

## I.2 The Basic Picture

PHIL101: Introduction to Philosophy

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### Goals, this lesson:

- Become acquainted with the Basic Picture of Philosophy;
- Become acquainted with the concepts, the sensory world, and understanding.

### The Basic Picture of Philosophy

As we have seen, the goals of philosophy include a complete account of all that is, including instructions on how to live well or properly. You might ask yourself, just how one might proceed to achieve these goals. The Basic Picture that I want to draw for you of this situation is as follows:

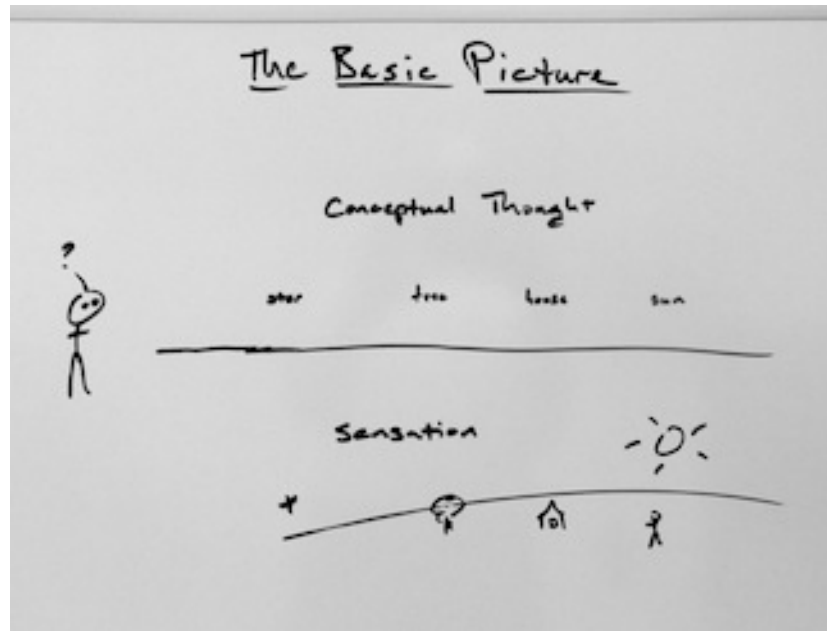


Figure 1

If you think about what, at bottom, we know and how we know it, I suggest that our situation is as depicted in Figure 1. As we experience the world around us, we appear to encounter two distinct “worlds” or “realms”. The Sensory Realm, as we shall call it, is the world that we experience with the five senses. It’s the world that we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. This realm includes trees, birds and bees, tables and chairs, clothing, stars, planets, roses, and so on. The basic nature of this world we call “physical” or “material”: the objects and events of this world are made up of *matter*, as we call it. We are, further, inclined to think of the sensory world as the “real world” – when this question comes up as it does, sometimes, when one wakes from a

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dream. But the question of what, exactly, is the real world is a philosophical question, so we will postpone this matter for the present.

Besides the “physical” world of the senses, the other realm that humans encounter is the mental realm or the realm of conceptual thought. For not only do humans *sense* things but we also *think* them or *think of* them. Not only, that is, may we see or touch a tree, but we may also think of trees whether they are present to our senses or not. Indeed, it seems that we can think of anything that we can sense and we can think of many further things as well: pink elephants, flying horses, a stairway to heaven, etc. The basic constituents of this thought-world are thoughts themselves or what we may also call *ideas* or *concepts*. And just as the objects of the physical world have physical structure, the objects of the thought-world, conceptual thoughts, have what we may call a logical structure.<sup>1</sup>

Now, in addition, we tend to think that there is a close relationship between the world of ideas and the world of the senses. In particular, we tend to think that the world of ideas is just our way of thinking about the world of the senses. But before we go too far in relating the two realms, let’s make sure that we have a good grasp on them individually.

So, think about this for a moment: There is the world that you sense with your senses. You see your surroundings, the room that you’re in, your hands and forearms, etc. On the other hand, there is a different “realm”, the realm of ideas, which you don’t see or hear or taste. You don’t *see* the idea of a tree any more than you see the idea of the number 5. Ideas aren’t objects of sense. Still, we *can* and *do* think a whole world of thoughts; it’s what you’re doing right now as you read these words: the world of thought exists, in some sense, for you whenever you think, which is most of the time that you are awake.

So, the Basic Picture of Philosophy is this: Philosophers want to know everything about everything, including how to live. The information that we have to find out everything about everything consists in these two worlds, one of thought, the other of sense. And I want to call your attention to a problematic feature of this picture. The question is, what exactly do the two realms that we experience, thought and sensation, tell us about what is and how we should live?

It may be that you think that there is a simple answer to that question. You may think that sense and thought tell us all that there is to know about what is. As we will see, however, the philosophical world is not that simple, for as you know, appearances can be misleading and thoughts can be mistaken.

For the moment, I want you simply to reflect on the Basic Picture and on the philosopher’s goals of total knowledge and wisdom. We’ll refer to this picture as we proceed through the course.

### Understanding

Let us return now to the question of the relationship between our two realms, the realm of conceptual thought and the realm of sense. What is the relationship between the realm of concepts and that of sense? In order to proceed, we need more information about the nature of *concepts*. A *concept* is a *general representation* of something. For example, the concept of *tree* is a general representation of trees; the concept enables us to think about trees in a general way. Note this fundamental feature of the mind: our capacity to think about many things at once.

Concepts have two features, an *intension* and an *extension*. The *intension* of a concept (that’s ‘intension’, with an ‘s’) is what we otherwise call its *meaning*, what one thinks of when using the concept. The intension (meaning) of the concept of *tree* is something like this: relatively large

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘logic’ derives from the Greek *logos*, meaning “word” or “account”. The logical, then, concerns those things that we can express in words, those things for which we can give an account in words.

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(ten to several hundred feet in height), leafy (or needled) plant, usually with a single, primary trunk and multiple branches; etc.<sup>2</sup>

The *extension* of a concept is that set of things that the concept *refers to*, given its intension (meaning). For example, given what we mean by *tree*, that concept refers to all of the trees, out there in the world. These points are illustrated in Figure 2.

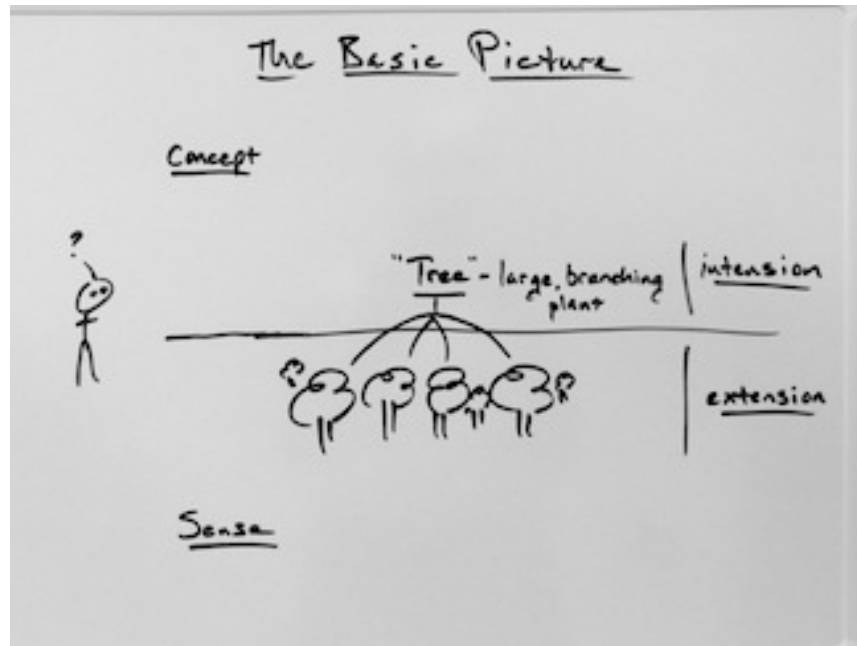


Figure 2

Our Basic Picture thus includes these central features: concepts have meaning, an intension, enabling them to refer to certain further things, many of which, ultimately, are to be found in the realm of sense. Given what *tree* means, we thus find a relationship between the conceptual and sensory realms: concepts have meanings satisfied by sensations.

For a simpler example, consider the meaning of the color term, *black*. It would be difficult to put into words just what this term means, but this much is clear: what *black* means is exactly what we experience when we see a certain color (i.e., the one we call “black”). That is, in the sensory realm, one visual experience that we commonly have is precisely what the concept *black* means. The color black satisfies what we mean, conceptually, by the concept, *black*.

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<sup>2</sup> Notice that the intension (meaning) of a concept is spelled out in terms of further concepts; this feature will be important when it comes to our *analyzing* concept and conceptual statements.

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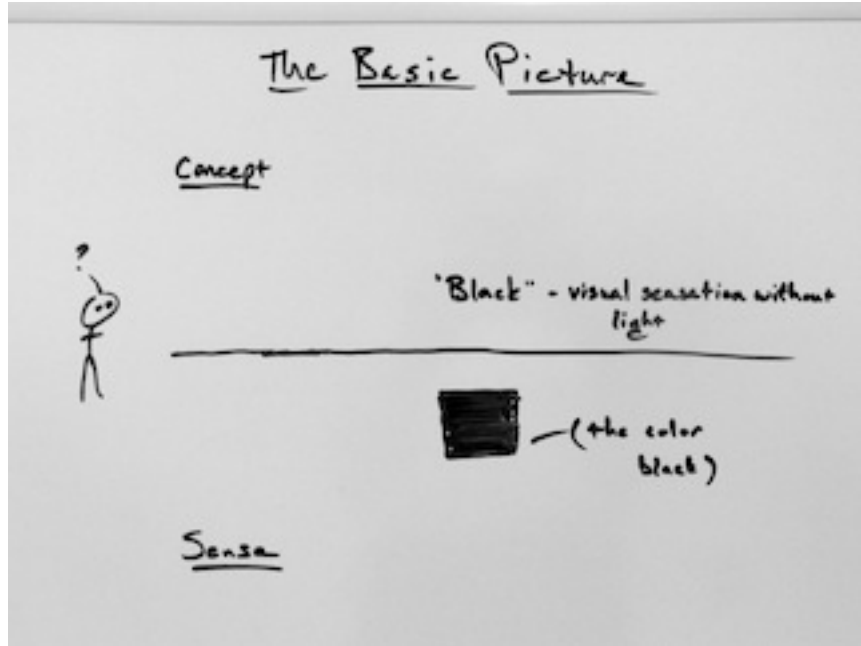


Figure 3

One further important term will help us to state the relationship between the conceptual and sensory realms. Above, we spoke of trees and the color black. You *understand* both of these terms, which is to say also that you understand what you are seeing, ordinarily, when you see a tree or the color black. Notice that in these cases, your *understanding* involves both concepts and sensations. In both cases, we can say, you are able to recognize that what you mean by the concept is what you experience in the sensation. Visual images of trees satisfy the meaning of your concept, *tree*; and visual images of blackness satisfy what you mean by the concept, *black*. We can define *understanding*, then, as follows:

Understanding: recognition of a concept's intension in a member of its extension.

That is, given what a concept such as *tree* means, when you see a tree, you will recognize what you mean by that concept in your visual sensation. You “match” the meaning of your concept with what is happening in your sensory field.

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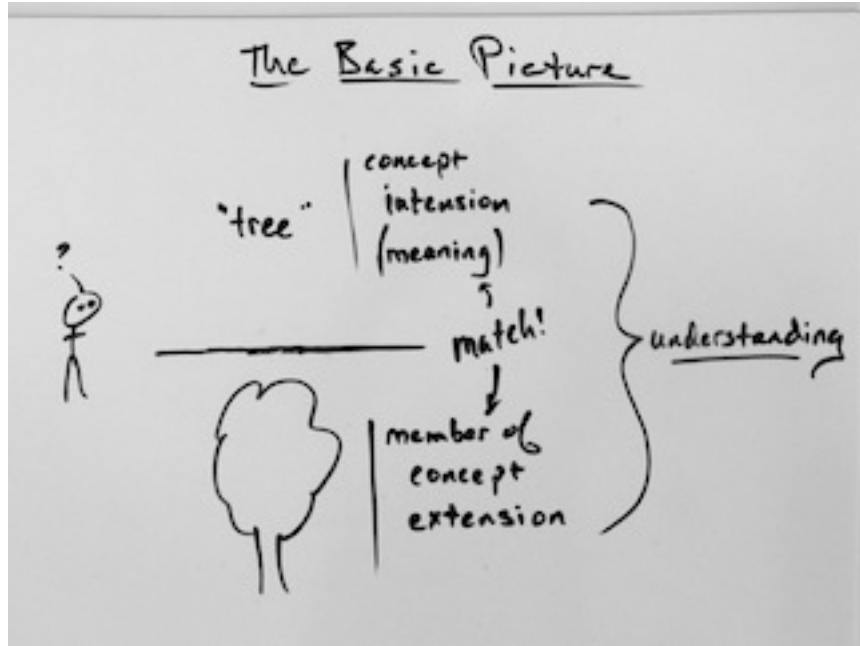


Figure 4

What, then, is the relationship between the conceptual realm of thought and the sensory realm of sense? Ideally, this relationship is a relationship of *understanding*, one in which we recognize the meanings of our concepts in the various items of our sensory manifold. Take a moment to observe your surroundings. Note the extent to which you have a concept (word) for just about everything around you: tables, chairs, flooring, windows, arms, legs, bird-songs, the drone of an engine, etc. Our experience includes both sensory and conceptual components – the two realms. And these two components are so closely associated that we experience them as one – until, that is, philosophical analysis enables us to tease them apart.

What happens when one component functions without the other? Consider the words of the great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant: “Concepts without percepts are empty; percepts without concepts are blind”.

I said, *ideally*, the relationship between the conceptual realm and the sensory realm was one of understanding. It isn't always so: there are many experiences that we don't understand, many ideas that baffle us. Given the complexity of our sensory and conceptual realms, you can see that perfect accord between the two is a tall order. But this is another way of putting the philosopher's truth-goal: complete understanding, a concept for every sensation and a clear sensation for every concept.

We will return to these structural matters throughout this course. The Basic Picture of Philosophy is a sketch of the basic terms of humanity's quest for knowledge, itself central to our quest for the good life.

### Term Summary

Representation: representation is the human mental means of depicting some reality.

Concept: a concept is a general, thought representation.

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Sensation: a sensation is a particular, felt representation.

Intension: the intension of a concept is the meaning or signification of that concept.

Extension: the extension of a concept is the set of items that the concept refers to in virtue of its intension.

Understanding: understanding is recognition of a concept's intension in a member of its extension.

### **Ask Yourself:**

To complete this lesson, you should think about and "process" what you have read. Ask yourself the following questions, and review the reading until you are able to answer them readily. Bear in mind that some questions pertain to information stated explicitly, above, while others may require some thought, on your part.

1. What is the Basic Picture of Philosophy? What does that picture include?
2. What is the "conceptual realm of thought"?
3. What is the "sensory realm"?
4. How are the two realms, sensory and conceptual, ideally related?
5. What does it mean to *understand*, exactly? Can you give an example?