was an eminent philosopher of the 20th century, and even the seemingly trivial minutiae of his writings made scholars take note. A case in point is a casual parenthetical remark in the only major work published in his lifetime, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.¹ The *Tractatus* was published with German text and English translation on opposite pages and consists of hierarchically numbered propositions and passages; the parenthetical allusion to a fairy tale (*Märchen* in the German text) occurs in passage 4.014:

4.014 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 seems to have taken it for granted that the fairy tale would be familiar to his German readers. However, Inge Ackermann, Robert Ackermann, and Betty Hendricks, collaborators on a project on fairy tale symbolism, found that the native Germans they queried weren't able to recognise the fairy tale from Wittgenstein's brief remark.² Nevertheless, despite Wittgenstein's omission of a salient detail (*viz.* no mention of gold or anything golden), Ackermann *et al.* were able to conclude that the most likely candidate is a story from a Grimm brothers' collection³ of fairy tales under the title '*Die Goldkinder*' – literally 'The Gold-Children' but renamed 'The Golden Lads' in Andrew Lang's *The Green Fairy Book*.⁴

Wittgenstein's familiarity with the Grimms' fairy tales and the potential significance of fairy tales for his philosophical concerns are discussed by Colin Radford.⁵ However, Radford also tells us that in all of his writings Wittgenstein only ever alluded to two fairy tales, the other being the Grimms' 'Clever Elsie'. Radford pessimistically remarks, 'These allusions tell us nothing more about what relevance, if any, folk tales have to Wittgenstein's philosophy.'

We must look elsewhere.⁶ He does look elsewhere, but makes no further mention of 'The Golden Lads', which is our particular concern here.

There are many details and various twists and turns in 'The Golden Lads', but Ackermann *et al.* have conveniently summarised the features they consider relevant to Wittgenstein's remark as follows:

A poor man who repeatedly catches a golden fish is finally instructed by the fish to divide the fish into six pieces, to feed two to his wife, two to his horse, and to plant two in the ground. After an appropriate interval, the wife of the poor man gives birth to golden twin boys, his horse gives birth to two golden foals, and he has two golden lilies growing in his garden. At least the lilies and the boys are in some sense in a relationship of identity because when the one lad meets misfortune by being turned into stone, his lily simply droops in the garden, and this enables the other golden lad to recognize his brother's danger, and to ride off on his golden horse and rescue him. When he returns home, it is discovered that his brother's golden lily reared up and burst into blossom at the moment of rescue.⁷

'In a sense, then,' Ackermann *et al.* declare, 'a relationship of identity can be seen between the golden items in this story even though there are no visible physical connexions between them.' They acknowledge that this tale cannot explain internal relationships, but conclude that 'it seems an interesting illustration of Wittgenstein's point and it is clear why he might have thought of it in this context.'⁸

Well, as Radford later intimated, maybe not quite so clear. Nor have others subsequently attempted to make sense of this particular allusion; it's a cold case. Let us consider some details about the context in which Wittgenstein's statement was made. After his allusion, Wittgenstein immediately adds:

4.0141 In the fact that there is a general rule by which the musician is able to read the symphony out of the score, and that there is a rule by which one could reconstruct the symphony from the line on a gramophone record and from this again—by means of the first rule—construct the score, herein lies the internal similarity between these things which at first sight seem to be entirely different. And the rule is the law of projection which

projects the symphony into the language of the musical score. It is the rule of translation of this language into the language of the gramophone record.

4.015 The possibility of all similes, of all the imagery of our language, rests on the logic of representation.⁹

Earlier on in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had already outlined his general conception of picturing, which constitutes the broader context. Here is a representative selection of a few relevant propositions to provide a sense of Wittgenstein's enterprise:

2.1 We make to ourselves pictures of facts.

2.12 The picture is a model of reality.

2.131 The elements of the picture stand, in the picture, for the objects [pictured].

2.15 That the elements of the picture are combined with one another in a definite way, represents that the things [pictured] are so combined with one another.

This connexion of the elements of the picture is called its structure, and the possibility of this structure is called the form of representation of the picture.

2.151 The form of representation is the possibility that the things are combined with one another as are the elements of the picture.

2.161 In the picture and the pictured there must be something identical in order that the one can be a picture of the other at all.

2.17 What the picture must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it after its manner—rightly or falsely—is its form of representation.

Moreover, an intended parallel between pictures and propositions is evident:

2.14 The picture consists in the fact that its elements are combined with one another in a definite way.

3.14 The propositional sign consists in the fact that its elements, the words, are combined in it in a definite way. . . .

4.021 The proposition is a picture of reality, for I know the state of affairs presented by it, if I understand the proposition . . .

So both pictures and propositions picture states of affairs. (Should we perhaps also say that pictures picture them literally whereas propositions picture them metaphorically?) The salient points of comparison can be stated in a fairly straightforward way: (i) elements of a picture stand for objects, and words in a proposition also stand for objects; and (ii) the structure in which such elements or words are combined represents the structure of the state of affairs represented. Let us note, however, that for pictures the structure is a visually perceptible mirroring of the represented state of affairs, whereas in the case of propositions there is no shared 'identical' structure of that sort. But let us also note that even pictures may be indefinite as regards exactly what state of affairs is supposedly projected. (Is that person in the picture an obese woman or a pregnant woman? Or is it a man in drag with a beer belly? Or . . .?)

What does the 'law of projection' (4.0141) consist of and how is it supposed to relate to an internal relation of identity? Wittgenstein also tells us,

3.11 We use the sensibly perceptible sign (sound or written sign, etc.) of the proposition as a projection of the possible state of affairs.

The method of projection is the thinking of the sense of the proposition.

Basically, then, if we understand what a proposition is about, we are 'projecting' a possible state of affairs, i.e. the one that the proposition pictures, so to speak. The law of projection takes us from the proposition to the state of affairs. But it is still not evident how that helps us understand the 'oneness' intimated in the allusion, since for that we would still need specifics regarding any relevant pictures¹⁰ or propositions as provided in the fairy tale; the allusion is not self-evident. (Recall that Ackermann *et al.* found that native Germans were not even able to identify the fairy tale from the wording of the allusion.) So it appears we are not much closer to understanding what makes the two youths, their two horses, and their lilies in the fairy tale 'all in a certain sense one'. Time to go to Plan B.

In the spirit of seeking a plausible but not necessarily unique solution to a riddle, let us see whether we can make sense of the parenthetical claim without recourse to Wittgenstein's framework of picturing. It will not do to rely simply on the fact that the same word, 'gold' or 'golden', occurs throughout the tale. Something more robust is called for; otherwise any old golden thing could be encompassed by the alleged identity.

In what other way, then, might we make sense of the claim that the two youths, their two horses, and their lilies are all in a certain sense *one*? One possibility is an identity of origin and function. The fish is initially complete in itself, but after dissection becomes a 'scattered object'¹¹ consisting of six pieces. The whole fish still exists but some of its formerly undetached parts are now detached parts. In that sense, the *many* taken together are still the *one* from which they originated. Furthermore, in the fairy tale each piece of fish also functions as a seed. (Lest it be objected that a seed is not the same as what it grows into – an acorn is not an oak tree after all – let us note that something can function as a seed without actually being a seed. A seed potato is still a potato and not a potato seed.)

When the wife and the horse each ingest two pieces of the fish, the pieces function as seeds that become implanted in their wombs and grow into twin boys and twin foals.¹² The two pieces planted in the ground function as seeds that grow into lilies. The pieces have all undergone change in their growth from seed to boy, horse, or flower; but in a sense they are all still there, still golden, only older, bigger, and reshaped. There is spatiotemporal continuity of the *one*, from original unscattered golden fish to scattered golden fish to metamorphosed scattered golden fish.¹³

Another albeit closely related possibility is to take into account, together with origin, the distinction between count nouns and mass nouns. Intuitively, count nouns refer to things that can be numerically counted and hence are amenable to having a plural: 'chair' is a count noun inasmuch as it has a plural form, 'chairs'. Many nouns have both a mass and a count sense. For example, it may be true that there is chicken (mass sense) in the fridge, but false that there is *a* chicken (one) or that there are chickens (two or more) in the fridge. 'Gold', on the other hand, is a mass noun; it is not countable and does not have a plural.¹⁴ Moreover, masses share their characteristic nature with their parts: the parts of a mass of gold also consist of gold, whereas the parts of a chair aren't themselves chairs.¹⁵ Simply put, the 'certain sense' in which the two youths, their two horses, and their lilies are all *one* is that they all are the same substance, namely gold – they are linked materially by the mass noun 'gold' because they are composed of the same stuff *and* that particular stuff originates in the primal stuff of the unscattered golden fish¹⁶ which is the Ur-gold that gave rise to them all.

Let us sum up the results of our brief investigation. First, it appears that, *pace* Wittgenstein, his allusion to 'The Golden Lads' is neither an obvious nor an instructive illustration of his pictorial internal relation. His conception of picturing does not lead to a satisfactory explanation of the *oneness* mentioned in the allusion either. Secondly, we have nevertheless managed to sketch promising alternative explanations, independently of Wittgenstein's pictorial scheme, of how the *oneness* or 'relationship of identity' apparent in 'The Golden Lads' might be conceived. It may not glisten; but it's a step forward.

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Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, & Co. Ltd, 1922). Below I follow the common practice of including the hierarchical numbering as part of any quoted passage exactly as it appears in the text of the *Tractatus*.
2. Inge Ackermann, Robert Ackermann and Betty Hendricks, 'Wittgenstein's Fairy Tale', *Analysis* 38, no. 3 (June 1978): 159-60 (160).
3. Ackermann et al. were correct in identifying the fairy tale, but most likely mistaken as to Wittgenstein's source for it. They attribute it to an unspecified 1829 Grimm brother's collection, whereas Wittgenstein's apparent source was Paul Ernst (ed.), *Kinder- und Hausmärchen. Gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*, in three vols (München and Leipzig: G. Müller 1910). For a detailed explanation of Wittgenstein's familiarity with the work, see Marco Bastianelli, 'Wittgenstein and the Mythology in the Forms of Language', in *The Darkness of this Time*, ed. Luigi Perissinotto (Milano-Udine: Mimesis Edizioni 2013), 87-114 (95f, 113).
4. Andrew Lang, *The Green Fairy Book* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1892), 311-15.
5. Colin Radford, 'Wittgenstein and "Fairy Tales"', *Merveilles & contes* 2 (1988), 106-110.
6. Radford, 'Wittgenstein and "Fairy Tales"', 106.
7. Ackermann et al., 'Wittgenstein's Fairy Tale', 160. This summary is abstracted from Lang, *The Green Fairy Book*, 311-15.
8. Ackermann et al., 'Wittgenstein's Fairy Tale', 160.
9. However, the logic of representation of similes or imagery is not necessarily confined to internal relations. A shared aspect might simply be a matter of the speaker's or writer's say-so. For example, an artist might exhibit a miscellany of paintings under the title 'My Summer Vacation', where each picture represents something the artist did, saw, or even merely thought of during their summer vacation. There may be nothing relevant the pictures share except the artist's say-so regarding the seasonal provenance of whatever is represented, and that would be an arbitrary external relation to the content instead of a shared internal relation. A further complication for a logic of representation that we shall not address here is that some similes or metaphors are true despite being based on falsehood. Calling someone a gorilla typically represents that person as, for example, more like Popeye's archenemy, the thuggish muscle-bound brute Bluto, instead of the 'gentle giants' of primatologist Dian Fossey's gorilla research.
10. The fairy tale in Lang, *The Green Fairy Book*, comes with two intaglio illustrations (312, 315). One of them shows the fisherman and the fish but inasmuch as the picture is black-and-white the picture alone cannot project a possible state of affairs in which the fish is golden; for that to obtain the story's text is required for a proper interpretation of the picture.
11. There are logical and metaphysical issues pertaining to scattered objects that were first taken up by Richard Cartwright, 'Scattered Objects', in *Analysis and Metaphysics: Essays in Honor of R. M. Chisholm*, ed. Keith Lehrer (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1975), 153-71, reprinted in Richard Cartwright, *Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 171-86.
12. Surprisingly, oral impregnation does not only happen in fairy tales: a real-world case is described in Douwe A.A. Verkuyl, 'Oral conception. Impregnation via the proximal gastrointestinal tract in a patient with an aplastic distal vagina. Case report', *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 95 (1988): 933-4.
13. At least up to the time when one of the brothers is turned to stone. Instantaneous total replacement of an entity's stuff raises philosophical issues pertaining to the possibility of its continuing identity or existence that would take us too far afield to pursue here.
14. Of course, much remains to be said beyond my simplistic characterisation of the mass vs. count noun distinction; although much of a technical nature has since been published on the topic, Francis Jeffrey Pelletier (ed.), *Mass Terms: Some Philosophical Problems* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1979) is still a good general introduction.
15. At least at the macroscopic level; the element's protons and electrons per se aren't gold. Mass terms generally come with some implicit constraints on the shared characteristics of parthood.
16. We might also note that the word 'fish' itself, like 'chicken', has both a mass and a count sense, except unlike 'chicken' the plural form is the same. For example, it might be the case that you can have fish (mass sense) for lunch, because we caught three fish (count sense) this morning. The ostensible plural 'fishes' is elliptical for different 'species of fish'.