

Aspects of the Theory of Visual Syntax

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In the scientific literature, the postulation of visual representations with a pictorial format has proven highly productive. But this ‘picture theory’ faces long-standing philosophical objections. In response, proponents of the picture theory sometimes seek to dismiss their critics, suggesting that their objections rely on a crude conception of pictures or the mental processes that manipulate them. I recommend an alternative (yet complimentary) style of response, arguing that the picture theory becomes eminently more plausible once we appreciate *an* important difference between normal pictures and the visual images posited in the head: that while normal pictures lack syntactic structure, the pictorial nature of our visual representations results from syntactic principles (implemented in the visual system) which function to mirror certain metaphysical constraints. After explaining why this does not amount to a rejection of the picture theory, or its collapse into a linguistic characterization of visual format, I propose that these observations defuse prominent objections to the theory.

This is an unpublished work in progress. A short version of the paper was recently declared joint winner of the Tenth Annual Essay Prize at the Centre for Philosophical Psychology, University of Antwerp – awarded 22 December 2021. Please shoot me an email if you’d like to see a draft of the paper.