This paper argues that the later Wittgenstein’s notion of the autonomy of grammar opens up critical space for thinking about world politics. The claim that philosophy should be a ‘grammatical investigation’ involves considering bow particular pictures, as representations of reality, hold us captive. Although the ‘deep disquietudes’ that are expressed in world politics may have similarities with the depth of a grammatical joke, I will look at a few reasons why we aren’t laughing.

The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of depth. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language. Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be deep? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.) (Wittgenstein, 1953, §111)

Language and reality

Much of the later Wittgenstein’s work was directed against the view that language and thought represent reality, a view which he had held earlier in the Tractatus as the ‘picture theory’ of meaning. In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein had believed that ‘To give the essence of a proposition means to give the essence of all description, and thus the essence of the world’ (Wittgenstein, 1922, 5.4711). On this view names name objects
and configurations of names depict possible configurations of objects in the world. In this way, language can represent possible states of affairs because it shares the same structure. Thus, the truth or falsity of a proposition depends on whether it agrees or disagrees with reality (Wittgenstein, 1922, 2.223, 4.05).

However, in his later work, Wittgenstein believed that the Tractarian view was an illusion that generated the idea that there must be a super-order between super-concepts – a ‘hard’ connection between the order of possibilities common to both thought and world (Wittgenstein, 1953, §97). It is in the context of breaking down the seduction of the Tractarian picture of language that Wittgenstein introduces the notion of language-games and a grammatical investigation. The metaphor of games is constructed to break the captivating influence of the idea that the meaning of a word is the object that for which it stands (names) (Wittgenstein, 1953,§1). By sketching various language-games, he tries to show that there are many other ways in which words are meaningful which do not rely on the word-object naming relation. For example, giving orders and obeying them, making a joke, forming and testing a hypothesis, praying etc. (Wittgenstein, 1953,§23). Furthermore, the metaphor of a game is also meant to bring to view the idea that there are not only many different types of game (board-games, ball-games, Olympic Games and so on) but that the meaning of the word ‘game’ is not dependent on naming an element which is common to all instances of its use. He says, ‘I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than “family resemblance” … And I shall say: “games” form a family’ (Wittgenstein, 1953,§67). The importance of this move is that the notion of family resemblance ‘replaces explanation in terms of category and essence’ (Staten, 1985, p.96). The search for the essence of propositions as the essence of reality is therefore overthrown by the idea that language can be meaningful without reference to common elements (objects) of reality. So, if the naming of objects does not provide the meaning of a word then what might? ‘For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language’ (Wittgenstein, 1953,§43). Meaning then, comes from the way in which a word is used in particular contexts or as Wittgenstein sometimes put it, ‘our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings’’ (Wittgenstein, 1969,§229). The ‘rest of our proceedings’ are our practices. He says, ‘The word “language-game” is here meant to emphasise that the speaking of language is part of an activity or a form of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1953,§23). Language games are not just what we say but what we do. Words are Deeds (Wittgenstein, 1981b, p.46). Most relevant in this context is that language games are not primarily the representation of the super-order of reality but are the particular practices of ways of life, including world politics.

In the sections below I shall examine how Wittgenstein understands pictures, including those of world politics, to hold us captive. It is argued that pictures seem to locate perennial problems thereby creating ‘deep disquietudes’. Although Wittgenstein says that grammatical jokes also seem deep, I shall argue that many of the pictures that hold us captive in world politics are not a laughing matter. Indeed, it is through grammatical investigations that the reasons why we aren’t laughing can be exposed and a critical and emancipatory approach to world politics constructed.

**Grammatical pictures**

goes on in the head’ (Wittgenstein, 1953,§427), ‘The picture of the earth as a very old planet’ (Wittgenstein, 1981a,§462) and so on. One might add various other pictures taken from International Relations; the picture that the international realm is anarchic, the picture of the state having an inside and outside, the picture of ethics and international politics as incompatible activities etc. One of the captivating influences of such pictures is that they seem to represent deep metaphysical facts about the world – the way things are. This is linked to the assumption that thought’s fundamental task is the representation of facts and that language is the medium of thought’s expression; what Edwards calls rationality-as-representation (Edwards, 1982). Rationality-as-representation accounts for the seductiveness of pictures because it is via its assumptions that they are taken to be representations of superfacts and ‘hard’ connections.

For example, in International Relations the rationality-as-representation picture of theorising is exemplified by the work of Kenneth Waltz (Waltz, 1959; 1979). Although Waltz says that theory is not a ‘reproduction’ of reality, it nonetheless is meant to represent or depict those aspects of reality with which the theorist is concerned. He says,

A theory is a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity. A theory is a depiction of the organization of a domain and the connections among its parts. The infinite materials of any realm can be organized in endlessly different ways. A theory indicates that some factors are more important than others and specifies the relations among them ... Theory isolates one realm from all others in order to deal with it intellectually (Waltz, 1979, p.8).

Vitally for Waltz, the point of a theory is to reveal which factors are most important and their relation to each other—what Wittgenstein would call a super-order between super-concepts. In this way, there is a ‘hard’ connection between the order of possibilities common to both theory and reality. Although it may be the case that Waltz does not hold that theory mirrors reality in a simple way, I nonetheless want to maintain that his picture of theory is one which assumes a mirroring relation that might be attributed to the Cartesian legacy of the exaltation of epistemology—that is, the privileging of questions about how and to what extent the world can be known. Within this legacy lies a particular picture of the subject, reality and their relationship to one another. Reality is the external world, that is to say outside the mind standing in need of being ‘viewed, represented, known’ (Edwards, 1982, p.164). The Cartesian subject then becomes ‘the self-conscious, self-enclosed knower who wants to represent’ fundamental realities (Edwards, 1982, p.164). However, for Descartes since reality is outside the mind, the mind is able to abstract; ‘stepping back first from the world, then from its representations of the world, then back even from itself, attempting to represent the justification of its own powers of representation. The mind, the vehicle of representation, becomes the self’ (Edwards, 1982, p.164). What then does this have to do with Waltz?

Waltz puts into practice the assumption that the theorist’s mind and therefore, intellect is sovereign and distinct from the reality it seeks to know in two important ways. First, this assumption constructs his understanding of the origins and generation of theory. Theories, for him, are ‘mentally formed’. They are generated ‘creatively’ with ‘flashes’ of ‘brilliant intuition’ (Waltz, 1979, p.9). In this picture the reasoning powers of the theorist are autonomous and sovereign providing the origins of ‘creativity’ and ‘intuition’. Here theory is not historically, culturally or socially created but springs (as if from nowhere) from a disembodied, rational self as the vehicle of representation.

Secondly, the above assumption informs his view on the role of theory as an abstraction from reality. For Waltz, abstraction is
necessary in order to explain regularities and repetitions of phenomena. This is the difference between description and explanation. ‘Descriptions strive for accuracy’ whereas assumptions used in a theory require that ‘the world must be drastically simplified; subtleties must be rudely pushed aside, and reality must be grossly distorted’ (Waltz, 1991, p.27). It is in this sense that Waltz does not have a simplistic view of theory mirroring reality. However, what still lies in the background unquestioned is the view that theory is representational of reality. That reality may be ‘distorted’ by the theorist still assumes the separation of the theorist (the distorter) and a passive, external reality (the distorted). It is only through assuming such a separation that abstraction, as a form of representation, is possible. For Waltz then, abstraction is necessary in order to justifiably represent reality and in that sense, mirror the most important elements under consideration as representations of superfacts and ‘hard’ connections. In the case of International Relations the abstracted picture of reality that Waltz believes explains international politics is one where ‘international systems are decentralised and anarchic’ (Waltz, 1979, p.88).

As already suggested, Waltz also applies a particular picture of the subject in relation to reality; a subject who is sovereign, autonomous and disembodied. The ‘I’ ‘become[s] a set of representations, abstractly describable’ (Edwards, 1982, p.165). In this way, the Cartesian subject or Waltz’s theorist, is itself an abstraction becoming ‘the seeing eye’; a ghostly observer (Edwards, 1982, p.166). Any historical and physical identity of the theorist is lost, thus severing any link between the subject and contingencies of time and space such as history, culture, society, etc. Severing this link, albeit implicitly, allows Waltz to appeal to a universal, sovereign, reasoning ‘we’ in his attempts to describe theory. Only in this way can ‘we’ take Waltz’s arguments as ‘our’ own (Ashley, 1989). For example, Waltz says ‘In order to get beyond “the facts of observation,” as we wish irresistibly to do, we must grapple with the problem of explanation’ (Waltz, 1979, p.6. Italics added.).

Such then are the pictures that Waltz, widely regarded as one of the most important international theorists of the post-war period, applies in his Theory of International Politics. How, then, does Wittgenstein’s later philosophy offer a challenge to such pictures? Wittgenstein attempts to move away from rationality-as-representation as the privileging of epistemological questions concerning truth and falsity ('correct' or 'incorrect' representations) towards looking at practices. He says, “The picture is there. And I am not disputing its validity in any particular case. Only I also want to understand the application of the picture” (Wittgenstein, 1953,§423).

Why is a focus on a picture’s application more important than the assessment of its truth or falsity? It seems that for Wittgenstein, judgements of truth or falsity also rely on basic assumptions about the nature (essence) of adequate proof, evidence, procedures of investigation etc. and these assumptions may be pictures themselves (Edwards, 1982, p.145). Thus, the move away from questions of truth and falsity are a move away from metaphysical philosophy (rationality-as-representation) for Wittgenstein. To accept the challenge of demonstrating the truth of a particular metaphysical picture would be self-defeating because it would be accepting that the foundations of truth lie in propositions as representations of reality. As we have seen, it is this notion of language as representational that Wittgenstein’s later work is directed against.5

So, if pictures are not representations of deep metaphysical facts about the world, what are they? Wittgenstein says that they are ‘A full-blown representation of our grammar. Not facts; but as it were illustrated turns of speech’ (Wittgenstein, 1953,§295). I shall now look at how Wittgenstein’s understanding of grammar helps complete the move away from rationality-as-representation towards practices of world politics.
Grammatical investigations

The first thing to note about Wittgenstein’s use of the term ‘grammar’ is that it is not singular and nor is it purely formal. There are grammars of words, expressions, phrases, sentences, states, processes and indeed, philosophical problems are grammatical (Baker and Hacker, 1985). Also his understanding of grammar is not formal in the sense that it is not concerned with parts of speech, verb conjugations, pluralizing nouns etc. So what is involved in a ‘grammatical’ investigation in the Wittgensteinian sense? He says,

We feel as if we had to penetrate phenomena: our investigation [Wittgenstein’s], however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the ‘possibilities’ of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the kind of statement that we make about phenomena...Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one (Wittgenstein, 1953,§90).

This seems to me to suggest that the importance of grammatical investigations is two-fold. First, a grammatical investigation is not involved in finding the ‘hidden’ essence of phenomena and the world as if it was deeply buried. This is a re-statement of Wittgenstein’s rejection of the foundation of language as the essence of the world. Rather what he is suggesting is that there is no ‘beneath’ the surface of language where we can venture in search of explanations (of phenomena in this case), though certain pictures may compel us to do so. However, although everything is on the surface, ‘The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.)’ (Wittgenstein, 1953,§129). This leads to the second point about a grammatical investigation. Such an investigation is meant to bring to view that which has been rendered invisible through our familiarity with it. In the case of investigating phenomena this would include reminders of the kinds of statement we make about phenomena, and their possibilities.

A grammatical investigation is necessary because grammar ‘constitutes our form of representation, the way we see the world’ (Hacker, 1972, p.160). In this way, our conception of the structure of reality is a projection of grammar and we should resist the metaphysical temptation to understand grammar as a projection of reality. How can this be? Wittgenstein says, ‘Grammar is not accountable to any reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary’ (Wittgenstein, 1974, p.184). Grammar is arbitrary and autonomous. What Wittgenstein means by this is that our rules of grammar cannot be justified by reference to reality. Grammar determines what counts as a ‘description of reality’ (Baker and Hacker, 1985, p.332) and there is no metaphysical necessity that serves as the ultimate justification. Justifications themselves are grammatical in so far as the rules of the language game that is being played will determine what counts as a ‘justification’.6 This is why pictures are a ‘full-blown representation of our grammar’. Everything is on the surface of language.

We do not need to know the rules of grammar of a particular language game explicitly. That we are playing the language game means that we understand the rule because we are applying it.7 Wittgenstein’s comments about rule following being a custom, or that ‘I obey the rule blindly’ (Wittgenstein, 1953,§219) may be understood to highlight just how much language use is automatic and normalised. As Cavell points out this ‘is a view in which the idea of normality ... is seen to be an idea of naturalness’ (Cavell, 1979, p.122). The critical aspect of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is that what is taken as ‘natural’ (pictures) needs to be grammatically investigated in order to reveal the various assumptions that ground them—in other
words, the way in which ‘pictures hold us captive.’

In the case of Kenneth Waltz’s theory of international politics ‘every relationship to reality is a representational relation’ (Edwards, 1982, p.166). As such, his picture of the theorist (subject) as a ghostly observer is applied in a way that leads to a particular kind of absentmindedness or captivity that should not leave us laughing. As a spectral observer, the theorist is rendered invisible—she is literally nowhere either in time or space. As such questions of the theorist’s material interests and historicity are also rendered invisible. Questions of who the theory is for, how it is historically created and reproduced by particular silences and exclusions, which practices are legitimised and privileged vs. those that need to be disciplined etc. are left ‘out of view’ in the same way as the ‘seeing eye’ is not seen by the spectator/theorist. Instead the only ‘relevant’ questions to world politics are those restricted to how well or badly a theory represents international political reality. If, as Waltz suggests, the role of theory is to represent reality then theorising world politics is reduced to epistemological issues such as explaining how the anarchic structure of international politics affects the behaviour of ‘like units’ (i.e. states) in a way that can be tested, predict and therefore, control outcomes. This means, amongst other things, that the exclusion of ethical issues such as justice, gender inequality, global distribution of wealth and human rights abuses within states are taken as ‘natural’. For those who have to bear the consequences of slavery and torture in Burma, for example, their exclusion from world politics is hardly a laughing matter. If ethical issues are to be approached at all in Waltz’s picture, they take the form of a deferred question about what can be accurately represented—are the ‘elements’ of international politics and ethics really connected in a realm of anarchy? Such a question expresses what Wittgenstein calls a ‘deep disquietude’ about the nature of international reality. However, such disquietude only arises if one takes Waltz’s picture to be a representation of a metaphysical fact about ‘the international’ as a realm where ethicality is either impossible or restricted to doing ‘less evil’. Captivity to Waltz’s picture of international theory, in practice, forecloses fundamentally challenging such exclusions thereby perpetuating a ‘forgetting’ of the politics of doing theory.

It is in this sense that a grammatical investigation becomes important. It is only when we begin to ask what the ‘possibilities’ for certain phenomena are and the kinds of statement we make about them that the grammatical rule is shown. For example, it is only when one asks about the application of Waltz’s picture of theory that it can be seen that his grammar determines what counts as ‘international politics’ and therefore, what it excludes and how. It is in this way that Wittgenstein’s grammatical investigations opens up space for thinking about world politics critically. The autonomy of grammar creates this space because it serves to overthrow the notion that a statement such as ‘self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order’ is grounded in the facts of our existence and of reality (Waltz, 1979, p.111). The undermining of a ‘hard connection’ between language and reality allows for an investigation into other possibilities that have previously been foreclosed. Given that for Wittgenstein language games are practices, the way in which grammatical rules are applied are also practices. As pointed out earlier, language games are not what we say but what we do. A grammatical investigation on my reading therefore, includes an investigation into which practices are ‘allowed’ as legitimate, justified, etc. therefore widening the agenda of world politics to issues of how particular pictures hold us captive and the multifarious reasons why they aren’t a laughing matter.

**Notes**

1. I would like to thank Howard Williams for suggesting this piece, Stephen Hobden and
Nicholas Wheeler for their comments and in particular Timothy Dunne and Steve smith for their ceaseless encouragement and help with this project. Thanks also to the two anonymous referees whose comments, I hope, improved this paper. Any weaknesses that remain are my own. The paper was prepared with financial support from the Economic and Social Research Council.

2. International Relations (capitalised) I shall take as referring to the academic discipline.

3. I am not alone in following this line of argument. For a poststructuralist perspective see Ashley (1989).

4. Although it can be pointed out that Waltz seems to acknowledge that ‘what we think of as reality is itself and elaborate conception constructed and reconstructed through the ages’, his understanding of ‘construction’ is distinctly representational (Waltz, 1979, p.5). Reality is what ‘we’ think it is as disembodied, rational selves. Thus, even where Waltz appears ambiguously ‘constructivist’, my claim is that a notion of rationality-as-representation still dominates his picture of theory.

5. There is much more that could be said about how Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is the abandonment of the search for foundations of knowledge and even more importantly, a complete rejection of the Careesian exaltation of epistemological questions as basic to all philosophical concerns. For his critique of Cartesian assumptions see especially his private language argument in *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953) and discussion of scepticism in *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein, 1969).

6. This is Wittgenstein’s particular brand of anti-foundationalism.

7. ‘To understand a language is to be master of a technique’ (Wittgenstein, 1953, §199).

8. For waltz’s seven rules for theory-testing see Waltz (1979, pp. 13-16)

9. See, for example, John Pilger and Olivier Pin-Fat (Pilger, 1996; Pin-Fat, 1996).

10. Morgenthau is probably the best known advocate of this view in the discipline (Morgenthau, 1962; 1964). See also Chris Brown (1992) and Mervyn Frost (1996) for a discussion of normative issues in International Relations.

**References**


