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PICTURES, PROPOSITIONS, AND PREDICATES

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ABSTRACT

Do representational pictures have propositional contents? The current paper argues that the characteristic contents of pictures are predicative rather than propositional: pictures characterise things as looking certain ways, and they thereby express properties of visual perspectives. The paper argues that the characteristic predicative contents of pictures are nonetheless able to feature in fully-fledged propositional contents once they are combined with contents of other suitable sorts. Various facts about communicative uses of pictures are then explained. The paper concludes by considering the bearing of its conclusions upon questions about the relationships between linguistic representation and pictorial representation.

1. Introduction

We are able to understand many kinds of representations. Given that our ability to understand representations derives from our ability to grasp their contents, it is natural to wonder about the relationships that hold among the contents of the various sorts of representations that we are able to understand.

Pictures have often been contrasted with sentences. The role that vision plays in our comprehension of, say, a picture of a cat on a mat seems to be very different to the role that it plays in our understanding of an inscription of the sentence “a cat sat on a mat”. But it is natural to think that the contrast goes deeper than that. For the very nature of the information that we get from pictures often seems to be especially visual, in a way that contrasts with the

nature of the information that we typically get from sentences. Our understandings of pictures commonly interact with our visual recognitional capacities, for instance, in ways that our understandings of words generally do not.

The notion of a proposition has its roots in philosophical reflection upon language, and that aspect of its genesis is still apparent today.[1] Thus, in a recent book exploring various approaches to propositions, the very first remark that is made in response to the question why many philosophers believe in propositions is that, "in the first instance, sentences of natural languages (taken relative to contexts of utterance) seem to encode pieces of information"[2], where it is suggested that those pieces of information may be identified with propositions.

Given that the contents of pictures seem often to be rather different to the contents of ordinary sentences, though, and given that the notion of a proposition has its natural home in thought about language, the question whether the contents of pictures are propositional is an obvious one to ask.

The current paper addresses that question. The next section briefly examines the idea of a proposition, outlining the functional approach to propositions that has dominated recent debate. Section 3 then presents some considerations that might be felt to support the claim that pictures have propositional contents; some counterarguments owed to Crane are discussed and briefly criticised, although the paper eventually endorses one of Crane's main contentions. Section 4 makes a general suggestion about a particularly elementary form of content that many pictures are used to express, one which is also crucial to a wide array of additional communicative uses of pictures.

Section 5 sharpens up that suggestion, by providing an account of a fundamental variety of pictorial content. Section 6 uses the resulting ideas to formulate a general position on the relationships holding between propositions and the contents expressed by appropriate communicative uses of pictures, and to explain certain phenomena. Section 7 concludes, with

some further reflections upon the relationships holding between pictorial contents, propositional contents, and linguistic ones.

2. Propositions

What are propositions? It is widely held that the idea of, say, the proposition *that snow is white* serves to gather together certain related roles that a single item should be called upon to perform.[3] The proposition *that snow is white* is then whatever fits the bill. The notion of a proposition is thus naturally treated as being a functional one: the class of propositions encompasses those items that perform certain tasks, just as the class of headteachers covers those people who fulfill certain roles in the lives of schools.[4] But what are the parts that propositions must play?

Philosophers have put propositions to many uses, and there is room for debate over just which of those roles best serve to define what it is to be a proposition. King claims, for instance, that "propositions are the meanings of sentences taken relative to contexts and what is grasped in understanding a sentence in a context"[5]. Yet how exactly is that claim to be construed? Is it being claimed that *every* proposition is the meaning of a sentence taken relative to a possible context? Or—much less strongly—that *some* propositions are the meanings of sentences taken relative to possible contexts?

The former construal fits with King's own eventual account of propositions, according to which they are facts of a sort that feature quantification over linguistic expressions.[6] But it might be thought rather peremptorily to rule out the possibility of propositions of a kind that words—by contrast with, say, pictures and mental sensory images—cannot express.[7] For the purposes of what follows, I shall therefore focus upon some putatively defining features of propositions that remain neutral over the relationships

obtaining between propositional contents and specific forms of representational vehicles. (The paper's conclusion will briefly return to the relationships between language and propositional content, however.)

Let's assume, first, that *any proposition P may be evaluated for truth and falsity*. (The truth or falsity of some representation, as used on a certain occasion to express a proposition, may accordingly be treated as deriving from the truth or falsity of the proposition that the representation then serves to express.) For, second, we may assume that *any proposition P serves to define certain truth-conditions*; that is, we may assume that, for any given proposition, there are some conditions such that, necessarily, the proposition is true just in case those conditions obtain.[8]

Let's also assume, third, that *any proposition P may feature in more complex propositions*: one can negate any proposition, for instance, and one can disjoin any proposition with any other one. Finally, we may take it that *it is possible for any proposition P to serve as the object of some propositional attitude*, in that the proposition might serve to specify the content of some propositional attitude: any proposition can be either believed, or doubted, or asserted, or denied, or supposed, and so on.[9]

While each of the previous conditions surely features in the "proposition role", it will not be assumed that they are exhaustive; they will thus merely be taken to generate conditions whose satisfaction by a bunch of items is *necessary* for the relevant things to count as propositions. If the contents that belong to a certain kind of pictures cannot be evaluated for truth and falsity, we may then conclude that pictures of the relevant type do not have propositional contents. By contrast, if we find that the contents belonging to the pictures of a certain sort meet each of the previous conditions, we as yet have no reason to deny that the relevant pictures possess propositional contents.

3. Crane on pictures and propositions

Why might someone claim that pictures have propositional contents? One potential reason for doing so—a reason that parallels a potential reason for making an analogous claim about perceptual experiences[10]—relates to the first couple of features of propositions noted in the previous section: namely, their evaluability as either true or false and their association with truth-conditions.

People do not generally talk about whether pictures are simply "true" or "false". But we are often happy enough to evaluate pictures in terms of their "accuracy". So, for example, the following image accurately captures what things were like around a place at a certain time:

Figure 1: William H. Rau, *New Main Line at Duncannon* (about 1890-1900).[11]

Relatedly, while it would sound a little odd to talk about the "truth-conditions" that are associated with Figure 1, it sounds much more normal to talk of the "accuracy-conditions" belonging to the picture. Figure 1's accuracy-conditions—the conditions under which the image supplies an accurate representation of what things are like around a certain place—feature the presence of a train, for example.

One might reasonably wonder about the significance of our reluctance to talk about "truth" and "truth-conditions" in relation to pictures, however. Propositional truth is certainly one form of accuracy, and it might be suspected that our tendency to favour talk of pictorial "accuracy" over talk of pictorial "truth" merely reflects a superficial fact about linguistic usage. Would it really be wrong to say that Figure 1, for instance, is "true" relative to a certain place at a certain time? Or to say that Figure 1 is associated with certain "truth-conditions"? But if pictorial "accuracy" can be assimilated to truth, and if pictorial "accuracy-conditions" can be assimilated to truth-conditions, the idea that pictorial content is propositional starts to look more attractive.

Crane strongly resists the identification of the accuracy-conditions belonging to pictures with propositional truth-conditions, for a variety of reasons.[12] While some aspects of his arguments seem to be problematic, for reasons explained below, they contain some striking observations about communicative uses of pictures. He holds, for example, that "in order to obtain something which one can assert [using a picture], or to which one can apply logical operations, you need to employ non-pictorial symbols. Without these non-pictorial symbols it makes little sense to say that the content of the picture can be something which can be asserted, denied, negated or disjoined"[13].

Those points conflate some issues that need ideally to be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the claim that one cannot present the contents of pictures with a certain force—for instance, as true, in the course of an assertion—unless one employs non-pictorial symbols.

And, on the other hand, there is the claim that the mere contents of pictures are not suitable to feature in certain sorts of logically complex contents, or perhaps it is the claim that one cannot produce mere pictures that possess certain sorts of logically complex contents; that pictorial contents cannot themselves be negated, for instance, or—alternatively—that one cannot produce pictures whose contents amount to negations.

Let's focus on the first of those claims.[14] It might be taken to illustrate a more general contention, namely that the mere contents of pictures cannot serve as the objects of propositional attitudes. It might be held, for example, that one cannot spell out the content of a belief or desire, or make an assertion, simply using a picture; rather one must also employ some "non-pictorial symbols".[15] But if the mere contents of pictures cannot serve as the objects of propositional attitudes, the mere contents of pictures cannot be propositional.

While Crane's remark about assertion seems to be getting at an important point, as indeed does the more general thesis just presented, it needs further elaboration. It just is not evident, for instance, that one cannot make an assertion using a picture without the explicit use of some additional non-pictorial symbols. So, if the surrounding communicative context makes it clear that we are concerned with a certain specific visual perspective *p*, why mightn't I be able to make an assertion concerning what things were like around *p* simply by holding up a picture? One might appeal here to the implicit occurrence of some non-pictorial symbols, but this move is in danger of looking *ad hoc*.

More generally, it is unclear exactly how Crane's claims concerning the resources that are needed to make *assertions* using pictures—that is, to perform communicative actions in which pictorially-derived contents are presented as true—bear upon the nature of the contents possessed by pictures. Someone might use the name "Fred" to refer to the proposition that 2+2=4, for instance. Yet one cannot make an assertion simply by uttering the name "Fred", at least not in the absence of some suitable scene-setting. But that last point does not

demonstrate that the name's content amounts to any more than the proposition 2+2=4: it just bears out the fact that mere names are not the right vehicles for making assertions.

Although it is somewhat tempting to think that the contents of pictures stand in different relationships to propositional attitudes than do, say, indicative sentences of natural languages, and to connect that with the thought that the contents of pictures are not propositional, the nature of those relationships needs further investigation. But Crane is certainly correct to urge that representational accuracy cannot automatically be equated with propositional truth, even though it surely sometimes can be. In particular, note that *predicative contents*, like "_ is red", may be accurate in relation to specific items. Yet, while the accuracy of a predicative content relative to a given item may reflect the truth of an associated proposition, the predicative content is not itself propositional; hence talk of a representation's "accuracy" cannot immediately be used to justify the conclusion that the representation's content is propositional. Those last points are in fact highly relevant to the current case, as we will see in the next few sections.

4. Pictures and properties

Any discussion of the relationships holding between the contents of pictures and the contents of non-pictorial kinds of representations is complicated by the fact that pictures themselves form such a ragtag crew. It is hard not to suspect that the contents belonging to some pictures are as different in kind as those often belonging to pictures and contrasting non-pictorial representations.

Thus contrast Figure 1 with, for instance, Picasso's famous 1911-1912 painting *Ma Jolie*. Figure 1's depiction of a railway is distinctively visual: the image depicts what it depicts by showing things as *looking* certain ways from certain visual

perspectives. But *Ma Jolie*—which depicts a woman, and a guitar, using the resources of Analytic Cubism—is different, although it is also a picture. Although aspects of the latter's representation of a woman and a guitar may be read as deriving from familiar pictorial strategies for representing women and guitars, the image does not perform its overall depictive work by showing things as looking certain ways; it has striking similarities to relatively abstract forms of diagrammatic representation, for example.

The class of pictures seems to be semantically heterogeneous, then. It is therefore reasonable to focus on some but not all pictures throughout what follows. More specifically, let's concentrate upon *distinctively visual* pictures like Figure 1; that is, upon pictures that show things as looking certain ways.[16] Something like this restriction seems tacitly to be invoked by other writers. Crane writes, for example, that "one of the things a painter, for example, is doing when painting a (realistic) picture is portraying *how things look*. The point, then, is not that visual perception is essentially pictorial; it is rather that picturing is essential visual"[17].

The overall contents of distinctively visual pictures may be very complex and multi-layered, often on account of relevant contextual factors. Allegorical paintings do not just represent what they represent by showing things as looking certain ways, for instance; they also exploit contextually-fixed associations between aspects of the ways that they show things as looking and appropriate conceptual materials. More interestingly for our purposes, though, uses of distinctively visual pictures within appropriate contexts may enable them to function in the transmission of distinctively visual information that is, in certain ways, relatively specific.

Suppose that Figure 1 were to be produced as evidence in a court case, as showing that a train was hurtling down the track near Duncannon at a particular time *t*. The particular

spatiotemporal specificity attaching to the content expressed by that use of the picture would be absent from other potential uses of it. Someone could easily instead use Figure 1 to show what things supposedly looked like near Macclesfield within 12 hours of a different time *t**, for instance; or someone could simply use it to show things as looking certain ways "from somewhere", without invoking any associations between the image and some particular place.

Consider a use of Figure 1 in line with that last suggestion; a use of the picture, that is, merely to show things as looking certain ways "from somewhere", but from nowhere in particular. It is natural to think that the content conveyed by that nonspecific use of the picture is, in some ways, more fundamental than the more specific contents that might be conveyed by alternative uses of the image.

Someone witnessing our hypothetical court case might initially fail to appreciate that the picture is being used to show how things looked from some particular perspectives, for instance, while nonetheless appreciating that the image show things as looking certain ways "from somewhere", in the nonspecific sense. But the person might later cotton onto the picture's supposed association with some specific times and places. In doing that, our person's interpretation of the picture would surely build upon her or his earlier understanding of Figure 1. For the person would just be hanging the content which he or she had previously associated with the picture—by virtue of her or his awareness of the ways that the image shows things as looking "from somewhere"—on the hooks now provided by some particular viewpoints.

Construals of distinctively visual pictures that take them to show things as looking certain ways *from specific perspectives* thus seem to build on more primitive contents that are associated with the relevant pictures. In particular, the more specific construals seem to build upon those contents whose grasp by us accounts for our mere ability to appreciate the ways

that the pictures show things as looking *from unspecified perspectives*. But what is the nature of those last, more basic, contents?

Consider an analogy. Suppose that I am talking to somebody about Nyirimana, a person whom we both know, and that I assert that "he is a boy". My interlocutor full understands my statement, and appreciates that it relates to a specific person. But that full understanding builds upon a prior appreciation of the mere way that I stated things to be with respect to somebody. So, someone who has missed the first part of the conversation—and who thus does not make any connection between my use of "he" and my earlier uses of the name "Nyirimana"—might appreciate some of what I have said, if the person were simply to hear me say that "he is a boy". For the hearer may appreciate the way that I have said things to be with respect "to someone", even though he or she does not appreciate exactly whose properties I have purported to characterise.

In that case, the hearer's partial understanding of my assertion amounts to his or her appreciation of the *property* that my assertion invoked for the purposes of characterising someone that the hearer was not able to identify. Note, too, that the hearer's partial understanding of the assertion thereby involves an appreciation of certain "accuracy-conditions" that are associated with the utterance: namely, of those conditions that an item must meet if it is to count as being a boy.

Similarly, here is a suggestion concerning what goes on when we merely appreciate that a picture shows things as looking a certain way "from somewhere", without yet associating the picture with any particular visual perspectives: we associate the image with an appropriate *property* of visual perspectives.[18] The conditions of satisfaction belonging to the properties thus associated with the picture—with the ways that the picture shows things as looking—will then amount to the picture's *accuracy-conditions*.

On this approach, the contents which we associate with pictures, when we merely grasp the ways that they show things as looking from unidentified perspectives, are akin to the properties that we may associate with linguistic assertions that employ singular terms that we do not understand, where the latter properties may be captured using "open sentences" such as "_ is a boy". This thought makes sense, too, of the earlier idea that our associations of more specific contents with pictures, as when they are used to make claims concerning what things were like relative to particular perspectives, build upon the foundation provided by our mere appreciations of the ways that they show things as looking from unspecified perspectives.

To continue with the linguistic analogy, our ability fully to understand an assertion of a sentence like "Jane is tall" calls upon our awareness that the assertion invokes the predicative content expressed by the open sentence "_ is tall": as Frege's famous metaphor has it, our understanding of the assertion results from our ability to fill the "gap" in the predicative content expressed by "_ is tall" with a content that denotes whatever is referred to by the name "Jane". Similarly, consider someone's ability to grasp that, say, Figure 1 is being used to show how things supposedly looked from somewhere near Duncannon within 24 hours of a particular time *t*. That understanding of the relevant use of Figure 1 depends upon the person's ability appropriately to fill the "gap" in a certain predicative content; namely, in the predicative content that one grasps merely by virtue of one's appreciation of the ways that the image shows things as looking from some unspecified visual perspectives.[19]

5. Distinctively visual contents and pictorial accuracy-conditions

We have seen how distinctively visual pictures—ones that show things as looking certain ways—may be used to "show things how things look" in various different ways: they may be used to show how things once looked from somewhere, for instance, or how things will look

from some particular perspective; or they may be used to show how things look to a subject. According to the ideas just developed, though, those uses of distinctively visual pictures are nonetheless alike in exploiting predicative contents, contents that express properties of visual perspectives. We have seen, too, that distinctively visual pictures may be used to show how things look "from somewhere", but from nowhere in particular, in which case they serve simply to express predicative contents of the relevant sort.

But just what type of properties are at issue here? To follow up some ideas briefly called upon in the previous section, one route to an answer to this question is by thinking about the "accuracy-conditions" that belong to appropriate pictures; just as one way of getting at the property that someone identifies when they merely understand what "he is a boy" says "about someone" is by thinking about the "accuracy-conditions" that they thereby associate with the partially-understood use of the previous sentence.

Reconsider Figure 1. That photo is accurate relative to a viewpoint—to a particular orientated spatial location, of the sort relative to which visual appearances are generally accurate or inaccurate—just in case the visual perspective's surroundings are laid out in an appropriate manner. But what manner?

It is tempting here to appeal to appropriate ways that the world might appear to us to be through vision, ones that we might seek to characterise in the light of our comprehension of the photo itself. While viewing the photo, one might say that the picture shows things as looking like *this* or—while looking at a different bit of it—like *that*. But note that these ways for things to look are not essentially wedded to one's visual experience of the photo itself. They are, for instance, ways that things might also be shown as looking by mental visual images. And, more crucially, they are ways that things might look to people in the course of genuine visual experiences.

Suppose that someone has a visual experience in which things look to him or her some way that Figure 1 shows things as looking. Then the person enjoys certain characteristic visual appearances. If things look like *that* to him or her, for instance, the world looks to him or her be *thus*; or, using more words to put things more roughly, it looks to him or her as if a certain kind of train stands in certain spatial relationships to appropriate surroundings.

But Figure 1's accuracy-conditions are then shaped by the contents of the visual appearances that figure in what it is for things to look like *that*. Consider a visual perspective. Figure 1 captures what things look like from that perspective only if things are indeed *thus* relative to the perspective. That is, Figure 1 is accurate relative to the perspective only if, relative to the relevant perspective, a suitable kind of train stands in suitable spatial relationships to appropriate surroundings.[20]

According to the ideas just sketched, the perspective-relative accuracy-conditions that belong to a given picture are determined by the ways that the picture shows things as looking: the approach regards the picture's accuracy-conditions as determined by a range of types of visual sensations that figure in the picture's content. For the ways that a picture shows things as looking involve certain characteristic visual appearances. The contents of those visual appearances then fix the picture's accuracy-conditions, by determining what things must be like around a given perspective for things to be, relative to it, some way that the picture shows things to be.[21]

Uses of distinctively visual pictures to show things as looking certain ways, in both the nonspecific and relatively specific manners described previously, thus do indeed derive from the pictures' association with predicative contents expressing properties of visual perspectives. One who merely appreciates the ways that Figure 1 shows things as looking "from somewhere", for instance, thereby associates Figure 1 with the following property of visual perspectives: *being a visual perspective relative to which things are thus*. But that

elementary pictorial content may serve as the basis for more complex contents, by being combined with components of additional sorts. It may be combined with quantificational content-components, for instance, to yield complex contents like the following one: *there was some visual perspective* v *by near Duncannon such that, within 24 hours of time t, things were thus relative to* v.

It is worth noting, too, that these predicative contents—*distinctively visual contents*, as we may call them—are predicative contents of an especially visual variety. For they are features of visual perspectives whose characterisation calls upon the contents of the visual appearances that are associated with types of visual sensations. And all this fits very well, of course, with our untutored sense that the very information that we get from pictures like Figure 1 is strikingly visual. For it implies that our grasp of distinctively visual pictorial accuracy-conditions is mediated by our appreciation of ways in which the world may apparently be presented to visually responsive subjects through vision.[22]

6. Pictures and propositions

Where does all this leave the question whether pictorial contents are propositional? According to the previous ideas, pictures that show things as looking certain ways possess elementary contents of a characteristic sort: namely, the contents that we grasp merely by virtue of our appreciations of the ways that the pictures show things as looking "from somewhere", in a nonspecific sense. And those distinctively visual contents are predicative rather than propositional. Furthermore, there are certain communicative uses of distinctively visual pictures in which the images serve merely to express their predicative distinctively visual contents.

Thus consider, for instance, the way in which one often and rightly interprets the paintings which ones encounter in galleries, pictures that evidently are not meant to portray real situations. There, we appreciate the ways that the pictures show things as looking "from somewhere", but from nowhere in particular. And we do not, I think, construe the images as expressing some truth-evaluable content to the effect that there are—or even could be—visual perspectives from which things look the way that the image shows them as looking. Rather, our understanding of the paintings—focusing here merely on our appreciation of the visual information that they give to us rather than in terms of, say, any of their aesthetic features—simply rests with our awareness of the ways that they show things as looking, where that just encapsulates our grasp of what it would be for the pictures to be accurate relative to some perspectives.

But distinctively visual pictorial contents are able to feature in more complex contents that perform the roles that previously associated with propositions, just as other forms of predicative content are able to do. For once the "gaps" in predicative distinctively visual contents are filled in suitable ways, we end up with contents that may be evaluated for truth and falsity[23], that may form the objects of propositional attitudes, that stand in logical relationships, and the rest.[24] And this explains why pictures may play central roles in communicative situations that revolve around propositional information; just consider the subtle weighing of pictorially-based evidence that may feature in court cases, for instance, or in scientific investigations.[25] While distinctively visual pictures may sometimes serve to express non-propositional contents, then, they are also commonly used to express propositional ones.

It is worth noting that the suggested assimilation of, first, the accuracy-conditions that belong to distinctively visual pictures merely by virtue of the ways that they show things as looking with, second, the accuracy-conditions belonging to predicates like "_ is a boy"

chimes with one of Crane's contentions. For it implies that it would be wrong, in general, to conflate the accuracy-conditions belonging to pictures with the truth-conditions belonging to propositions, even if uses of pictures to express propositional contents are nonetheless perfectly unproblematic. And the predicative nature of distinctively visual pictorial contents also allows us to explain various striking phenomena relating to potential communicative uses of distinctively visual pictures.

While one can use distinctively visual pictures to make assertions, for instance, a certain amount of scene-setting is necessary for this, because one needs to introduce elements of content that go beyond the picture's mere distinctively visual content. Someone who sought to use Figure 1 to make an assertion about what things once looked like from a particular viewpoint, for instance, would need somehow to get across the identity of the relevant perspective to the assertion's intended audience. The person might rely upon the audience's ability to recognise the location that had been photographed, for instance, or the person might spell things out using supplementary words.

But the same kind of situation arises for other forms of predicative content. If one were to try to make an assertion about a particular person by inscribing "_ is a boy", for instance, one would need somehow to introduce into the circumstances additional elements of content that go beyond the mere predicative content belonging to the inscribed open sentence: one might point at the relevant person, for instance, or exploit one's audience's awareness of some previous conversation. Analogous points apply to attempted uses of pictures and open sentences in performing other speech acts that involve propositional contents, and in relation to their use in characterising the contents of our propositional attitudes.

More generally, then, if we regard the distinctively visual contents of pictures as predicative, we may explain the fact that uses of pictures within certain standard communicative contexts need to call upon auxiliary forms of communication, or upon shared

items of background knowledge, in terms of the general requirements for communicative uses of representations possessing predicative contents.

Although the predicative nature of the most characteristic contents of distinctively visual pictures does allow us to explain certain facts about the communicative powers and limitations of such images, there is a sense in which the non-propositional nature of distinctively visual pictorial content is philosophically somewhat disappointing. For it merely reflects the non-propositional nature of predicative contents more generally. In particular, it alone does nothing to illuminate some of the main questions that might be raised concerning the relationships holding between pictorial and non-pictorial forms of representation.

7. Conclusion: pictorial contents, propositions, and language

It has been argued, first, that there is a core type of pictorial content that is predicative rather than propositional but, second, that there are no evident reasons for denying that those core contents, when completed in suitable ways, are able to feature in propositions. It has also been argued that pictures are commonly used to express their non-propositional predicative contents, but that they are also commonly used to express propositional contents that build upon those predicative ones. Pictorial contents are thus on all fours, for all that has been said so far, with the many predicative—and hence non-propositional—contents that belong to familiar linguistic expressions like "_ is red".

To conclude, I want briefly to explore the question what the existence of propositions that are built upon the distinctively visual contents of pictures might mean for the relationships between propositional content and language. Would the existence of propositions that are based on the distinctively visual contents of pictures show that some *propositions* cannot be expressed linguistically?

Matters are complicated at this point by potential uses of indexical linguistic expressions. For it is hard to see why one would not be able to express contents of *any* given variety using linguistic expressions, at least so long as it is possible for language users to gesture at representations that possess contents of the relevant sort while using an appropriate demonstrative.

Consider some way that Figure 1 shows things as looking. I can easily assert that there could be visual perspectives from which things looked *that* way. But it is natural to think that the content of the assertion that I just made directly incorporates some of the distinctively visual content of the picture to which I referred. Let's concentrate on those propositions that are expressible just using non-indexical linguistic expressions, then.

The accuracy-conditions of distinctively visual contents flow from their characterisations of the ways that things look from visual perspectives. So, consider some way *W* that Figure 1 shows things as looking. We have seen that a given visual perspective *p* is one from which things look that way just in case the following holds: the contents of the visual appearances involved in what it is for things to look way *W* to someone hold relative to *p*. But it is not as if indexical-free linguistic representations cannot also characterise things as looking certain ways from one or more visual perspectives.

Thus consider the following indexical-free sentence, which makes reference to some visual perspective that someone happens to have just singled out and named using the term '*p*':

(1) Things look from *p* the way that Figure 1 shows them as looking.

Sentence (1) characterises things as looking a certain way from a certain perspective, but its propositional content is somewhat different to the—equally propositional, as far as I

can tell—content that one might express by holding up Figure 1 itself and asserting, while pointing at that image to make it appropriately salient, that things look like *this* from *p*. More specifically, while the latter assertion would use Figure 1 to *show* what things supposedly looked like from the perspectives in *G*, the former assertion does not "show" the ways that things ostensibly looked from those perspectives.

How might we understand the difference between those representations, like distinctively visual pictures and visual mental images, which *show* things as looking certain ways from one or more perspectives and those representations, like sentence (1), that merely characterise things as looking certain ways from one or more perspectives?

One strategy would be to look to the *modes of presentation* by means of which the contents of representations like distinctively visual pictures and visual mental images identify ways for things to look. In particular, part of what is striking about pictures like Figure 1, and also about visual mental images, is that our grasp of their contents involves an appreciation of *what it is like* for things to look the ways that the relevant representations show things as looking.

The distinctively visual contents of appropriate pictures and visual mental images are thus *subjectively informative*: they identify ways for things to look in terms of the subjective characters that are shared by the possible instances of the relevant ways for things to look. And it is perhaps this aspect of the contents of, say, distinctively visual pictures and visual mental images that we mark by our inclination to say that the relevant representations "show" things as looking certain ways.

Distinctively visual contents will consequently correspond to indexical-free linguistic contents only if indexical-free linguistic contents are capable of being subjectively informative in the way that distinctively visual contents are. Now, while I am unable to demonstrate indexical-free linguistic contents *cannot* be subjectively informative in that

manner, one might reasonably suspect that they cannot be. For it is hard to see how one might construct indexical-free linguistic expressions whose contents are so strongly bound to vision that they identify ways for things to look simply in terms of the subjective character that is shared by all and only the possible instances of those ways for things to look.

Thus consider a particular visual experience; let's call it "*e*". It is easy enough to use indexical-free language to identify a way for things to look *T* whose possible instances are just those possible visual experiences that share a certain subjective character: just let *T* encompass all and only those possible visual experiences that are subjectively indiscernible from *e*. But, while the way for things to look thereby identified is as subjectively unified as one could desire, its previous linguistic characterisation failed to single out the relevant type of visual experiences in terms of what it is like for things to look that way.

Is that shortcoming of the previous linguistic characterisation merely contingent? One theme in discussions of non-conceptual perceptual content has been that attempts, using indexical-free language, to specify the contents of perceptual states will inevitably fail, because the relevant concepts are too coarse-grained to capture aspects of the contents of those states that are subjectively available to their subjects. [26] But if nonindexical language and conceptual contents more generally are indeed limited in that manner, any propositions that are built upon distinctively visual contents will not be expressible using indexical-free linguistic means. The notion of a proposition would then not really be essentially linguistic, even though its arrival within philosophical thought first derived from reflection upon language.

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NOTES

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[1] See Prior (1976) for relevant historical information.
[2] King (2014, p. 5).
[3] See, for instance, Lewis (1986, pp. 54-55) and King, Soames, and Speaks (2014).
[4] Any functional account of what it is to be a proposition will need to be supplemented by some account of how to handle multiple systems of items that are equally able to perform the various tasks that serve functionally to define what it is to be a proposition, but we can safely ignore this complication below.
[5] King (2014, p. 8)
[6] See King (2007); see also relevant portions of King, Soames, and Speaks (2014).
[7] If belief, for instance, is a propositional attitude—so that the content of any belief amounts to a proposition—the thesis that every proposition is expressible linguistically rules out the possibility of beliefs whose contents cannot be expressed using language. While there may turn out to be good reasons for ruling out the latter possibility, it is not immediately obvious that it should be ruled out.
[8] Given this feature of propositions, it follows that any proposition may be evaluated with respect to its modal status: any proposition is either possible true or necessarily false, for instance, depending upon whether the truth-conditions that it serves to define may or may not obtain.
[9] Note that there is no commitment here to the claim that, for any proposition *P*, it is possible for *P* to be, say, believed: maybe it is impossible for anyone to believe that, for instance, 1=0. (It is, however, possible for the proposition that 1=0 to be denied, so the proposition that 1=0 fits the disjunctive condition stated in the main text.)
[10] Crane (2009, p. 257)
[11] William H. Rau (American, 1855-1920), *New Main Line at Duncannon*, about 1890-1900, Gelatin silver print 44 × 54.6 cm (17 5/16 × 21 1/2 in.), The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.
[12] Crane's main interest is in the question whether perception is a propositional attitude, but he considers pictures at some length in the course of section III of Crane (2009).
[13] Crane (2009, p. 460)
[14] The second claim, on its first reading, just does not seem to me to be true, as later parts of this paper will make clear; while, on its second reading—as a claim about the expressive limitations of picturing as a means of representation—it is not immediately relevant to the question whether those contents that pictures *can* be used to express are propositional, as also noted by Grzankowski (2015).
[15] Bennett (1974 pp. 259-260) also contains observations that are pushing in this direction, and his eventual explanation of why the observed facts obtain has a similar shape to the one proposed in this paper; see below for further discussion of Bennett's paper. (Many thanks to an anonymous referee for the current journal for the Bennett reference.)
[16] The above discussion of the semantic heterogeneity of pictures is rather brief, because it is a side-issue in the current context: see Gregory (2013, chapter 6) for more discussion, along with further consideration of the class of distinctively visual pictures. A lot of recent philosophical work on pictures has been concerned with providing a uniform account of the nature of "depiction", where that last notion is introduced as a way of capturing the fundamental representational properties of pictures. The vast range of different sorts of pictures creates serious difficulties for this enterprise, however, and one might anyway be sceptical about its value, at least as a starting-point for philosophical theorising about pictorial representation; it is fairly natural to think that the class of pictures is semantically heterogeneous, and that a "one size fits all" account of depiction will consequently obscure philosophically important semantic differences.
[17] Crane (2009, p. 462)
[18] Other authors have endorsed related views. Bennett (1974) argues that pictures correspond to predicates, rather than to whole sentences, although he identifies the properties which correspond to the meanings of pictures with properties of the items depicted by the pictures, rather than with properties of visual perspectives; see, for instance, (see Bennett (1974, p. 263)). More closely, Blumson (2010) identifies pictorial contents with sets of centred worlds, where centred worlds are taken to be ordered *n*-tuples which contain a possible world along with the various components needed uniquely to identify a viewpoint within a given world. But—taking one's cue from the treatment of attitudes like belief and desire in Lewis (1979), as Blumson does—sets of centred worlds of this type may then be identified with properties of visual perspectives. The resulting position ends up identifying pictorial contents with properties of visual perspectives, as I have done. The main difference between the approach to pictorial content being developed here and the one articulated in Blumson's paper is that the current paper starts from the observation that distinctively visual pictures show things as looking certain ways, and then works outwards to an account of the nature of the especially visual properties of viewpoints that correspond to the elementary contents of distinctively visual pictures. By contrast, Blumson's approach

identifies pictorial contents with properties of viewpoints—understood as set-theoretic constructions built from possible worlds—without invoking an underlying account of the especially visual nature of the relevant properties. (The way of proceeding adopted here has the virtue of enabling one to explain various central features of pictures in terms of the visual nature of their contents: see Gregory (2010) and Gregory (2013, chapters 3 and 4).)

[19] Parallel remarks apply to another potential use of distinctively visual pictures, in characterising the ways that things look *to subjects* in the course of visual experiences. (Pictures are sometimes used in this way in comics, for instance.). One might use Figure 1 to capture what things looked like to a certain person in the course of 2017, for instance, and somebody might correctly understand that use of the image. But one might also use Figure 1 simply to capture what things looked like "to someone", although to nobody in particular. The former, more specific, understanding of a use of Figure 1 again builds upon an ability to understand the image's association with a content of the latter sort; it depends upon the person's ability to complete the "gap" in an appropriate predicative content, although this time the relevant predicative content corresponds to a property of visual experiences—to their possession of a suitable phenomenological character—rather than to a property of visual perspectives. For simplicity's sake, I have ignored this additional use of pictures in the main text, as it does not affect the main lines of argument which follow; see fn. 22 below for a bit more discussion, though.

[20] See Gregory (2013, chapter 3) for a more extended treatment of aspects of these ideas, within the context of a discussion of a very wide class of "distinctively sensory" representations that includes distinctively visual pictures as a special case.

[21] This claim implies that the natures of the distinctively visual contents that pictures may possess are constrained by the natures of the contents that may belong to visual appearances. This general thought is surely plausible, and it means that certain questions—about, for example, whether pictures are able to denote specific individuals in a *de re* manner, simply on account of the ways that the pictures show things as looking—depend, at least in part, upon parallel questions about the contents of visual appearances. (I do not claim to know the answers to questions like the previous one, so I ask the reader to take with a pinch of salt any descriptions of pictorial contents in this paper which may suggest otherwise.)

[22] Fn. 19 above noted that distinctively visual pictures may also be used to express "experiential" contents, relating to what things look like to the subjects of visual experiences. It is relatively straightforward to provide an account of the accuracy-conditions that are associated with that sort of use of distinctively visual images. Consider some way that, say, Figure 1 shows things as looking: like *that*. And consider a suitable deployment of Figure 1 to show what things look like to someone in course of a certain visual experience. Then, relative to that use of the image, Figure 1 is accurate just in case the relevant experience really is one in which things look to the subject the way that Figure 1 shows them as looking; that is, just in case the relevant experience is one in which things look like *that* to its subject. One who merely appreciates the way that Figure 1 is being used to show things as looking "to someone"—but to nobody in particular—thus associates Figure 1 with the following property of visual experiences: *being a visual experience in which things look like that*. The preceding elementary predicative content is then also able to serve as the basis for more complex contents, in the sorts of ways discussed in the main text.

[23] Bennett (1974) claims, in a related vein, that "[p]ictures are not themselves true or false, but are parts of things which can be true or false' (Bennett (1974), p. 259). He says, more specifically, that "we have found something which can be true or false: the combination of a picture and a label", where "in these cases the picture is analogous to a *predicate* and the label [for whatever is depicted by the picture, though, rather than for visual perspectives, which would be more in line with the ideas in the current paper] analogous to a *name*" (Bennett (1974), p. 260).

[24] To illustrate the point about logical relationships, for instance, consider some way that Figure 1 shows things as looking. And suppose that there was once somewhere from which things looked that way. Then either there was somewhere from which things looked that way or 0=1.

[25] Grzankowski (2015) suggests that certain potential uses of pictures indicate that pictorial contents are propositional: he notes, for instance that one might indicate a picture that depicts a certain historical event while asserting that "things were not really like that", and that one might similarly point to a picture that depicts someone performing a certain action while asserting that "that's possible". I think that examples of this sort do indeed bear out the thought that distinctively visual pictures can be used to express propositions, but that these are again cases in which the relevant propositions build upon more fundamental predicative distinctively visual contents.

[26] This thought is present in Heck (2007), for instance, while Bermúdez suggests that "[p]erceptual experience has a richness, texture and fineness of grain that beliefs do not and cannot have" (Bermúdez (1995, p. 185)).

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