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An Ontological Turn in the Philosophy of Photography

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ABSTRACT. The contemporary philosophy of photography has yet to take the ontological turn that has occurred in philosophy of science and mind. There, an attempt has been made to move beyond a simplistic epistemological discourse of objectivism and subjectivism and engage the ontology of powers, dispositions and tendencies. Dispositional realism requires that one take into account surfaces, ambient conditions and the psychobiology of the observing subject in understanding perceptual knowledge. By accepting a powers ontology, whereby stimuli do not lawfully give rise to percepts but contingent mechanisms do, one fully embraces realism. The aesthetics of photography shows many cases of an epistemological bias or, if “causal,” an ontologically narrow idea of causality. Even Walton’s counterfactual dependence view is basically an empiricist approach. Just as in the philosophy of mind and the discussion of perception such a viewpoint remains vulnerable. A causal realist can admit that photographic images are equivocal but affirm a deeper kind of realism that takes into account the nature of the depicted, the environmental conditions, and the photographic apparatus (and its range of sensitivities). The singular view of a photo, like a phenomenal quale, does not always disclose reality but the very characteristics of the qualia, the grain and phenomenology, give us larger clues. Dispositional realism moves beyond the fixation on the individual photo (quale) and insists that to surpass a stale debate between objectivists and constructivists one must recognize that any photo (as any experience) is part of a larger context wherein dispositional properties are manipulated, giving rise to sometimes unpredictable results.

I. Introduction

Encouraged by developments in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, our wish is to investigate an ontological turn in the philosophy of photography. Perhaps this is a good time for such a meta-exercise. Within the

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aesthetics of photography there seems to be a large consensus about the overall transparency of photographs, except for minor points that form the majority of debates. For example, Dominic Lopes has questioned whether a drawing can be transparent like a photograph. Geert Gooskens believes that digital photos are just as transparent as film photos. Perhaps the most serious challenge to the status quo is Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskins' argument that photographs do not contain egocentric information and therefore they do not seem to be true prosthesis, as argued by Walton.

We approach this situation from a transverse angle. After studying activities in other fields, we ask quite simply whether the aesthetics of photography is too epistemologically based. Can it respond, not to epistemic objectivity, but to ontological reality? Does its focus put too much weight on the photograph, which might be likened to experiences of the epistemic subject, without considering the larger systems at play with their own properties, that might give rise to that experience?

In this sense, our project is relatively modest. We propose to look to post-positivist metaphysics and more specifically dispositionalist approaches to mind for what can be gained in the aesthetics of photography. In particular, we will argue that the realist approach in general of someone like Christopher Norris puts us in closer contact with ethical questions and more narrowly the approach to qualia of Gary Hatfield allows us to talk more meaningfully about what sense a color might be objective. Transposed to photography, we anticipate a more direct approach to questions about reality and objectivity.

Switching to a post-positivist realist approach means giving up latent Humean ideas of regularity, which are largely epistemic, and moving the conception of causality toward one that is radically contingent, and based on multi-causal factors. We submit that the overly epistemic view of photography, wherein we have inputs and expect outputs, is uncomfortably close to old-fashioned positivism and the tendency to argue with counterfactuals – although it is not pressed too hard – can harness one to a Humean idea of regularity. If instead, realism is embraced wholesale, we become comfortable answering about whether some drawing or photographic device will yield accurate outputs, “I don't know?” We would have to disengage explanation from prediction.

Our article will have three parts. First we want to sketch the contem-

porary situation in photographic aesthetics and the nature of debates taking place, then we will review briefly new approaches to causality and realist metaphysics, paying special debate to Gary Hatfield's dispositionalist model of qualia, and then propose some ideas for rethinking photography on different lines.

2. The Contemporary Situation

As we noted before, much of the most interesting discussion in the aesthetics of photography constitute challenges to major paradigms like that of Kendall Walton, which focus on questions of evidence and accuracy of photos or other media in relation to photography. Here we want to draw attention to a couple of points in discussions by Dominic Lopes and Geert Gooskens. They accurately represent points about their theories but we hope you can see where more discussion is called for.

In "The Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency," Dominic Lopes writes that the idea that photographs are transparent should not,

be confused with a claim about their accuracy. A photograph is necessarily accurate in the sense that it carries information by means of a causal process. In another sense, a photograph is inaccurate, since it may cause or dispose one to have false beliefs about the objects photographed. A colour photograph of a red apple carries information about the apple's redness, though it may carry the information by having a colour indistinguishable from that of an orange seen in ordinary light, with the result that we are liable to believe falsely that the apple is orange in colour.¹

Similarly, Geert Gooskens dismisses composite photos as a challenge to photographic transparencies because they are not actually photos:

There is, for example, a picture of a meeting between Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman that, in reality, never took place. Two digital pictures of the actors were merged to make it appear as if they had met. This, however, is not an argument against the epistemological

¹ Dominic Lopes, "The Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency," *Monist* 112 (2003): 335-48.

realism of the digital photograph either, because the picture in question is not a photograph – the one in which Cruise and Hoffman appear to meet each other – is not a photograph at all. It is a collage which uses epistemologically realistic photographic elements to produce a picture which is not itself a photograph.²

In both of these cases, there is a way in which the photograph is not impugned: in the first example the photograph is transparent but we don't know it, it produces false knowledge; in the second example, the photographs of the two actors are still transparent as for instance in the face and fist of one of Walton's example, Jerry Uelsmann's *Symbolic Mutation*. Sometimes we can see that the result is impossible, as in this case, but there are others in which we would arrive at the opposite effect as before: a picture is not transparent but we think it is. It seems that we are often led to such qualifications. We affirm transparency but protect the idea through a concession: that a photo need not be accurate. If we compare this to the epistemology of vision, we would probably be led to think about conditions of viewing or the way the eye processes information.

Lopes does make reference to "ordinary light," some information about conditions. But in vision, for example, normal seeing is determined by a variety of causal factors. There can be a defect of the physiology of the eye, or simply unusual ambient conditions (dusk and mesopic vision), etc. Rob Hopkins, in his important "factive" theory of photography, is perhaps one of the few to recognize how such experiences are shot through with normativity and he puts norms at the center of his discussion.³

In a classic argument, Maurice Mandelbaum countered Moore's and Ryle's naive realism by switching cases where object and property often align - vision - to another sense modality like hearing, where they do not.⁴

² Geert Gooskens, "The Digital Challenge: Photographic Realism Revisited," *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 3 (2011): 115-125.

³ Rob Hopkins, "Factive Pictorial Experience: What's Really Special about Photographs?"

Nous 46 (2012): 709-31. Perhaps the main difference between our view and Hopkins' is that his is a largely epistemological account, foregrounding normative elements it presumes, whereas ours is ontological, explaining via powers or dispositions where these norms come from.

⁴ Maurice Mandelbaum, *Philosophy, Science and Sense-Perception* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964).

Gary Hatfield has recently done the same thing to counter Stroud's naive realist argument by switching talk from vision - the yellow of a lemon - to felt heaviness.⁵ Where Stroud is on pretty good ground in arguing that there is no difference between saying:⁶

- (1) Jones sees yellow.
- (2) Jones sees something yellow.

The argument falls apart with weight, for it is impossible to collapse these two statements:

- (1') Smith feels heaviness.
- (2') Smith feels something heavy.

Now we are completely with a quality without existential import.

If we cannot collapse statements of quality with statements of being, then we need to challenge ourselves to come up with a better way to deal with those statements of quality. Using a similar process of variation pushes us to realize that response-dependent talk of ordinary observers and traditional photography, while understandable, leaves something unsaid. For the sake of argument, we want to push these examples on analogy to examples of response-dependence (R-D) in moral judgment, which presses the issue about realism in photographs. For example, Christopher Norris boils down R-D approaches of Crispin Wright or Mark Johnston that "any action x is pious, good, worthy of moral approbation:"

if and only if that action is such as to elicit an approving response on the part of moral agents fully apprised of the relevant facts and circumstances and possessing an adequate discriminative power to arrive at the right (ethically justified) verdict.⁷

⁵ Gary Hatfield, "The Reality of Qualia," *Erkenntnis* 66 (2007): 133-68; reprinted in *Perception and Cognition: Essays in the Philosophy of Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2009).

⁶ Barry Stroud, *The Quest for Reality: Subjectivism and the Metaphysics of Color* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷ Christopher Norris, "The Perceiver's Share," *Language, Logic and Epistemology: A Modal-Realist Approach* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 154.

This synthesis to settle the score between realism and relativism is pushed by Norris *ad absurdum* when he discusses examples of real moral approbation like Apartheid or cruelty to animals. The R-D theorist has an inability to acknowledge transcendent moral truths, or for that matter cases of error. It turns out to be merely quasi-realist. This leads us back to qualia and a theory of color – not as a warranted judgment – but a “psychobiological property” for inspiration about photography.

3. Post-Positivist Realism and Dispositionalism

In the 1970s, realism began to be taken seriously again with Harre and Madden’s *Causal Powers* and Roy Bhaskar’s *Realist Theory of Science*.⁸ These reforms were intended to address the shortcomings of the standard positivist account of science. Such early efforts have given rise to various kinds of causal realism, dispositionalism and even essentialism.⁹ In general they have moved discussion away from the logic of confirmation and the covering-law model toward a realist idea of interacting strata of reality wherein confirmation is complicated, prediction is almost ignored, and focus is on the characteristics of the strata capable of producing such conjunctions. The event view of Hume has been traded for a powers view closer to Aristotle.

Part of the Humean legacy is counterfactuals. Here is Walton’s original formulation in differentiating a photograph of a dinosaur and a painting of one:

if the scene had been different - if there had been no dinosaur, for example - the pictures would have been different....Photographs are

⁸ Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975); Rom Harré and E. H. Madden, *Causal Powers: a Theory of Natural Necessity* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1975).

⁹ For overviews, see Ruth Groff (ed.), *Revitalizing Causality: Realism About Causality in Philosophy and Social Science*, London, Routledge, 2007) and Ruth Groff and John Greco (eds.), *Powers and Capacities in Philosophy: the New Aristotelianism* (London: Routledge, 2013). See works by Nancy Cartwright, Anjan Chakravarty, Stephen Mumford, and Brian Ellis and Jonathan Jacobs. For overviews, see Ruth Groff (ed.), *Revitalizing Causality: Realism About Causality in Philosophy and Social Science*, London, Routledge, 2007) and Ruth Groff and John Greco (eds.), *Powers and Capacities in Philosophy: the New Aristotelianism* (London: Routledge, 2013). See works by Nancy Cartwright, Anjan Chakravarty, Stephen Mumford, and Brian Ellis and Jonathan Jacobs.

counterfactually dependent on the photographed scene even if the beliefs (and other intentional attitudes) of the photographer are held fixed.¹⁰

Counterfactuals express a “nomic” or lawful relationship based on a conditional connection. It is inherently directed to explanation and prediction and is fruitful in aesthetics. However, a look at the philosophy of science has shown its weakness. At its extreme in David Lewis’ theory, counterfactuals are admittedly anti-realist because they engage in alternative worlds. In contrast, a transfactual relationship would be “normic,” or norm-based and universal.¹¹ Counterfactuals turn out to be a subset of the transfactual; they are observed and confirmed regularities reflecting underlying (real) properties of the objects under discussion.

This is not a major matter for the philosophy of photography; the use of counterfactuals does not generally carry with it a full endorsement of Lewisian possible worlds.¹² The only explicit discussion of the metaphysics involved is Cohen and Meskins, who follow Dretske in his “probabilistic, counterfactual-supporting, connection between independent variables.”¹³ However, things change when we press the affirmation “a change in the object will necessitate a change in the photograph.” Will it? Walton, Lopes, Cohen and Meskins all take for granted that changes are counterfactually dependent. But there can be minor changes in objects that are

¹⁰ Kendall Walton, “Transparent Pictures: on the Nature of Photographic Realism,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 264. See also Lopes, “Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency,” 439: “above a threshold of acuity, any visible difference in a tomato would have made a difference in the visible properties of a photograph of the tomato and thereby in the content of the experience of seeing the photograph;” and Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskins, “On the Epistemic Value of Photographs,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62 (2004): 197–210: “had your ancestor been smiling rather than frowning, the photograph of her would have looked different.”

¹¹ For the distinction see “counterfactual/transfactual,” Mervyn Hartwig, ed., *Dictionary of Critical Realism* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹² As Jonathan Jacobs writes (“A powers theory of modality: or, how I learned to stop worrying and reject possible worlds,” *Philosophical Studies*, 15 [2010]: 227–248), “Lewis is perhaps the only philosopher to believe in the existence of the totality of Lewisian worlds.” As Jacobs shows, however, even the use of possible worlds as “abstract representations” are constrained to Humean thought because it presumes that necessity must be supplied from without the properties of objects.

¹³ Cohen and Meskins, 7.

indiscernible or irrelevant. How do we account for these? Cohen and Merskins' example specifically invokes *ceteris paribus* conditions already mentioned above. To believe in counterfactual dependence is to smuggle in a normative idea of the photograph. The definition of the transfactual is that its consequent may not be realized. We submit that this simple change in orientation of the problem has consequences.

The problems with counterfactual dependence can be dramatized with an example from color. Objectivists would like to say that color just is a property of surfaces (Hardin) but more importantly, as in the aesthetics of photography, is the condition that these properties are transparent to experience. We see the color and we register it objectively. However, there are many possible points when a color is not seen correctly. Color can be changed by a defective visual system - going from the retina to the cortex, unusual conditions of illumination, borders and surrounding surfaces and objects.

To take just one quick example of the relational effect of reflectance, illumination, and spatial disposition on color perception, we can look at Alan Gilchrist's classic lightness experiments, wherein he demonstrated the effect of perceptual organization on lightness (the perceived reflectance).¹⁴ It had been known that in impoverished disk/anulus displays, lightness is perceived as relative ratios of brightness. By manipulating the planarity of test patches, as seen in the image, Gilchrist led the visual system of observers to assign them to different planes under different illuminations. Hence, their perceived reflectance could change wildly, from light gray to dark gray.

We take inspiration from Gary Hatfield's recent discussion of qualia to resolve some of these problems. First of all, it is just too much to expect that we can get an idea of a phenomenal color unproblematically while experiencing it. This would be to follow Michael Tye and the later Fred Dretske in their controversial idea that qualia are intentional properties that just so happen to be transparent in disclosing the actual properties of things.¹⁵ Instead, Hatfield regards qualia like colors to be:

¹⁴ See Alan Gilchrist, "The Perception of Surface Whites and Blacks," *Scientific American* 240 (1979): 112-125.

¹⁵ Fred Dretske, *Naturalizing the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Michael Tye, *Consciousness, Color, and Content* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

a disposition (or its basis) for producing subject-dependent experiences of certain kinds in perceivers, which experience may properly be called 'qualia.'

To anticipate our argument, if for Hatfield qualia are not that which we see but *that by which we see*, photographic signs are similar. They are the means of seeing the reality beyond them. Oftentimes we can remark on the photographic signs themselves but generally their purpose is to point beyond themselves. They are the currency of seeing photographically at all.

It is interesting to compare some of the language in the philosophy of photography and in the qualia debate. Tye and the later Dretske believe that color is a quality that is metaphysically transparent: we see through the qualia to the color of the object or the surface. Without forcing the argument, without a dispositionalist account, Walton or any other defender of a transparency thesis has the conundrum of forcing an epistemological position into a metaphysical position, which Bhaskar has called the epistemic fallacy. *Generally*, photographs like vision bring us unproblematically to their object but it is the exception, brought up in many challenges to the causal theory, that is the issue. As with the dispositionalist account of qualia, with photography we become more comfortable with experiences over being, with the look and phenomenology of a photo - what it seems to show - rather than passing directly to what it shows. Here, we hope, we have come close to the delicate balance of the artificial and causal found in a theory of photography like that of Rudolf Arnheim.¹⁶

For example, looking at Lee Friedlander's *Colorado* (1967) (FIGURE 1) we see a dilemma that is happily common to both vision and photography. We can imagine walking toward this store in real life, which our vision tracks as we approach it, and correspondingly gets larger. The part that we see transparently is the portrait of Kennedy. There is another part, however, which is more confusing, the reflection of the street, including the photographer. This creates a bit of indecision as to whether the reflected cars are just that or real cars seen through the window. So we have to sift between these two kinds of information to navigate correctly. Friedlander

¹⁶ E.g. Rudolf Arnheim, "On the Nature of Photography," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1974): 149-161.

does something more, however, by merging these two elements and his reflected body seems to be continued by the portrait of Kennedy. So a new expressive idea emerges.



FIGURE 1. Lee Friedlander, *Colorado*, 1967.

So how do we deal with the reliability of traditional photography? According to a realist account, cameras are like the evolved representational capacities of the human visual system. Photography is not accurate absolutely, however; like the eye it has evolved as a truth-tracking mechanism. If the eye has evolved over time to maximally afford information about the environment to the human organism, so too has the photographic camera. The early use of analog photography, film and digital photography as documentary devices, and the manufacture of cameras for this purpose, ensures that it too is constructed to take advantage of causal properties that track truth.

In conclusion, let us return to Cohen and Meskins' challenge to Walton. Their argument, even in its rejection of Walton's conclusion, is we

believe begging for ontologization. By invoking the early Dretske ('70-'80), the Dretske of non-epistemic and epistemic seeing, they are precisely holding to a critical realist approach to seeing, whereby some content is epistemic and some not, some informed of belief ("doxastic") and some not.¹⁷ The key is to see the non-epistemic seeing as part of the psychobiological nature of seeing. Just as some counterexamples of Walton require a larger perspective to find their place, so too with their falsification of Walton's theory we require a larger perspective. Does photography give egocentric information? We, the viewer, have no counterfactual relation with information in the photography. If we change our position (of course, the photo will not) then we do not see a change in the photo. As we have said, this is Humean thinking, with antecedents and possible lawful causal outcomes. The framing of the question does not allow us to think about the original camera and *its* counterfactual relationship to the portrayed scene. Perhaps this is a remnant of the transparent idea of the standard viewer looking at a standard photo, made by a standard camera. But the transparency of photography is just as much about film and cameras, lighting and space, as it is about photos themselves. Keeping the door open to an ontological turn in the philosophy of photography allows us to remember this.

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