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Keuze van Hans Maes

How do pictures work? How are they able to represent what they do? A picture of a goat, for example, is a flat surface covered with marks, yet it depicts a goat, chewing straw, while standing on a hillock. The puzzle of depiction is to understand how the flat marks can do this.

Language poses a similar problem. A written description of a goat will also be a collection of marks on a flat surface, which none the less represent that animal. In the case of language the solution clearly has something to do with the arbitrary way we use those marks. The word 'leg', for example, is applied to legs, but any other mark would do as well, providing we all use it in the same way. In the case of pictures, however, something different seems to be going on. There is not the same freedom in producing a picture of a goat on a hillock chewing straw – the surface must be marked in the right way, a way we are not free to choose. So what is the right way?

A helpful thought is that the surface must be marked so as to let us experience it in a special way. With the description, we merely need to know what the words it contains are used to stand for. With the picture, we must instead be able to see a goat in it. However, although this does seem right, it is difficult to make clear. After all, we do not see a goat in the same way that we see a horse in a view from a window. For one thing, there is no goat there to be seen. For another, it is not even true that looking at the picture is like looking at a goat. It is partly because of the differences that, as we look at the picture, we are always aware that it is merely a collection of marks on a flat surface. So what is this special experience, seeing a goat in the picture? This is the question that a philosophical account of depiction must try to answer.

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