**Wittgenstein’s Duck/Rabbit: The Dawning of Value?**

**by Sharon Kaye**

In 1929, Wittgenstein proposed a wonderful thought experiment in which an omniscient person writes down everything she knows in a Big Book. Wittgenstein asserted that this Big Book would contain all facts and no values. He takes this to mean that we cannot know or assert any ethical judgments.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Because of the Big Book and other things he says, Wittgenstein is typically regarded as a relativist. That is, he is taken to hold that there is no such thing as absolute value. There is only relative value for me or for you, always for some particular purpose.

In his early work, the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein seems to provide support for relativism. He asserts that the only thing we can meaningfully talk about is what we can picture. We can picture facts; we cannot picture ethical or metaphysical claims. Therefore, we cannot meaningfully talk or even think about absolute values—i.e. things that are right and wrong or good and bad *in themselves*.

However, Wittgenstein stops short of saying that there is *no such thing* as absolute value. At least I think he does, and I *hope* he does, since the claim “there is no such thing as absolute value” is a metaphysical claim, and therefore, on his own terms, cannot be known, thought, or meaningfully asserted.

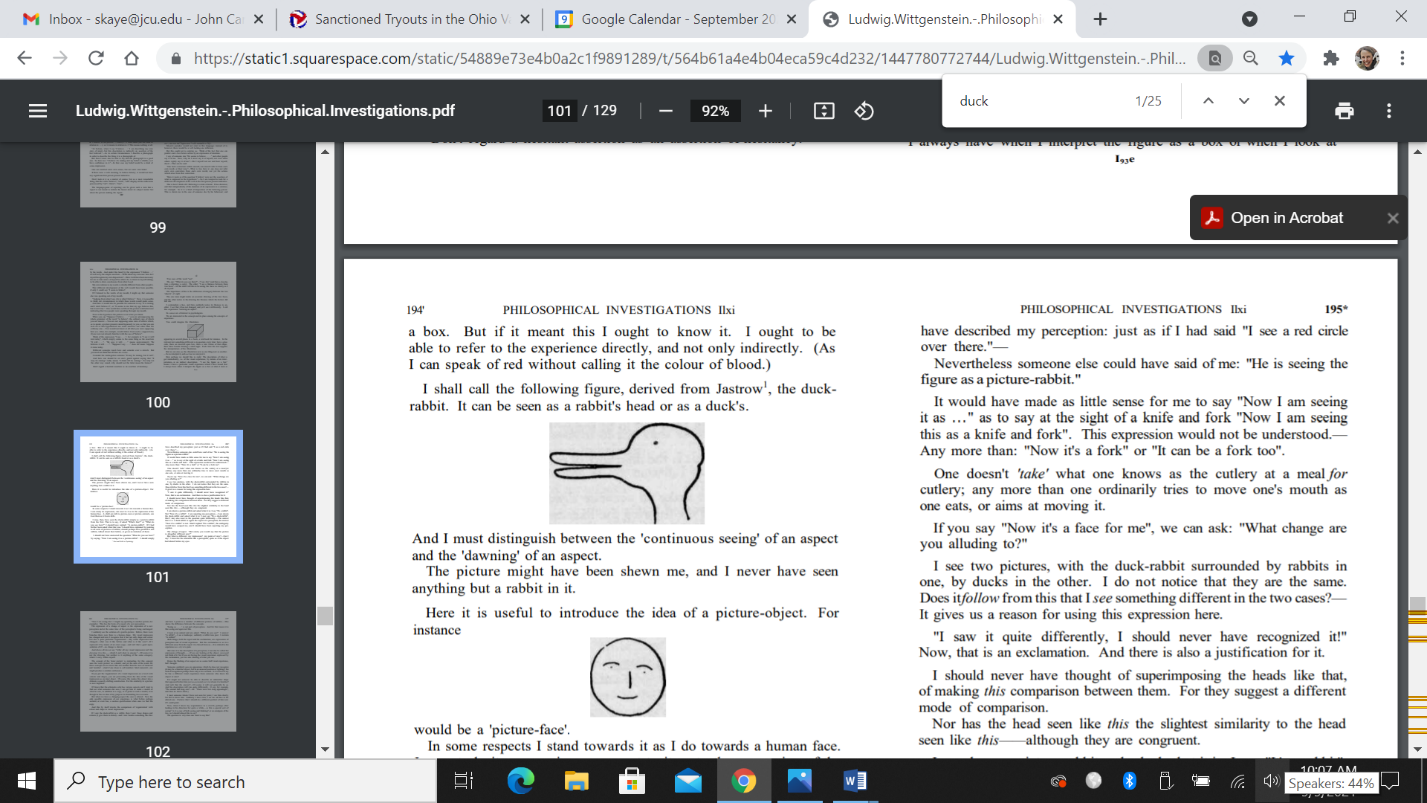
Not surprisingly, in his later work, the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein refrains from discussing values. But all along, I think he was secretly obsessed with value.[[2]](#endnote-2) He wanted to believe in good and bad, right and wrong. Perhaps he was even hoping his new game theory of language would allow this.

At any rate, some of us would like to believe in absolute value. So, suppose we regard Wittgenstein’s later game theory of language as a supplement to his early picture theory of language.[[3]](#endnote-3) Perhaps it can explain how we can legitimately talk and think about nonfacts that the picture theory does not allow. We picture facts, but we play a game with values.

Much of the value game is relative of course, and much of it is pure nonsense. Wittgenstein’s clearest message is that people talk too much. And with that I completely agree!

But what if some of the value-game is deeply meaningful? I think Wittgenstein’s notion of “the dawning of an aspect” shows how this could be. Wittgenstein argues that the dawning of an aspect is an empirical process. It is therefore a fact. We can therefore talk about it. If the aspect that dawns is good or bad, right or wrong, then it seems we can talk about the dawning of value.

Wittgenstein discovered the dawning of an aspect through studying an unattributed cartoon from a German humor magazine. Here is Wittgenstein’s super cute sketch of it:



It’s a picture of a rabbit looking up at the sky, wondering whether there are rabbits on other planets in outer space. Hold on—I was wrong. It is actually a picture of a duck who is very hungry and has just caught sight of a delicious-looking fish. Hold on—I was wrong. It is actually a rabbit….

When I introduce the picture this way, alternating between duck and rabbit, does your experience of the picture alternate? When I called it a rabbit did you *see the picture as* a rabbit? When I called it a duck did you *see it as* a duck? Most people do. Wittgenstein found this “seeing as” absolutely fascinating. The picture stays the same. Our perception stays the same. But our *experience* changes. First, we experience a duck, then we experience a rabbit. Wittgenstein called this “the dawning of an aspect.”

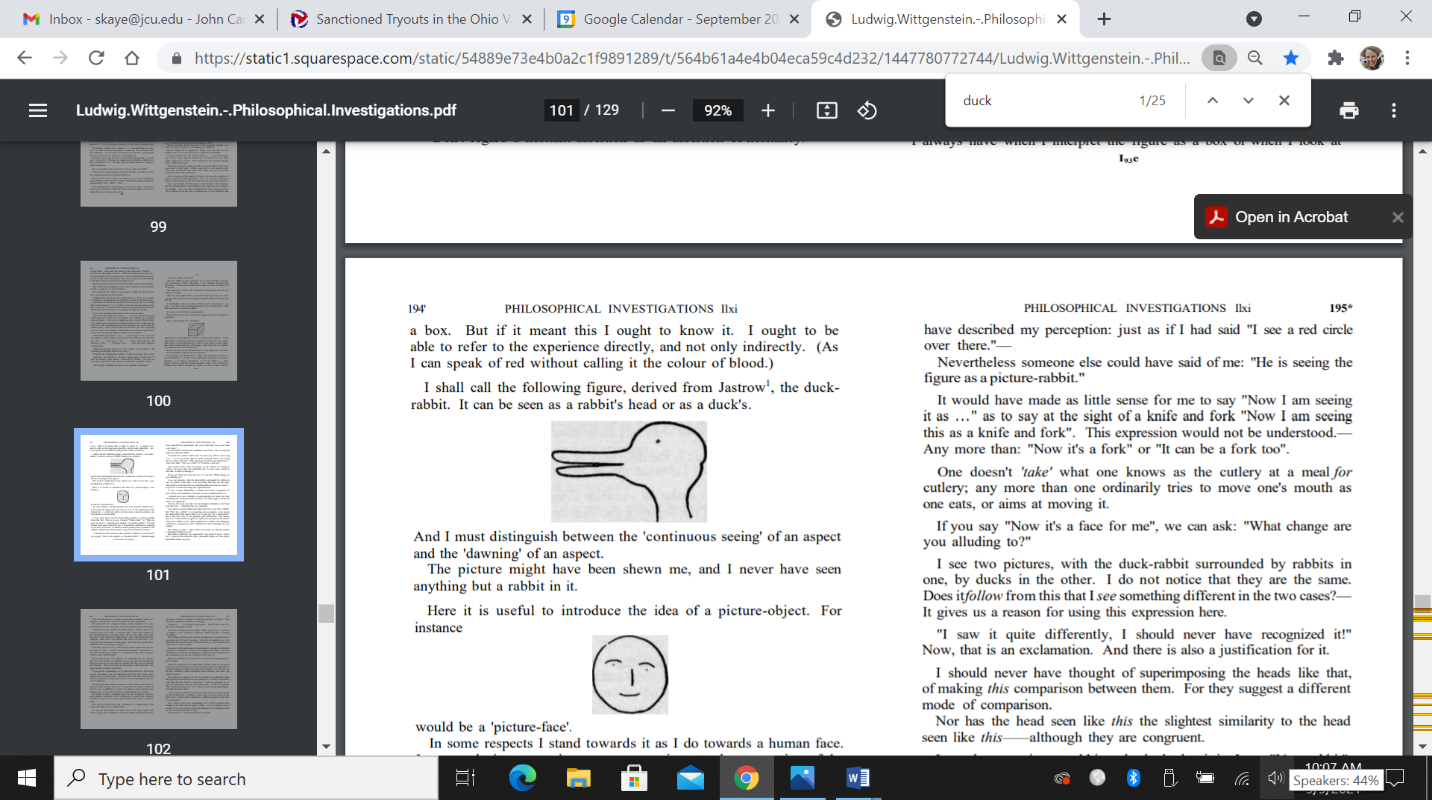
The dawning of an aspect is a truly peculiar phenomenon. Is it significant? Does it show that human experience is more than the perception of facts?

One prominent Wittgenstein scholar, Colin McGinn, wishes to dismiss the significance of the duck-rabbit. He writes:

Duck-rabbit cases are highly unusual, indeed carefully contrived: they are not instances of something more general, and they shed no light on anything beyond themselves. It is surprising they exist at all, being an anomaly of the human visual system…. We would be in no way worse off without them; they appear to have no use except as entertainment. *Contrary to Wittgenstein’s advocacy, they have no philosophical significance*, except perhaps to illustrate how very peculiar things can be. Their significance is their insignificance, their sheer quirkiness.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Wittgenstein found duck-rabbit cases significant. Why did he “advocate for” them?

In exploring this question, we need to consider that Wittgenstein more than once explicitly compares the duck/rabbit to a picture of an ambiguous face. Below is Wittgenstein’s super cute sketch of a face, considered to be the world’s first emoji.[[5]](#endnote-5)



This is a picture of someone smiling down on a child at play. Hold on—I was wrong. It is actually a picture of someone smiling at the suffering of an enemy. Hold on—I was wrong. It is actually someone smiling down on a child at play….

When I introduce the picture this way, alternating between gracious smile and malicious smile, does your experience of the picture alternate? When I described it as a gracious smile did you *see the picture as* a gracious face? When I described it as a malicious smile did you *see it as* a malicious face?

We might be inclined to dismiss the ambiguous face as a case of *alternating interpretations we impose on the world*. This would be a strictly rational process—that is, all in our minds—making the value strictly relative.

For example, suppose I hold up a stick and say: “This is a spear. No, actually it is a divining rod. No, actually it is a spear.” Here, the alternating descriptions do not make us see the stick differently. We simply think of it differently. Perhaps we imagine using it in different ways. But this is a rational process—all in our minds. We don’t have different *experiences* of it.

For the duck/rabbit phenomenon, in contrast, there is an empirical component—the dawning of an aspect. In the dawning of an aspect, *the world imposes a different experience on us*. I believe Wittgenstein was inclined to see the ambiguous face like the duck/rabbit. We don’t simply think differently of the face when it is described differently. We *see it as* something else. We experience it differently.[[6]](#endnote-6)

So, what do *you* think – is the ambiguous face like the duck/rabbit or is it like the stick?

This is an important question because, if you say the duck/rabbit is like the stick, then we can all quit and go home as relativists. But if you say the duck/rabbit like the ambiguous face, then you are well on your way toward absolute value. For surely a gracious aspect is good in itself and a malicious aspect is bad in itself.

A gracious aspect would be a relative value if seeing it on a face were a strictly rational process. That is, if I see the face as gracious for some purpose of my own, as a means to my ends, then I am imposing an interpretation on the world. As with the stick: how can I use this thing? But if the gracious aspect is imposed by the world on me, then it seems to have value on its own, in and of itself.

It might be objected that the face needs to be called alternately “gracious” and then “malicious” in order to have alternating effects on me. This suggests that seeing the value is a rational process, supporting relativism.

But the same naming procedure is crucial to the duck/rabbit. I have to speak of it or at least think of it as a duck in order to see it as a duck. But when I do speak of it or think of it as a duck, I actually see something different from what I saw when I spoke of it or thought of it as a rabbit. This is why Wittgenstein says that the dawning of an aspect is partly empirical and partly rational.

Wittgenstein indicates that the rational part of the dawning of an aspect is linguistic. He says, for example, “A smiling mouth smiles only in a human face.” Categorizing the face as human is a linguistic process. But then beyond that, it helps if you know more about the human—is it your friend? What caused him to smile? What effects will his smile have? Wittgenstein doubts that a feeling of love could have any significance if it took place in the space of a second. It needs temporal context of before and after. [[7]](#endnote-7) In order for something to have deep significance it must play a role in an ongoing language game.

Aspects empirically dawn on us. But we would not recognize an aspect as an aspect without the right mindset—the mindset built by linguistic exchange. In Wittgenstein’s words: “Hence the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

Wittgenstein compares the dawning of an aspect to the recognition of a friend. Suppose I am scanning a crowd for a long time. Suddenly one of the people snaps into focus as someone I know. I recognize him. The face now has meaning for me. Wittgenstein askes “Is this a special sort of seeing?”[[9]](#endnote-9) If so, it reminds me of Plato’s doctrine of recollection: the moment you “see the truth” in an equation that was at first meaningless to you.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Wittgenstein shows us how the dawning of an aspect plays a crucial role in language games through an analogy with a children’s game. He writes:

Here is a game played by children: they say that a chest, for example, is a house; and thereupon it is interpreted as a house in every detail. A piece of fancy is worked into it. And does the child now see the chest as a house? "He quite forgets that it is a chest; for him it actually is a house." (There are definite tokens of this.) Then would it not also be correct to say he sees it as a house? And if you knew how to play this game, and, given a particular situation, you exclaimed with special expression "Now it's a house!"— you would be giving expression to the dawning of an aspect.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Likewise we might say: “Now it’s a duck!” or “Now it’s a gracious face!” According to Wittgenstein, we can tell the dawning of an aspect is (partly) an empirical phenomenon because we react as if the object had altered and had ended by *becoming* this or that.

So, we react to the ambiguous smile as if the face actually alters and becomes an expression of graciousness or an expression of maliciousness. But this reaction is genuine. It is what constitutes *understanding the smile* within the language game. Wittgenstein writes:

If someone sees a smile and does not know it for a smile, does not understand it as such, does he see it differently from someone who understands it?—He mimics it differently, for instance. Hold the drawing of a face upside down and you can't recognize the expression of the face. Perhaps you can see that it is smiling, but not exactly what kind of smile it is. You cannot imitate the smile or describe it more exactly. And yet the picture which you have turned round may be a most exact representation of a person's face.

The person who does not understand the smile fails to see *what kind of smile it is*. I propose that we are entitled to say more specifically that such a person fails to see *its value*.

Imagine someone who is asked to imitate the face of a mother who is smiling down on her child at play. Perhaps he imitates the smiling but not exactly what kind of smile it is. What kind of smile is it? It is a gracious smile, which means it is *good*. It is intrinsically good in itself. We can see such goods and know them when we see them through the dawning of an aspect.

Bear in mind that the central thesis of Wittgenstein’s great friend G.E. Moore was that goodness is a non-natural property. Moore contended that, while we can call empirical objects good, goodness cannot be identified with any empirical object.[[12]](#endnote-12) I think Wittgenstein agreed that goodness is not natural, but was baffled by how Moore could then go on talking and writing about it. For Wittgenstein, goodness peeks at us from beyond our world, just like the dawn. And then there is nothing more we can meaningfully say about it.

I conclude that Wittgenstein makes a lovely case for the dawning of value. He held that the dawning of an aspect is an empirical process. As such, we can talk about it all we want. When the aspect that dawns is an empirical aspect—such as a duck—then we can talk about it as well. But when the aspect that dawns is not an empirical object but a value, such as graciousness, then we can’t talk about it. All we can do is experience it, and be uplifted and inspired.

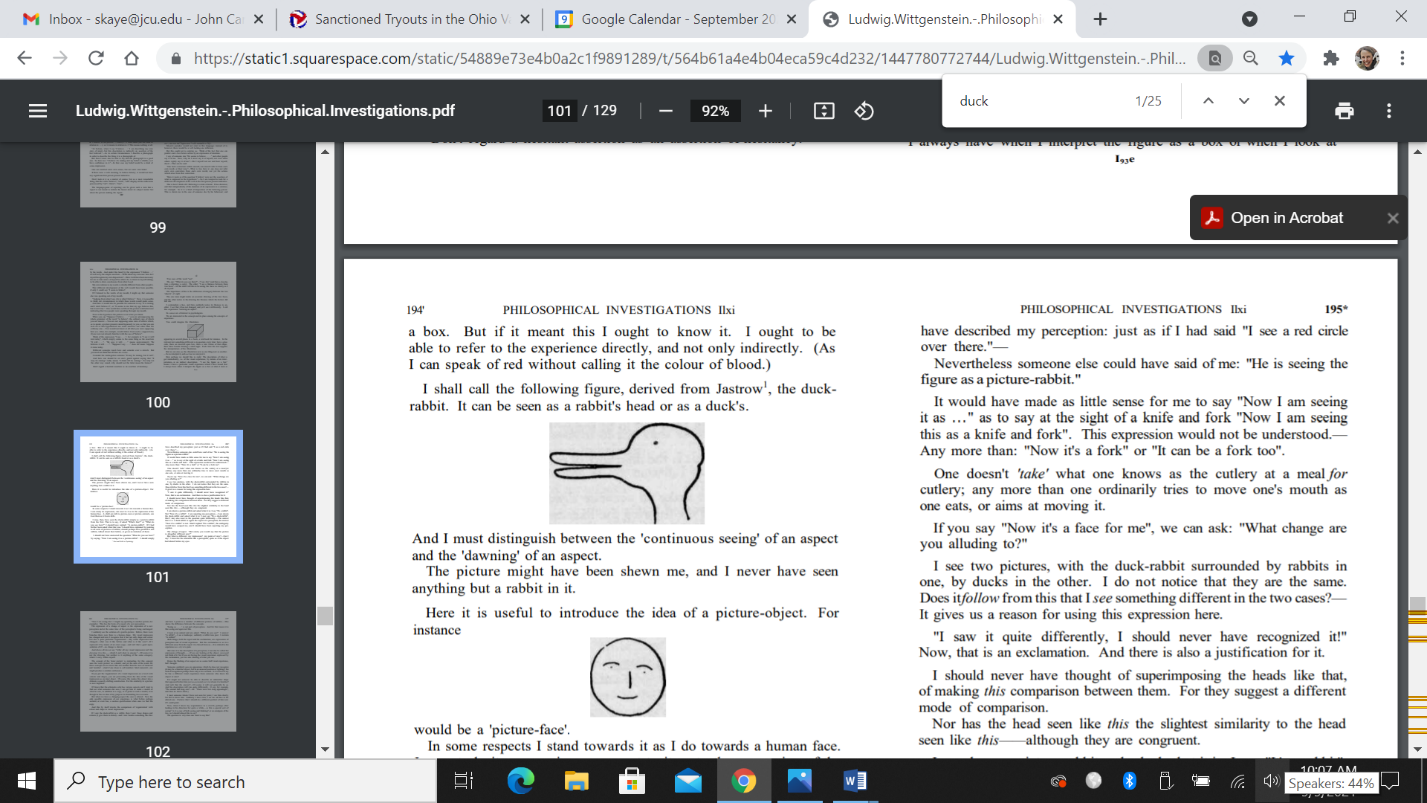
**Notes**

1. Wittgenstein’s Big Book Thought Experiment from “A Lecture on Ethics,” by Ludwig Wittgenstein 1929 *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Jan., 1965), pp. 3-12.

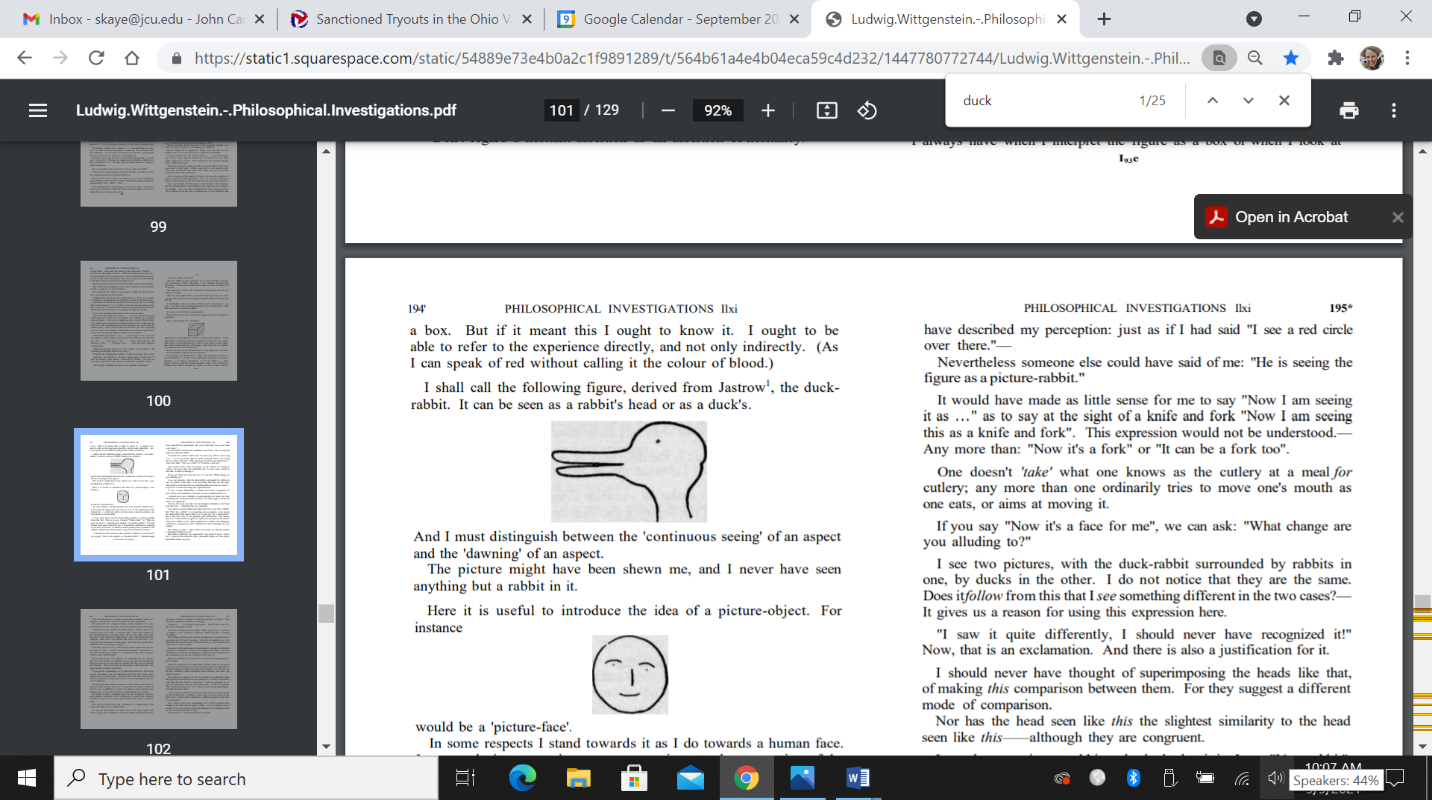
   Now what I wish to contend is that, although all judgments of relative value can be shown to be mere statements of facts, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value. Let me explain this: Suppose one of you were an omniscient person and therefore knew all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and that he also knew all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived, and suppose this man wrote all he knew in a big book, then this book would contain the whole description of the world; and what I want to say is, that this book would contain nothing that we would call an ethical judgment or anything that would logically imply such a judgment. It would of course contain all relative judgments of value and all true scientific propositions and in fact all true propositions that can be made. But all the facts described would, as it were, stand on the same level and in the same way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial. Now perhaps some of you will agree to that and be reminded of Hamlet's words: "Nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." But this again could lead to a misunderstanding. What Hamlet says seems to imply that good and bad, though not qualities of the world outside us, are attributes to our states of mind. But what I mean is that a state of mind, so far as we mean by that a fact which we can describe, is in no ethical sense good or bad. If for instance in our world-book we read the description of a murder with all its details physical and psychological, the mere description of these facts will contain nothing which we could call an ethical proposition. The murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone. Certainly the reading of this description might cause us pain or rage or any other emotion, or we might read about the pain or rage caused by this murder in other people when they heard of it, but there will simply be facts, facts, and facts but no Ethics. And now I must say that if I contemplate what Ethics really would have to be if there were such a science, this result seems to me quite obvious. It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be the thing. That we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters. I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world. Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, natural meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it. I said that so far as facts and propositions are concerned there is only relative value and relative good, right, etc. And let me, before I go on, illustrate this by a rather obvious example. The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, "the absolutely right road." I think it would be the road which everybody on seeing it would, with logical necessity, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This is suggested by his personal notes, published under the title *Culture and Value* translated by Peter Winch, 1984, University of Chicago Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As many philosophers do. See Duncan J. Richter’s article “Ludwig Wittgenstein” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://iep.utm.edu/wittgens/#H9 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Colin McGinn, September 26, 2020, “Understanding Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Duck-Rabbit,” *Simply Charly*, https://www.simplycharly.com/articles/understanding-ludwig-wittgenstein-duck-rabbit/ [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Olivia Goldhill, April 28, 2018, “Ludwig Wittgenstein was one of the great 20th-century philosophers. He also invented the emoji,” *Quartz*, https://qz.com/1261293/ludwig-wittgenstein-was-the-great-philosopher-of-the-20th-century-he-also-invented-the-emoji/#:~:text=Ludwig%20Wittgenstein%20was%20one%20of,He%20also%20invented%20the%20emoji&text=%E2%80%9CSuch%20words%20as%20'pompous',by%20faces%2C%E2%80%9D%20said%20Wittgenstein. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 519. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54889e73e4b0a2c1f9891289/t/564b61a4e4b04eca59c4d232/1447780772744/Ludwig.Wittgenstein.-.Philosophical.Investigations.pdf

   I see a picture which represents a smiling face. What do I do if I take the smile now as a kind one, now as malicious? Don't I often imagine it with a spatial and temporal context which is one either of kindness or malice? Thus I might supply the picture with the fancy that the smiler was smiling down on a child at play, or again on the suffering of an enemy. This is in no way altered by the fact that I can also take the at first sight gracious situation and interpret it differently by putting it into a wider context.—If no special circumstances reverse my interpretation I shall conceive a particular smile as kind, call it a "kind" one, react correspondingly. ((Probability, frequency.)) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. 583. "But you talk as if I weren't really expecting, hoping, now— as I thought I was. As if what were happening now had no deep significance."—What does it mean to say "What is happening now has significance" or "has deep significance"? What is a deep feeling? Could someone have a feeling of ardent love or hope for the space of one second—no matter what preceded or followed this second?—— What is happening now has significance—in these surroundings. The surroundings give it its importance. And the word "hope" refers to a phenomenon of human life. (A smiling mouth smiles only in a human face.) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid.

   I shall call the following figure, derived from Jastrow, the duckrabbit. It can be seen as a rabbit's head or as a duck's.

   And I must distinguish between the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect and the 'dawning' of an aspect. The picture might have been shewn me, and I never have seen anything but a rabbit in it. Here it is useful to introduce the idea of a picture-object. For instance:

   Would be a ‘picture-face’

   But since it is the description of a perception, it can also be called the expression of thought.——If you are looking at the object, you need not think of it; but if you are having the visual experience expressed by the exclamation, you are also thinking of what you see.

   Hence the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid.

   I meet someone whom I have not seen for years; I see him clearly, but fail to know him. Suddenly I know him, I see the old face in the altered one. I believe that I should do a different portrait of him now if I could paint.

   Now, when I know my acquaintance in a crowd, perhaps after looking in his direction for quite a while,—is this a special sort of seeing? Is it a case of both seeing and thinking? or an amalgam of the two, as I should almost like to say?

   The question is: why does one want to say this? [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Plato’s *Meno* dialogue. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, (Cambridge, 1903). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)