Philosophy of Photography Naturalized

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Over the past several decades two philosophical methodologies have emerged in the course of investigations into photography. The first, which I call the Platonistic approach, involves revealing necessary or sufficient conditions involved in concepts closely associated with photography, and then explores conceptual relations between these, seeking leverage for revision, and then offering such revisions as advancements in our knowledge of the medium.

The second, which I call the Aristotlean approach, instead canvasses high-level functions associated photographic technology and then examines ways in which photographers use those functions in contexts ranging from family snapshots to the production of contemporary art. This methodology also delves into how those high-level functions emerge from the interplay of lower-level functions manifested by the components out of which the technologies are assembled. As photographic technologies develop, the high-level functions change, and advancements in our knowledge take the form of cataloguing such changes and of exploring how the new functions are pressed into service by photographers who are addressing the needs of social environments in which they find themselves. Less often, but still importantly, such advancements take the form of discerning the interplay of lower-level functions with the aim of understanding the potentials or limitations of high-level functions in addressing the needs of the social environments as they are at a given point in time.

In what follows I outline a recent application of the Platonistic approach and argue that the methodology it adopts to gain leverage for conceptual revision is flawed and that, more generally, the approach does little to advance our understanding of photography. I then sketch one application of the Aristotlean approach and ponder the larger question of how that

approach might have application, not only to our understanding of photography, but to our investigations into the philosophy of art generally.

Roger Scruton and the New Theorists

The most influential application of the Platonistic approach is found in Roger Scruton's argument that viewers cannot take an aesthetic interest in ideal photographs and that, therefore, ideal photographs cannot be artworks (Scruton 1981). Suppose that a painter thinks of a man on a horse as possessing authority, arrogance even. In creating an image of him she can use her control over details to arrange the eyes in a way that gives the sense of authority, or arrange the lie of the arm in a way that reveals the arrogant character (Scruton 1981, p. 581). In so doing she creates not only an image, but as well an image that is a representation, where a representation is defined as an image that presents "not just the object portrayed, but [as well] the [artist] seeing that object (Scruton 2009, p. 451). Viewers encountering such representations can recuperate those thoughts of the painter, and in so doing they, by definition, take an aesthetic interest in those paintings.

But now suppose that a photographer likewise thinks of the man on the horse as authoritative and arrogant and that he wants to use photographic technology to form a representation imbued with such thoughts. If we accept a traditional definition of an ideal photograph as having been formed automatically, by means of the camera mechanism, a mechanism that preserves independence from beliefs or other mental states of the photographer, he is expressively hamstrung, as such independence prevents him from arranging details in the eyes or in the lie of the arm in the ways available to the painter. On this traditional definition of ideal photographs, the photographer cannot produce a representation and, therefore, viewers cannot take an aesthetic interest in his photograph. Absent such potential to generate aesthetic interest, ideal photographs, unlike paintings, cannot be artworks.

Likewise adopting the Platonistic approach, Diarmuid Costello and Dawn Wilson offer a response to Scruton's controversial thesis. Taking as their starting point the transduction of

light energy into chemical energy on a roll of film or electrical energy on a digital sensor, instances of which they refer to as “photographic event[s]” (Costello 2018, p. 78), they argue that many of the techniques photographers use to gain control over their images in ways that can render them representations in Scruton’s sense are in fact steps in the formation of ideal photographs or, in their own terminology, are involved in instances of “photography proper” (Costello 2018, p. 78).

> If a photographic event is necessary, but not sufficient, for the creation of a photograph, then all those subsequent stages of image processing—without which there could be no visible image—should in principle count as strictly photographic. If one cannot generate a photograph without the use of such means, they can hardly be regarded as incidental to “photography proper.” (Costello 2018, p. 80)

> So understood, a “photograph” is a visual image, the causal history of which necessarily implicates a photographic event... (Costello 2018, p. 78)

> Darkroom techniques such as dodging and burning, double-exposure, or use of multiple enlargers are central to the history of the discipline; just as the manipulation of variables such as hue, contrast, saturation and other forms of post-production, such as gradient mapping, are already central to that of digital photography. So long as they implicate a photographic event they are photographic—irrespective of whether they preserve belief-independence. (Costello 2018, p. 88)

Photographic events result in arrays of altered energy states on film or digital sensors, arrays that are not visible. Because photographs are, by definition, visible, such arrays are not photographs. They are better referred to as mere "registers" (Wilson 2021, p. 168). But, because a photographic event is, by definition, a necessary condition for a photograph, all the processing steps "necessarily implicated" in rendering those registers visible become part of the definition of "photography proper" (Costello 2018, p. 78). Thus, contra Scruton's definition, ideal photographs need not have been formed by wholly automatic, mechanical means, means that preserve independence from beliefs or other thoughts of the photographer. And, because techniques such as double exposure or other forms of post-production can in this way be part of the formative process of ideal photographs, the possibility is opened for photographers to have the sort of control over their images that permits those images to be imbued with thoughts about their subjects and, thus, to be representations. Viewers can therefore take an aesthetic interest in photographs—even ideal photographs—and so photographs can be artworks after all.

Costello and Wilson offer such reasoning as advances in our understanding of photography. They dub Scruton's assumption that automaticity is at the core of the definition of an ideal photograph the "Orthodox Theory," and contrast this with a "New Theory" that dispenses with such orthodoxy and instead defines "photography proper" in terms of visible images that implicate photographic events along with any processing steps necessarily implicated in getting from the event to the image (Costello 2018, p. 74-78).

I do not share their conviction that such reasoning offers genuine advances, and for two reasons. My first concern questions the means by which they gain leverage for definitional revision. Because photographs are, by definition, visible, and because registers are not visible, Costello and Wilson argue that all the processing steps required to render a register visible are part of the definition of "photography proper." These processing steps are "necessarily

implicated" in the formation of the visible image and it is thus this modality that constitutes the fulcrum point for their revision of the definition of "photography proper." But how exactly are we to interpret this modality? Given that they seek to revise a definition of "photography proper" one would expect a very strong interpretation, perhaps as a *logical* necessity. But it is not clear that they are entitled to a modality with such strength. Instead, the various processing steps that yielded a visible image on the basis of the register, if they are in any sense necessary, would be necessary only in a weaker *nomological* sense, one according to which, given the physical laws governing such processing steps, no visible image could have been produced without those steps.

But my more fundamental objection is with the Platonistic methodology itself or, at least, with its application to investigations into technologies such a those associated with photography. Photographic technology is, after all, just another contemporary technology, one akin to automotive and telephonic technologies, and so we should expect that the sorts of investigations that yield understanding in relation to those latter technologies would be the same ones that would yield understanding in relation to photography. Looking to automotive technology takes us in the direction of the Aristotlean methodology outlined at the outset.

Functional Knowledge and Engineering Knowledge

Call the two types of knowledge associated with the Aristotlean approach "functional knowledge" and "engineering knowledge." With respect to cars, much functional knowledge is quite simple. I know, for example, that when I turn the steering wheel clockwise my car turns to the right and when I turn it counterclockwise it turns to the left. Matters become less simple, however, when we examine the high-level functions of cars in relation to their environments. Suppose that, at a very general level, cars are understood as technologies that function to

transport a small number of people and a limited amount of cargo medium distances without physical exertion and under protection from the weather. The success of this technology at performing this function both inexpensively and reliably has had profound impacts on urban design and average physical fitness, and anyone professing knowledge of such technology must be aware of such impacts and the normative dimensions associated with them.

Engineering knowledge in relation to automotive technology is likewise sometimes simple, as when someone learns how the high-level function of the steering wheel is realized in a rack-and-pinion assembly, or sometimes complex, as when one learns how kinetic energy for locomotion can be derived from chemical energies stored in gasoline, in hydrogen or in electrical batteries. Such engineering knowledge also has implications for high-level functions and thus for our understanding of the limitations of what high-level functions might be manifested. For example, limitations on the storage of energy in electrical batteries has implications up at the functional level in terms of distances electric cars can travel without being recharged, with the result that those using such cars frequently experience "range anxiety."

It is important to note that both functional knowledge and engineering knowledge are constantly in flux as technologies develop. With regard to automotive functional knowledge, in the early days cars functioned as gadgets for the wealthy, as they were so unreliable that owners had to hire technicians on a full time basis just to keep them operating. These days, however, cars can undergo many months of daily use without need for any maintenance beyond filling the gas tank, or charging the battery, and keeping an eye on the tire pressure. With regard to engineering knowledge, an understanding of carburetors or clutches has been replaced with an understanding of fuel injectors or torque converters. Such flux stands in sharp contrast with the sort of definitional knowledge sought by those who might adopt the

Platonistic methodology in relation to cars. Aristotleans who wish to understand cars and their roles in our society and impacts on our planet are not theorists who search for stable, essential qualities of cars, such as an automotive event (a transduction of chemical energy into kinetic energy) and all the steps necessarily implicated in making that kinetic energy available to ordinary drivers, with the aim of determining what counts as automotive technology proper. Instead, they explore the ever-changing functional capacities of cars, and how those capacities are materially realized, all in relation to urban planning, global warming, public health and other pressing issues of our times.

The structure of Aristotlean knowledge in relation to photography is strikingly similar. The list of functional capacities of photographic technology is familiar. Such technology enhances our epistemic capacities, both by expanding our perceptual sensitivities beyond what they are naturally capable of (via telephoto lenses, sensitivity to electromagnetic radiations beyond the visible spectrum, high shutter speeds capable of freezing action) and by offering warrant for perceptual beliefs thereby formed that would be absent had the images been manugraphic rather than photographic (imagine Steve Austin of '70s television fame, taking up painting in his retirement, using his enhanced bionic eye to freeze the motion and on this basis create sketches of Muybridge's famous galloping horse, and our lack of warrant for beliefs formed on the basis of those sketches relative to Muybridge's actual photographs). Such high-level functions also intersect scientific, surveillance and photojournalistic practices and, as Arthur Danto (1998) noted, with ethical considerations, given that high-speed shutters can result in unflattering depictions of persons, and given that the special warrant offered by photographs can reveal truths about persons that are at odds with the appearances they autonomously decide to project. An additional—and coveted—high-level function is the capacity of photographs rather than manugraphs to furnish viewers with a special sense of

contact with the subjects of those photographs, thereby explaining the frequent placement of photographs of departed loved ones on desks and nightstands. And, of course, there is the large and fascinating question of how these epistemic, ethical and phenomenological functions of photographic technology are used (or abused) by artists.

The development of engineering knowledge in relation to photographic technology is a nascent field or, at least, it is in terms of the development of knowledge about how high-level functions *that are of interest to philosophers* are realized by arrays of lower-level functional units. The distinction is both important and unimportant. It is important in the sense that knowledge of the operation of high-level functions, such as how the release of the shutter button leads to a timed exposure of light-gathering sensor, is obviously highly developed in the minds of the engineers who designed the camera, and yet is of little interest to philosophers. But it is unimportant in the sense that such knowledge is of a kind with that which philosophers seek. In the same way that the designers of a shutter mechanism know the functional parameters of that mechanism—they know for example, the extent to which image created with it will be subject to distortions arising from the "rolling shutter" effect—philosophers seek engineering knowledge of the functions enumerated in the previous paragraph in order both to understand how photographic technology can furnish those functions and to understand what the limitations of that technology in those regards will be.

Kendall Walton is perhaps the first philosopher to seek engineering knowledge in relation to photography in a careful way. In his celebrated "Transparent Pictures," Walton (1981) takes as his starting point the contact-function or, as he calls it, the "immediacy" that photographs afford:

> ... in general, photographs and paintings (and comparable nonphotographic pictures) affect us very differently. Compare Francisco Goya's etchings *The Disasters of War* with the Civil War photographs by Mathew Brady and his associates...It is hard to resist describing the difference by saying that the photographs have a kind of immediacy or realism which the etchings lack. (Walton 1981, p. 247)

He then traces this capacity to the transparency of photographs and opacity of manugraphs, the transparency enabling photographs to function as windows through which "we see, quite literally, our dead relatives themselves when we look at photographs of them" (Walton 1981, p. 252). Such transparency is, in turn, realized in the mechanistic character of the photographic technology insofar as "[i]n order to see through the picture to the scene depicted, the viewer must have visual experiences which do not depend on the picture maker's beliefs in the way that paintings do" (Walton 1981, p.264).

I have argued that Walton is wrong in this latter regard (Walden 2016), but it is the general methodological point that is central to this discussion, and with this I concur. Unlike Costello, Scruton and Wilson, Walton is not interested in presenting a web of definitions, devising a rationale for altering one of them, and then pointing to a resultant logical consonances or dissonances as constituting an advancement in our understanding of photography. Instead, he takes as his starting point an important high-level function and then

postulates whatever lower-level functional units are required in order to explain how that high-level function can be manifested. His methodology is continuous with science, and in this sense he naturalizes philosophy of photography.

Walton's term for this mode of investigation is "theory construction" (Walton 2008, p. 110) and he endorsees it forcefully, devoting his American Society for Aesthetics Presidential Address to a discussion of it (Walton 2007). The language, however, can be misleading, as Costello refers to his Platonistic investigations as a mode of inquiry that seeks a new "theory of photography" (Costello 2017). Indeed, Costello divides current researchers into those who endorse the "Orthodox Theory" (2018, p.5) and those who endorse the "New Theory" (2018, p.7) the former defining "photography proper"(2018, p.78) in terms of "automaticity" (2018, p.6) and the latter defining it so as to include "necessarily implicated" processing steps lying between the photographic event and the photograph (Costello 2017, 2018). It is not for me to legislate on the proper use of the term 'theory', but to my mind Walton's usage lies much closer to historical usage of the term than does Costello's. Newton's resolution of phenomena such as apples falling from trees and orbiting satellites in terms of the mutual attraction of massive bodies governed the inverse-square law is the textbook case of theorizing, and this mode of inquiry does seem closer in structural terms to what I am calling engineering knowledge than it does to Costello's investigations. Regardless, and in order to avoid confusion, I use "engineering knowledge" to refer to this aspect of the Aristotlean methodology and avoid the term "theorizing" as much as possible.

Perhaps even more challenging than Walton's investigation into the contact-function of photography are investigations into how photographs function in terms of furnishing warrant for perceptual beliefs formed on the basis of looking at them. Understanding this function and its limitations, unlike understanding the function of a steering wheel, is a complex matter, as

instances of it supervene on a causal chain that includes, not only the photographic technology utilized by the photographer, but also the perceptual systems of viewers of the resultant photograph and whatever assemblies of first- and higher-order mental states that result from the operation of those systems and that constitute warrant for the perceptual beliefs that form in their minds. The required engineering knowledge will thus straddle both the operations of photographic technology and the operations of the human psyche. No doubt the automaticity of the photographic process will figure in this, but explaining how it does so without making implausible belief attributions to ordinary viewers of photographs is a surprisingly difficult task.

At the most challenging level, however, is the question of how the Aristotlean methodology may be pressed into the service of fostering our understanding of issues in the philosophy of art generally. Walton is sanguine in this regard, arguing that, in the same way that Newton's theory of gravitation yielded an understanding that united categories which, on our folk understanding of the world, were quite disparate (falling apples and orbiting moons, for example), the Aristotlean approach will likely render cherished distinctions within artworld discussions obsolete but then lump together various artworld phenomena with phenomena traditionally thought to be entirely unrelated to art (Walton 2007, §4).

I am likewise sanguine, although I foresee developments in our general understanding of art more often taking the form of discerning the functions of artworks in the most general terms and then investigating how those functions are realized in more basic functional units. In his final publication, Arthur Danto, drawing inspiration from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*—although not the inspiration that is ordinarily associated with the text—concludes that "...the artist finds ways to *embody* [an] idea in a sensory medium," illustrating this function with Kant's example of the artist who is tasked with conveying the god Jupiter's power, and who does so by painting an eagle with bolts of lightning in its claws. Given that the eagle is

Jupiter's bird and that being able to hold bolts of lightning a superhuman feat, the image conveys the thought in a way that stating "Jupiter is mighty" does not (Danto 2013, p. 123).

The example, as Danto acknowledges, is "somewhat impoverished" (2013, p.123) but its barebones character serves to render apparent at least two important underlying functional units. On the side of the artist, she has to draw on her knowledge of mythology and of the capacities of her audience, and use such knowledge to guide the formation of the image. Elsewhere, I call this skill the "craft of the mind" (Walden 2022), both to distinguish it from the traditional material craft skills historically thought to be the essence of art, and to emphasize that it is at least as difficult a skill to develop as those traditional skills. On the side of the audience, they must not only possess the requisite knowledge of mythology, but as well be prepared to recognize that the artist, by embodying meanings in a sensory medium, is enjoining them to have certain thoughts. This latter requirement is crucial, as it functions to maintain a distinction between art and advertising, and to thereby inject an ethical component into successful art.

This ethical component is highlighted an underappreciated essay by Jerry Fodor (1993). What, Fodor asks, distinguishes art from advertising? While these practices have in common that one party intends to effect changes in the cognitive status of another, they are distinct at least insofar as, in instances of the former, success in effecting the desired changes is not sufficient for success in the practice overall. Instead, for such success the audience must *recognize* that they are being enjoined to accept the (real or virtual) communicative intentions of the artist. Such recognition, in turn, is a matter of the formation of, and adjudication between, hypotheses about those communicative intentions. An artwork is thus a sensory medium with a structure that is "compatible with its having been made with the primary intention that it produce a certain effect on its audience, and that it be recognized by its

audience as intended to produce that effect" (1993, p. 51). Because recognition, understood in this way, is a highly cognitive process, it is one that exercises a human capacity that is at the heart of the Kantian ethical framework broadly understood. Whereas in successful advertising all parties may treat one another as means, in successful art all parties must treat one another as ends, and it is in this respect that successful art is, if Fodor is correct, necessarily ethical.

In this way, the artist imagined in Kant's example will delve into their knowledge of mythology and structure the image they produce with the anticipation that a similarly knowledgeable audience will recognize that they are being enjoined to think about Jupiter in a certain way. This is in contrast to an imagined advertiser who, let us say, uses an indiscernible image to cause their audience to develop a certain desire, perhaps a desire to purchase a new model of electric car. In both cases one party attempts to effect changes in the cognitive status of another party, but only in the former case do the success conditions require awareness of the character of the project. The advertiser has succeeded in their task even if their audience is none the wiser about what is going on; the artist has not.

Finally, it will be objected that the complex cognitive structures to which Fodor draws our attention are not the sorts of lower-level functional units that the Aristotlean has in mind when seeking engineering knowledge. Quasi-Gricean communicative reflexive conditions are a far cry from, say, the rack-and-pinion assemblies normally associated with the interests of an engineer. But while I grant this, we should not let it obscure essential similarities. In his understanding of art, Danto draws our attention to a very high-level *sociological* function, one that we should expect to be resolved into immediately lower-level *psychological* functional units, and Fodor's offered reflexive condition looks to be a good candidate in this latter regard. In principle, this reflexive condition could be resolved into more basic *neurological* functions, functions that might seem more of interest to an engineer, but the philosopher of art would

likely be no more interested in these than a student tasked with learning a high-level software function would be interested in how it is realized, ultimately, in the logic gates and transistors of the computer on which the software is running. Philosophers of art are thus engineers, but given that in all domains of engineering there is a division of labor, with the operation of the most basic functions understood by one group and the higher-level functions by another, we should expect no less in a suitably naturalized philosophy of art.

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