

# The Eye and the Visual Field: Much Ado About Nothing?

ALBERTO VOLTOLINI


## Introduction

**I**N THIS PAPER, I WANT TO SHOW that, in his comparison of the relationships holding between the eye and the visual field on the one hand and the metaphysical subject and the world on the other, at the time of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (as well as at the time of the *Philosophical Remarks*), Wittgenstein was not concerned with the particular location of the eye relative to the visual field, but with the issue that the visual field has not the boundaries that folks would expect it to have; one of its essential properties is that it has no definite boundaries, but just a particular structure that makes it essentially asymmetrical and oriented: in a word, perspectival. For this issue makes it the case that its relationship with the visual field is necessary, not contingent. That is an idea that Wittgenstein partially revised in the later phase of his philosophy by making the matter of necessity, viz. of grammar, dependent on contingent facts fixating one's phenomenology. Section 1 is devoted to illustrating the first point; Section 2 illustrates the second point.

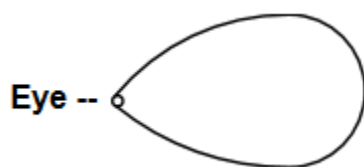
## § 1. What the Eye and the Visual Field Did Amount to at the time of the TLP

As anyone knows, the standard version of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* contains this picture, with the purpose of iconically completing the negative claim of TLP 5.6331 concerning the form of the visual field:




For the form of the visual field is surely not like this:

Alberto Voltolini (✉)   
University of Turin, Italy  
e-mail: alberto.voltolini@unito.it

Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin  
Vol. 11, No. 23, December 2022, pp. 23-32  
ISSN: 2254-0601 | [EN] | **ARTICLE**



In a series of papers, as well as in his recent new edition of the TLP (2021, xxii–xxv), Luciano Bazzocchi has criticized the traditional editorial choice of attaching this picture to Wittgenstein’s text. For, by appealing to different documents containing different related sketches by Wittgenstein —first, Wittgenstein’s manuscript containing his corrections of Ramsey’s translation, and second, Wittgenstein’s letter to Ogden 23.4.1922— he has maintained that the picture should be replaced by another picture putting the position of the eye not *within* the visual field, but *at its origin*. As is shown e. g. in the text of Wittgenstein’s letter to Ogden:

(8) As to  you will see from my correction as well as from the German that the prop[osition] had been mutilated. The figure s(c) should be like this  and not ; because this is how people very often imagine the shape of the field of vision to be. This, by the way, has *nothing whatever* to do with light going in straight lines.

As is well known, Wittgenstein’s reference to the relationship between the visual field and the eye seeing it figures as a comparison term that may explain what the relationship between the world and the metaphysical subject conceiving it amounts to. Here’s the whole text:

5.632 The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.

5.633 Where *in* the world is a metaphysical subject to be found?

You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field.  
But really you do *not* see the eye.

And nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye.

5.6331 For the form of the visual field is surely not like this [see above]

5.634 This is connected with the fact that no part of our experience is at the same time a priori.

Whatever we see could be other than it is.

Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is.

There is no a priori order of things<sup>1</sup>.

Now, one may reconstruct as follows Wittgenstein's implicit argument on this point lurking behind the text:

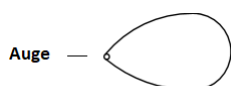
- 1) If one saw / could see the eye *relative to* the visual field, either as a part of it (5.633b), or as its origin (5.633c), the form of this field would approximately be this [either the one depicted in the traditional picture or the one depicted in the documents mentioned above];
- 2) But this is not the form of the visual field;
- 3) [From 1,2] Hence, one does not see / one cannot see the eye *relative to* the visual field.
- 4) [Corollary] Hence, the eye is not a content of the visual experience, which is a contingent fact (5.634).
- 5) The relationship between the eye and the visual field is the same as the relationship between the metaphysical subject and the world (5.633b);
- 6) [1,2,3] Hence, the metaphysical subject is not in the world, either as a

<sup>1</sup> 5.632 Das Subjekt gehört nicht zur Welt, sondern es ist eine Grenze der Welt.

5.633 Wo in der Welt ist ein metaphysisches Subjekt zu merken?

Du sagst, es verhält sich hier ganz, wie mit Auge und Gesichtsfeld. Aber das Auge siehst du wirklich *nicht*. Und nichts *am Gesichtsfeld* lässt darauf schließen, dass es von einem Auge gesehen wird.

5.6331 Das Gesichtsfeld hat nämlich nicht etwa eine solche Form:



5.634 Das hängt damit zusammen, dass kein Teil unserer Erfahrung auch a priori ist.

Alles, was wir sehen können, könnte auch anders sein.

Alles, was wir überhaupt beschreiben können, könnte auch anders sein.

Es gibt keine Ordnung der Dinge a priori.

part of its or as its origin;

- 7) [4, Corollary] Hence, the metaphysical subject is not a contingent element in the world.

Let me comment on the argument thus reconstructed. To begin with, premise 1) clearly shows that the alleged location of the eye (either within or at the origin of the visual field) is irrelevant to Wittgenstein's argument. Wittgenstein's letter to Ogden precisely clarifies this point. For it shows that Wittgenstein's main worry was not where to exactly locate the eye relative to the visual field but rather to have a picture that illustrated the sort of standard preconception that folks have that the visual field has some sort of *ovoidal*, not straight (e.g. triangular) borders. As regards the location of the eye, indeed, Wittgenstein is simply concerned with reporting that the standard preconception locates the eye *in some position or other* relative to the visual field that is *empirically* relevant: as if the eye could really be seen, either as located within the visual field or as located at its origin.

In this vein, moreover, premise 2) shows that Wittgenstein wants to stress that, on the contrary, it is misleading to draw boundaries to the visual field, as it would be the case if one adhered to the standard preconception, which precisely assigns an ovoidal form to the visual field, as the field would turn out to have if it were seen by an empirical eye. As Wittgenstein himself stresses later in the text: "Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits" (TLP 6.4311). This point is not only shown by Wittgenstein's letter to Ogden but is also perfectly understood by Russell in his Introduction to the TLP: "Our field of vision does not, for us, have a visual boundary, just because there is nothing outside it" (1961, xx). And indeed, the very same point is stressed by Wittgenstein again when returning to philosophy after the Austrian break of the Twenties. In the *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein writes that the sense that "boundary" has in the sentence "there is a red patch close to the boundary of the visual field" is different from the one which that expression has in the sentence "the boundary between red and blue in the visual field is a circle"; he continues saying that the so-called blurriness of the visual field cannot be rendered, as Mach wishes in his famous drawing in *The Analysis of Sensations*, by means of some blurriness in the picture allegedly depicting one's

visual field (1964, §213)<sup>2</sup>.



As a result of premises 1) and 2), Wittgenstein may reach the first conclusion 3) of the argument; namely, that the eye is not seen / cannot be seen, either within or at the origin of the visual field.

In this context, at the time of *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein's concern with the eye in relation to the visual field is to specify what remained implicit at the time of the TLP; namely that, in its being unseen/unseeable, the eye must be meant as a *geometric* property of the visual field: i.e., a necessary property of it, not an empirical, hence contingent, one. On the one hand, that there is nothing empirical in the eye relative to the visual field is what corollary 4) of the above argument is precisely about: that the eye is not seen / cannot be seen is in line with its being no empirical fact (a subsisting state of affairs) allegedly grasped by a visual experience. On the other hand, in the *Philosophical Remarks*, to the observation that there is no eye to be seen in the visual field, Wittgenstein adds that the only "subjective" contributions to the visual field amount to its essential properties of being *asymmetric* and *oriented*; namely, of being a *perspectival* space:

In visual space there isn't an eye belonging to me and eyes belonging to others. Only the space itself is asymmetrical, ... (1964, §73)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Es ist z. B. wichtig, dass in dem Satz: "ein roter Fleck befindet sich nahe an der Grenze des Gesichtsfeldes" das "nahe an" eine andere Bedeutung hat als in einem Satz: "der rote Fleck im Gesichtsfeld befindet sich nahe an dem braunen Fleck". Das Wort "Grenze" in dem vorigen Satz hat ferner eine andere Bedeutung —und ist eine andere Wortart— als in dem Satz: "die Grenze zwischen Rot und Blau im Gesichtsfeld ist ein Kreis".

<sup>3</sup> Im Gesichtsraum ist nicht ein Auge, welches mir gehört, und Augen, die anderen gehören. Nur der Rahmen selbst ist unsymmetrisch, [die Gegenstände in ihm sind gleichberechtigt].

We can also say visual space is an oriented space, a space in which there is an above and below and a right and left (1964, §206)<sup>4</sup>.

Now, coming back to Wittgenstein's argument, in its further premise 5), Wittgenstein goes on holding that we may concede that the relationship between the eye and the visual field is the same as the one holding between the metaphysical subject and the world. This allows the argument to conclude with 6) that the metaphysical subject is neither a part nor an origin of the world. For otherwise, it would be a contingent element of it, not its essential presupposition. As the second corollary 7) of the argument states and Russell well understood again: "in like manner our logical world has no logical boundary because our logic knows of nothing outside it" (1961, p. xx).

## § 2. Wittgenstein's Partial Revision of His Claims on the Eye

So far, so good. Yet one may still wonder whether, in its playing the role of opening the visual field, the eye is really not seen or seeable. Let us suppose that a head had a sort of trunk that ended with another eye facing the frontal part of the head itself endowed with its standard eye, or eyes. If this were the case, the standard eye would be, at one and the same time, both a seeing thing and a thing that is seen by means of the eye located at the end of the trunk. Likewise, of course, such a situation holds analogously for that latter eye. So, the phenomenology of sight would be in an analogous situation concerning the eye as a finger that actually touches another finger of a particular subject in the case of the phenomenology of touch, as Husserl remarked in his *Ideas*: the touching finger is also a thing touched by means of the other finger, which on its turn also is both touching and touched. In the *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein puts forward a similar supposition:

Suppose my eyeball were fixed behind the window, so that I would see most things through it. In that case this window could assume the role of a part of my body. What's near the window is near me. (I'm assuming I can see three-dimensionally with one eye.) In addition, I assume that I'm in a position to see my eyeball in the mirror, and perceive similar eyeballs on the trees outside, say.

How can I in this case tell, or arrive at the assumption, that I see the world through the

<sup>4</sup> Man kann auch sagen, der Gesichtsraum ist ein gerichteter Raum, ein Raum, in dem es ein Oben und Unten und ein Rechts und Links gibt.

pupil of my eyeball? Surely not in an essentially different way from that of my seeing it through the window, or, say, through a hole in a board that my eye is directly behind (1964, §72)<sup>5</sup>.

So, one may conclude that the visual field unquestionably has certain geometrical, i.e., necessary, properties, yet such properties depend on particular contingent facts that influence one's phenomenology. As Wittgenstein explicitly remarks regarding the nature of the visual field, it also involves specific muscular characteristics, but if the dynamics of certain muscular movements changed, the proprioceptive phenomenology would change as well:

I want to know what's going on behind me and turn [a]round. If I were prevented from doing this, wouldn't the idea that space stretches out around me remain? And that I could manage to see the objects now behind me by turning around. *Therefore* it's the possibility of turning around that leads me to this idea of space. The resulting space around me is thus a mixture of visual space and *the space of muscular sensation*.

Without the feeling of the ability 'to turn around', my idea of space would be *essentially* different (1964, §73)<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, the essential properties of the visual field depend on phenomenological contingencies that have to do with the fact that the perceiving subject is constituted in a certain way. In more general terms, one may comment that for

<sup>5</sup> Angenommen mein Augapfel sei hier hinter dem Fenster befestigt, so dass ich das meiste durchs Fenster sehen würde. Dann würde dieses Fenster die Rolle eines Teiles meines Körpers übernehmen können. Was nah am Fenster ist, ist mir nahe. (Ich nehme an, dass ich mit einem Auge dreidimensional sehe.) Außerdem nehme ich an, dass ich meinen Augapfel im Spiegel zu sehen imstande bin, und etwa an den Bäumen darußen ähnliche Augäpfel wahrnehme.

Wie kann ich nun erkennen, oder zu der Annahme kommen, dass ich die Welt durch die Pupille meines Augapfels sehe? Doch nicht wesentlich anders als dazu, dass ich sie durch das Fenster sehe, oder etwa durch ein Loch im Brett, hinter dem unmittelbar mein Auge liegt.

<sup>6</sup> Ich will wissen, was hinter mir vorgeht, und drehe mich um. Wäre ich daran verhindert, würde nicht die Vorstellung bleiben, dass sich der Raum um mich herum ausdehnt? Und dass ich die Gegenstände, die jetzt hinter mir sind, dadurch zu sehen kriege, dass ich mich umdrehe. *Also* ist es die Möglichkeit des Michumdrehens, die mir zu jener Raumvorstellung verhilft. Der resultierende Raum um mich herum ist also ein gemischter Sehraum und *Muskelgefühlsraum*.

Ohne das Gefühl der Fähigkeit, "mich umzudrehen" wäre meine Raumvorstellung eine *wesentlich* andere.

the Wittgenstein of the *Remarks*, what is necessary is not necessarily necessary. That is a morale he will stick to throughout the later phase of his philosophy, where, as is well known, a matter of necessity is reconceived as a matter of grammar. i.e., as a matter of the rules of use, we have assigned our linguistic expressions referring to given phenomena. “*Essence* is expressed in grammar” (2009 I, §371)<sup>7</sup>; “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is” (2009 I, §373)<sup>8</sup>. Definitely, we have the grammar we have. Hence the world is essentially made for us in accordance with that grammar. Yet, if we had been made differently, it is quite likely that we would have adopted another grammar:

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different, people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). Rather: if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize – then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him (2009 II, p. xii, § 366)<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Das *Wesen* ist in der Grammatik ausgesprochen.

<sup>8</sup> Welche Art von Gegenstand etwas ist, sagt die Grammatik.

<sup>9</sup> Ich sage nicht: Wären die und die Naturtatsachen anders, so hätten die Menschen andere Begriffe (im Sinne einer Hypothese). Sondern: Wer glaubt, gewisse Begriffe seien schlechtweg die richtigen, wer andere hätte, sähe eben etwas nicht ein, was wir einsehen, — der möge sich gewisse sehr allgemeine Naturtatsachen anders vorstellen, als wir sie gewohnt sind, und andere Begriffsbildungen als die gewohnten werden ihm verständlich werden.



## REFERENCES

- BAZZOCCHI, Luciano (2021). “Foreword” to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Centenary Edition*. London: Anthem Press, ix–xxvii.
- HUSSERL, Edmund (2012). *Ideas. General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. London: Routledge.
- MACH, Ernst (1914). *The Analysis of Sensations*. Chicago and Vienna: Open Court.
- RUSSELL, Bertrand (1961). “Introduction”. In TLP, ix–xxv.
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig (1922/1961). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [TLP]. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig (1964). *Philosophical Remarks*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig (1953/2009). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.



### The Eye and the Visual Field: Much Ado About Nothing?

The standard version of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* has a certain picture as an iconic continuation of TLP 5.6331. In that picture, the eye is located *within* the visual field. In various papers as well as in his last edition of the TLP (2021), Luciano Bazzocchi has maintained that the picture must be replaced by another picture locating the eye *at the origin* of the visual field, on the basis of certain important evidences involving other sketches made by Wittgenstein himself. Whoever is exegetically right, however, the issue is not theoretically decisive. For, what Wittgenstein basically wants to claim there is that, in its having no definite boundaries, the visual field necessarily depends on a point of view. This claim will be partially disputed by Wittgenstein himself in the later phase of his philosophy.

**Keywords:** Eye · Visual Field · Boundaries.

### El ojo y el campo visual: ¿mucho ruido sobre nada?

La versión estándar del *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* de Wittgenstein tiene cierta figura como explicación icónica de TLP 5.6331. En esa figura el ojo se ubica *dentro* del campo visual. En varios trabajos y también en la última edición del TLP (2021), Lucian Bazzocchi mantiene, basado en ciertas evidencias importantes relacionadas con otros esbozos hechos por el mismo Wittgenstein, que la figura se debería reemplazar por otra figura, ubicando el ojo *en el origen* del campo visual. Sea quien sea que tiene razón, exegéticamente hablando, el asunto no es teóricamente decisivo. Puesto que, lo que Wittgenstein desea afirmar aquí, simplemente es que, al no tener límites definidos, el campo visual necesariamente depende de un punto de vista: esta afirmación será cuestionada parcialmente por Wittgenstein mismo en la etapa posterior de su filosofía.

**Palabras claves:** Ojo · Campo visual · límites.

**ALBERTO VOLTOLINI** (PhD Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa 1989) is a philosopher of language and mind whose works have focused mainly on intentionality, depiction and fiction, perception, and Wittgenstein. He is currently Professor in Philosophy of Mind at the University of Turin (Italy). He has got scholarships at the Universities of Geneva and Sussex. He has been visiting professor at the Universities of California, Riverside (1998), Australian National University, Canberra (2007), Barcelona (2010), London (2015), Auckland (2007, 2018), Antwerp (2019). He has been a member of the Steering Committee of the European Society for Analytic Philosophy (2002–2008) and of the Board of the European Society for Philosophy and Psychology (2009–2012). He is presently member of the board of the International Society for Fiction and Fictionality Studies. His publications include *How Ficta Follow Fiction* (Springer, 2006), as well as the “Fictional Entities” and the “Fiction” entries (with F. Kroon) of the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, *A Syncretistic Theory of Depiction* (Palgrave, 2015), and *Down But Not Out* (Springer, 2022).

**INFORMACIÓN DE CONTACTO | CONTACT INFORMATION:** Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences, University of Turin, via S. Ottavio n° 20, 10124, Turin, Piedmont, Italy. e-mail (✉): [alberto.voltolini@unito.it](mailto:alberto.voltolini@unito.it) · iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0400-1978>

---

**HISTORIA DEL ARTÍCULO | ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received: 16–December–2022; Accepted: 23–December–2022; Published Online: 31–December–2022

---

**COMO CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO | HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE**

Voltolini, Alberto. (2022). «The Eye and the Visual Field: Much Ado About Nothing?». *Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin* 11, no. 23: pp. 23-32.

© Studia Humanitatis – Universidad de Salamanca 2022