

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE IMAGE: IMAGES IN PHILOSOPHY

By C. S. Meijns

Images do not find a tender home in philosophy. The main job of a philosopher is that of giving and assessing arguments in order to understand the world better, and most of this work is done by thinking, speaking, or writing things out as text. An image makes a bad argument, because, strictly speaking, it is neither premise nor conclusion. One occasionally finds that images permeate into philosophical discussions, often precisely to get a clearer view on how problematic aspects of reality might be understood. Three main roles for images can be distinguished in the literature: as models, test cases, or objects of inquiry.

The benefit of using an image as a model is that images have a certain character or features that can sometimes illuminate other topics which we find more problematic. For example, in his paper 'The Thought', philosopher and mathematician Gottlob Frege aims to understand what *truth* is. Defining truth is a daunting task, but it is aided pictorially. He observes that a picture of the Cologne Cathedral can be compared to the actual Gothic building in Germany to decide on its truth. He states: "It might be supposed from this that truth consists in the correspondence of a picture with what it depicts." (Frege 1956, 291) He thus considers whether truth may be defined as a form of correspondence between a thing and its representation. Even though Frege eventually rejects this proposal, the model of the picture helps convey his argument.

Something similar happens with the use of images as test cases for philosophical theories. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the figure of the duck-rabbit, popularised by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1953). The duck-rabbit is an ambiguous figure that can be seen either as a duck, or as a rabbit, but not as both at the same time. It is this image that Wittgenstein uses to probe his influential thoughts on aspect-seeing. Today, no student can graduate in philosophy without having puzzled over this awkward animal at least a dozen times.

Images as objects of inquiry have been considerably underrepresented in philosophical discussion. This is surprising, insofar as philosophers of art have concerned themselves for centuries with what makes paintings beautiful. This has only begun to receive attention recently: How do pictures actually represent the things they depict? Where does the correspondence between meaning in pictures and in language break down? Can we acquire knowledge by looking at pictures? Since these questions address the basic feature of visual representation, related inquiries look not only at artworks, but also at commonplace images such as street signs or maps, and scientific imagery such as x-ray photographs or fMRI images.

If all of this suggests that there is indeed a role for images in philosophical research, it does not belie that, browsing through the pages of *Journal of Philosophy* or *Philosophical Quarterly*, one must look long and hard before encountering any illustrations. It does reveal that a philosopher's mind, with all its respect for abstract reasoning and rigour, does not remain wholly insensitive to the instrumental, rhetorical or demonstrative force that images can sometimes provide.

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### Bibliography

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