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Painting an Experience

*Las Meninas, Consciousness
and the Aesthetic Mode*

Paintings are usually paintings of *things*: a room in a palace, a princess, a dog. But what would it be to paint not those things, but the *experience of seeing* those things? *Las Meninas* is sufficiently sophisticated and masterfully executed to help us explore this question.

Of course, there are many kinds of paintings: some abstract, some conceptual, some with more traditional subjects. Let us start with a focus on *naturalistically depictive* paintings: paintings that aim to cause an experience in the viewer that is similar to the experience the viewer (or someone else) might have were they to see, in a way not mediated by paint, the subject of the painting. Of course, many or even most paintings do not strictly adhere to this aim; indeed, their artistry and expressiveness often consist in the ways in which this aim is subverted. For example, no viewer of the scene that *Las Meninas* depicts — not even King Philip IV and Queen Mariana themselves — would see what Velasquez paints in the mirror on the back wall. Other artists, such as Escher and Magritte, are even more blatant in their transgression of naturalism. But even in such cases, the aim of naturalistic depiction is the departure point for the aesthetic journey of perception and meaning.

Asking our question is a natural consequence of rejecting dualism: if experiences are as much a part of the natural world as canvases, courtiers and Chamberlains, then they, too, should be capable of being painted. On the other hand, only the visible can be depicted in the sense described above, and rejecting dualism does not bring with it the implication that everything that is, is visible. One answer to our question, then, is pessimistic: there can be no painting of an experience,

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because experiences cannot be seen. Unlike the Infanta Margarita, and like justice, the number two, or feudal obligation, experiences, on this view, are not visible. But is this pessimism tenable? Wittgenstein writes: 'The timidity does not seem to be merely associated, outwardly connected, with the face; but fear is alive there, alive, in the features' (Wittgenstein, 1953, §537). Similarly, McDowell (1978) maintains that we see another's pain in their expression, and their behaviour. To think otherwise invites solipsism.

So Velasquez produces his first, affirmative, answer to our question by construction: for example, he paints the Infanta Margarita's experience of mischievous recognition by painting her eyes and smile just *so*. But even more clearly do we perceive the experiences of *las meninas* themselves: the devotion of the maid to the Infanta Margarita's right, the calm guardedness of the maid to her left. Velasquez reminds us of what we have known all along: that for millennia, painters have depicted general types of mental states: fear, anger, love, joy, hate, resignation, compassion, sorrow. No doubt this is possible because of our embodied, perhaps innate, socio-perceptual abilities to understand the mental lives of others. But if so, it highlights the limitations of this form of experiential depiction. The fact that we are encountering a static painting from the 17th century, rather than engaging in a fully dynamic, embodied encounter with a person, means that only a subset of our folk-psychological capacities can be deployed. This in turn restricts this depictive mode to general, universal categories of experience, rendering it unable to communicate more particular, specific states of consciousness.

By referring to this as Velasquez's *first* answer, however, I have already suggested that this depictive mode is only a beginning. But how can an artist go further, and capture the exquisite particularity of what it is like to be a certain someone, at a certain time, place, situation? Certainly one can use the setting of the painting to place an experience in a context, thereby making it more particular: not just grief, but Mary's grief while holding her dead son; not just horror, but a resident of Guernica's horror on April 26th 1937; not just humour, but the Infanta Margarita's humour. But these are only descriptive, external, contingent aspects of the depicted experiences; they do not, in themselves, detail the intrinsic qualities of what it is like to have the particular experiences that happen to fall under those accidental descriptions. Of course, if one has some prior, independent knowledge of someone else's experience, the artist's appeal to these external facts may elicit from one that knowledge, to yield a perception of a very specific experience: 'Ah, yes, I recall the Chamberlain was very

angry that day when he visited the artist painting the Infanta Margarita and her *meninas*.' The *recherché* nature of this example aside, there is no doubt that such descriptive evocations of memory and inference play an important role in giving many paintings the significance that they are widely appreciated as having.

But we have yet to match Velasquez's ambitions. The painting of experience is not limited to the production of, on the one hand, perceptual surrogates, and on the other, associationist, inferential *aides memoire*. That there is more that can be done should be suspected from the fact that perception of neither of these products is a particularly aesthetic form of engagement. Rather, such interactions are mere applications of mundane perceptual/cognitive processes to the special case of viewing a painting. But of course one's relation to a painting is not (or not merely) a relation to a proxy for the world; we encounter paintings *as* paintings, as aesthetic objects, and bring to bear modes of perception and interpretation that we do not exercise in our everyday interactions with the world. A work of art invites us to commit a form of the pathetic fallacy, to see significance and meaning in the precise configurations of objects and their visual properties, in a way we would not normally do outside of the gallery. This need not require us to commit the intentional fallacy as well; this openness to significance need not look to the artist's intentions as the authoritative source of meaning. But neither is that capitulation forbidden to us.

The existence of an aesthetic context, then, permits Velasquez to engage us in non-mundane communicative modes. We may thus call his contribution to this dialogue an *aesthetic*, rather than naturalistic, depiction. One might be tempted to refer to the non-mundane role of these picture elements as *symbolic*, but that would obscure the fact that once the aesthetic stance is taken, the role the picture elements can take in contributing to significance need not rely on any conceptual, conventional, or intentional explicit interpretation of them *as* symbols by the viewer. It is partly because of this that the aesthetic in general, and *Las Meninas* in particular, can exude an aura of magic, transcendence, or the hyper-real.

To depict, then, what it is like to be an artist painting in the court of Philip IV, it is not enough for Velasquez to depict naturalistically, not enough for him to merely 'paint what he sees'. Rather, the artist marshals the available visual elements, through such techniques as highlighting, spatial distortion, inclusion/exclusion, detailing/abstracting, and occlusion, in such a way that the components of the scene that are crucial to signifying the aspects of his experience are brought forth and enabled.

Consider, for example, the painter's presence in the painting, as opposed to not being visually present at all, or being present only from the first-person point of view, such as an arm with brush in the foreground. A literal, naturalistic depiction of what the artist sees would not take this form, unless one were to suppose that Velasquez is painting in front of a large mirror. There are several reasons for resisting this common interpretation, not least that it makes inexplicable the appearance of the King and Queen in the back mirror. Rather, the artist depicts himself from the perspective of the King and Queen seated in front of him, having their portrait painted while being watched by the Princess. To suppose that one's experience must always be egocentric, never allowing for explicit consideration of oneself, or one's relation to others that are not in the direct line of one's gaze, is to simultaneously under-appreciate the richness of consciousness and underestimate the depictive power of painting. The content of one's experience is not exclusively visual; Velasquez uses the aesthetic power of painting to visually evoke this non-visual content, such as the awareness of one's presence, one's station, one's similarity to and differences from those around one.

Another example is the presence of the paintings on the wall, enclosing the artist in a context of history of technique, language and the political exigencies of courtly portrait painting. Velasquez's experience of his activity is not out-of-time, but is literally framed by what has gone before, a Husserlian retention of similar occasions recursively invoking the next, back into obscurity.

The use of these aesthetic forms does not preclude the simultaneous use of more direct modes of depiction. Indeed, by including his own mien, the artist is able to exploit the power of painting to depict general forms of human experience, as discussed above, to provide an initial draft of his own mental state, a draft that is elaborated and refined via the more sophisticated aesthetic techniques.

Furthermore, that these elements are not best understood as part of a symbolic aesthetic is not only manifested in the fact, pointed out above, that conceptual, symbolic interpretation is not necessary for their contribution; such interpretation is not sufficient, either. That is, the contribution to the significance of *Las Meninas* (and thus to the experiential specification it effects) that these elements make is not independent of their particular, direct, visual qualities. Specifically, they cannot be replaced with the propositional passages above. Those passages do not in themselves capture the experience-specifying significance of *Las Meninas* (else why would we need the painting itself?), but rather act as a set of phenomenological instructions that,

together with and only together with the visual properties of the painting (that is, the painting itself, and not some description of it), can serve to highlight aspects of the conscious state Velasquez captures. This makes vivid a distinction that is widely ignored in discussions of non-conceptual content: the having of an experience may require the possession of concepts while still remaining non-conceptual in that it does not itself involve the deployment of those concepts in experience.

The ability of these elements to perform this experience-specifying function, rather than performing their depictive function alone, is catalysed by the presence of three crucial elements: the presence of the artist himself (just discussed), the canvas on its easel, and the mirror.

Although an unhelpful metaphor of mentality in many ways, consciousness has been likened to a picture since antiquity. Just as one can simultaneously be aware of a painting's white-pink-peach hued brushstrokes, and of the face of the Infanta Margarita that those brushstrokes depict, so also one can simultaneously be aware of the phenomenal properties of one's experience, and the person one is perceiving in the way that one is by virtue of having an experience with those phenomenal properties. By making pictures such a salient part of this picture, Velasquez encourages a semantic ascent from depicted to that which depicts, and thus from experienced to experience (even if the success of this shift results in *Las Meninas* being a depiction of experience, a feat that violates the neat dichotomy just made). That we see the canvas only from the back further assists the shift of topic from experienced to experience. Too easily do we look through the signifier to the signified, bringing the world into view, but rendering transparent, invisible that part of the world that is the means by which we encounter the world. Further, in the context of our natural speculative inclinations, the canvas back provokes us to engage in the deployment of our imaginative faculties, further reinforcing experience, rather than experienced, as the topic-in-view.

The metaphor of experience as painting is not as problematic as its descendant, experience as snapshot. That the same word in English is used both to refer to the result of an activity and to the activity itself reveals an interactive, sense-making and subjectivity-involving dynamic not present in photography, at least in its simplest form. For example, visual experience is created by the subject's active exploration of the scene, with raw input only having experiential impact after it is filtered and refined through interpretation and filling in. It is then poised, in conjunction with the subject's purposes and concerns, to play a role in directing further exploration of the scene, creating a reciprocal dynamic between experience and action. This interplay more robustly

supports a metaphorical relation with the painter's interaction with his canvas than with the passive, static, mechanical photographic process.

The mirror simultaneously establishes and minimises the topic of the painting being painted by Velasquez-in-the painting: the King and Queen. Moreover, while the canvas makes experience available as a depictive topic by emphasizing the distinction between experience and reality, the mirror does so by trivializing that same distinction, instead highlighting experience's directedness toward the world by emphasizing the close correspondence between reflection and reflected. In its faithfulness to what is placed before it, the mirror baffles our preconceptions about how it *should* behave; the most sophisticated among us still cannot resist the misconception that a mirror somehow gets things wrong by reversing our images left to right. So also is there a norm to which *Las Meninas* is subject, the objectivity of which is a reflection of the mirror's accuracy overriding our opinions and conventions to the contrary.

Why paint an experience? As ever the case with questions about the purpose of art, the artist need not answer. But this obscures the fact that depictions of experience may be necessary for the purposes of a scientific study of consciousness. Without a precise specification of the otherwise elusive nuances of experience, how can we hope to explain them, or appeal to them in our explanations? In the foregoing, aesthetic experience was contrasted with the mundane. But this is a misleading pedagogical simplification. Perhaps the aesthetic is at odds with the quotidian, but it need not be so with the everyday. We can adopt the aesthetic stance in our everyday lives outside of the gallery; being in the gallery is just another aspect of one's everyday life.

More relevant, perhaps, is this: science, too, is a part of the everyday, for those who practise it. What, then, might result if one were to employ the aesthetic stance in a disciplined way within one's scientific activities? If science can learn from and systematize the experience-specifying techniques that artists have developed over millennia, then an objective science of consciousness that nonetheless exploits the subjective, aesthetic capacities of the scientists involved will be made possible. Rather than being at odds with the objectivity of such a science, the experiential, empathic, emotive and aesthetic capacities of the scientist will be crucial to it.

References

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