It is section 4.0312 of the Tractatus where Wittgenstein introduces his Grundgedanke, or fundamental idea. Wittgenstein states, “My fundamental idea is that the ‘logical constants’ are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the logic of facts.” What Wittgenstein means by logical constants are the relations of elementary logic (‘v’, ‘&’, etc) and the symbols of quantification. When he says that logical constants are not representatives Wittgenstein means that when they are used in sentences, or propositions, about states of affairs of the world, they do not symbolize, or project on to, objects in the world. The implications of this fundamental idea when considered in the context in which Wittgenstein himself presents the idea, are far reaching. It is from this idea that Wittgenstein is later able to conclude that facts about the world must exist independent of one another.

In order to fully grasp Wittgenstein’s argument for his fundamental idea, it is important to first understand the background in which they are presented. First of all, when it is said that logical constants do not stand for objects, it is meant that they do not represent objects in Wittgensteins abstract sense of necessary unalterable elements of reality, not the everyday things normally referred to as objects. The objects of this sense are the elementary things that arrange themselves as states of affairs of reality. Secondly, and most crucial to Wittgenstein’s program, is that the fundamental idea is presented in the context of his picture theory of facts. According to Wittgenstein, statements about the world, in any type of language, must be seen as pictures. Names and words of relations are signs that stand for things, or the elementary objects, in the world. These signs represent states of affairs concerning the world through the relationships occurring between them. These relationships, between the signs, in a given proposition, or statement about the world, are to represent the actual relationships between the actual objects in the world that the names stand for. If a proposition is correct, that is, if it is true, then the objects in the world do stand in the relations given by the proposition. Just before introducing the fundamental idea, in the very same passage in which it is given, Wittgenstein asserts the necessity of the picture view, and explains that it is only through this means of presentation that statements about the world can be made. He explains, also in 4.0312 that, “The possibility of propositions is based on the principle that objects have signs as their representatives.” This statement says that the only reason we can say anything about the world, true or not, is because of the fact that the objects that make up the facts correspond to signs in our language. Wittgenstein's fundamental idea is presented in connection with his picture theory of propositions, therefore the only correct way in which his arguments for this idea can be considered is in connection with the picture theory. The final issue that must be addressed, before the reasons behind the fundamental idea can be seen, is that a proposition's sense, what it says about the world or its information content, is the only thing relevant to the proposition. On this issue Wittgenstein appeals to the concept of truth conditions. If two propositions are true under the exact same conditions of the world and only under these exact conditions, then they must be seen as identical. There can nothing more said about the world, by a proposition, beyond that belonging to its truth conditions.

With the background set up, the arguments in favor of the fundamental idea fall easily into place. Any proposition or statement containing any of the logical constants can be recast, into another statement containing different logical constants, without changing the truth conditions of the original statement. For example (p ⊃ q) and (~ p v q), are true on exactly the same conditions. The same sort of situations arise for ‘&’ and ‘iff’. Statements of the form ‘~ p’ and ‘p’ can be cast into infinitely many different forms simply by adding two extra ‘~’ in front of them. For quantifiers the situation is a little more complicated, but essentially the same. Existential quantifiers can be thought of as an infinitely long disjunction, whereas quantifiers of the form ‘All x are . . .’ can be thought of as an infinitely long conjunction. From here it can be seen that the same recasting program that applied to the other logical constants would apply to the quantifiers as well. The fact that this act of translation preserves the truth conditions implies that the original statement, with its logical constants, and the new statement, with its different logical constants, have the same sense. Because they have the same sense, and the sense of a proposition is all the matters, the two statements are equivalent, two different ways to say the same thing. When viewed in light of the picture theory the two propositions would seem to represent two different
pictures. The logical signs in each statement would differ causing the overall pictures to differ. However, the fact that the statements senses are identical, requires that the pictures, represented by the statements to also be identical, which is the essence of the picture theory. The two pictures being identical, implies that the differences between them that were first noticed are actually not differences at all. If the logical constants differ between the propositions, but the pictures do not, it must be the case that the logical constants add nothing to the picture. If logical constants contribute nothing to the picture, then they cannot represent signs or names contained in the picture.

Now that he has ruled out logical constants as representing objects, Wittgenstein asks the question of whether logical constants can instead be objects themselves. His argument here is similar to that of before. It has been seen that logical constants can play no role in the pictures of the statements that contain them. As well as drawing the conclusion that logical constants cannot be elements in the picture, Wittgenstein can also go another route saying that nor can they be represented by any elements in the picture. If elementary signs in pictures referred to the logical constants, our two pictures of statements with different logical constants would differ in that respect. However the pictures cannot differ because their senses are the same. The conclusion to be drawn is that elementary signs in pictures do not refer to logical constants. This result along with Wittgenstein’s statement just prior to the fundamental idea that, “…objects have signs as their representatives,” is enough to answer the question in the negative. It can thus be concluded, that logical constants cannot be signs representing objects in pictures, nor can they be objects represented by signs in pictures.