

# I

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## *Philosophical Scepticism*

Photographers, theorists and art historians may be surprised to find that scepticism about whether or not photography can yield art remains a subject for debate in philosophy. It is an attitude that may seem hopelessly outdated in an era where there is widespread acceptance of both popular and fine art photography among critics, galleries and museums. However, philosophers who take the sceptical problem seriously are not necessarily sceptics; few, if any, doubt that artists create works of art with photography.

The urge to engage with scepticism endures because philosophers are committed to resolving the tensions between two apparently competing considerations: the artistic and the epistemic capacities of photography. How is it possible for photography to provide both a medium for artistic creation and an instrument for scientific and forensic knowledge of the world? The former suggests an imaginative or expressive association with human psychology, whereas the latter suggests a detached and dispassionate mechanism. Until these tensions can be resolved, it makes sense that philosophers treat scepticism about photographic art as an open question; in fact speed-cameras and artists are equally subject to scrutiny.

Many philosophers claim that there is a significant difference in kind, rather than a difference in degree, between photographic images and other visual images. It is argued that photographs are 'mind independent' because their visual content does not necessarily require the involvement of a human mind. By contrast, paintings, drawings and similar kinds of pictures are 'mind dependent' because their visual content necessarily depends on the beliefs and mental states of the people who produce them. The notion of mind independence is used to argue that photography is privileged in epistemology, science, forensics and journalism. It is the basis for attributing highly valued qualities to photographs such as accuracy, objectivity, fidelity and veracity. Used as evidence of a crime scene, a photograph, it is claimed, will show only what was actually present, whereas a drawing will show only what a person believed or imagined to be present.

To establish a clear distinction along these lines, some philosophers

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include mind independence in the definition of a photograph. This step leads to scepticism in terms of the philosophy of art: most notably the idea that photography provides an inferior medium for creating representational art. There are sceptical arguments of various forms, but I will mention only two here. One argument is that artistic interest in a representational picture involves appreciating how the picture successfully conveys an artist's conception of the subject matter. This implies that a visual image of any kind cannot be a depiction unless it is mind dependent. Thus, if a photograph is defined as being 'mind independent', it becomes difficult to explain how this kind of image could manifest the thoughts, emotions and intentional states of the artist in accessible or artistically interesting ways. Another argument is that photographs cannot depict fictional entities. If a picture is mind dependent, the visual content may be anything that the artist can imagine. By contrast, the visual content of a photograph is limited to the objects that existed in front of the camera: there can be a painting of King Lear and a photograph of an actor playing King Lear, but not a photograph of King Lear. If photographs are defined as mind independent, these arguments imply that photography provides merely a limited representational medium or, worse, that photographs may be unsuitable for representational art at all.

One approach might be to argue that photographs have exactly the same artistic potential as other pictures, such as paintings and drawings, by giving up the idea that there is any difference in kind. However, this would throw into question the attractive possibility that photographs may possess aesthetic or artistic qualities that are importantly different to other kinds of images. It also rules out the idea that photographs have a privileged epistemic status for providing knowledge of the world. The puzzle that concerns me is whether it is possible to establish a substantive difference between photographic images and other kinds of visual images, which can explain the special epistemic and aesthetic qualities of photographs, without giving way to scepticism about photographic art.

In this essay I, consequently, offer a philosophical account of the photographic process which is able to resolve the above-mentioned tensions. I use this – substantive, schematic and clarificatory – account to argue that, while some photographs are mind independent, mind independence is not a defining feature of all photographs. My account is substantive because it distinctively distinguishes the photographic process from other image-making

processes and is able to explain the special qualities of photographs. It is also schematic, because it covers the fullest range of photographic technologies across a comprehensive range of applications. Finally, it is clarificatory because it is able to clear up misunderstandings and resolve philosophical problems. Beyond these theoretical aims, my broader purpose is to provide an account that has applicability for a wide range of art history cases and that, furthermore, is acceptable to photographic practitioners.

The account I offer may appear peculiarly dry to those without a philosophical background, so I will elaborate what I mean by saying that I seek acceptability. I do not expect practitioners to adopt this account as a prescription or proscription about how to produce photographs. Rather, I seek to benefit from their expertise for the purpose of refining my account. If the reaction I receive is 'Yes, all this is obvious. So what?', then I will be content. This reaction would enable me to return to the philosophical debate and use the account to solve the problems that are found there. But if what I am saying is not compatible with how practitioners understand and use photography, then I would like to know where changes are needed. A theory of photography that is constructed for the purpose of solving philosophical problems can afford to be peculiar, but it should not be incompatible with photographic practice.

#### *The Photographic Process*

I consider photography to be a collection of human practices which include creating, storing, displaying and viewing photographic images, for a variety of purposes. Philosophical discussions of photography rarely present a detailed, substantive account of the production process of photographic images. It is usually considered adequate to say that someone 'takes a photograph' under such-and-such circumstances and the photograph has such-and-such properties. As a simple way of characterising how a photograph is produced, the following account should seem familiar:

- I. The camera apparatus is set up.
- II. The photographer points the camera at something and 'takes a photograph'.
- III. When the photograph has been taken, it is printed or screened.
- IV. Furthermore, the photograph can be stored, displayed, distributed, copied and viewed.

1. See, for example, Gregory Currie, 'Visible Traces: Documentary and the Contents of Photographs', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 57, no. 3 (1999), pp. 285–97.

2. Discussed in Dawn M. Phillips, 'Photography and Causation: Responding to Scruton's Scepticism', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2009), pp. 327–40 and Dawn M. Phillips, 'Fixing the Image: Re-thinking the "Mind-Independence of Photographs"' (guest article), *Postgraduatist Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2009), pp. 1–22.

The simplicity of this account makes it usefully schematic so that it covers cases where the camera apparatus is analogue or digital, manual or automatic. In one case there may be a great deal of work involved in setting up, composing and printing a particular photograph, but in another case there might be little or no special effort, such as a Polaroid camera taking a photograph when it is knocked off a window ledge. Nonetheless, the basic notion of production is the same in all cases: a photograph is taken, printed and viewed. I think that this scheme may be found in many theoretical debates. The high-street photographic company Snappy Snaps advertises its own version as follows: 'snap it, print it, share it'. I will call it the 'snap-and-print' view of photography.

The snap-and-print view is inadequate for several reasons, but I want to highlight one particularly significant problem. The description above cannot serve as an account of the photographic production process because it contains a vague or confused notion of when, during the process, a photograph is produced. The account I have outlined describes a process with multiple stages, but at which stage does the photograph actually come into existence? The snap-and-print view delivers an unhelpful answer. Imagine that I set up the camera on Monday, 'take a photograph' on Tuesday and make a print of the photograph on Wednesday. When was the photograph produced? No one would say that the photograph exists on Monday and all would agree that on Wednesday a photograph exists. What should we say about the situation on Tuesday? Does a photograph exist then? The print I make on Wednesday is supposedly a print of the photograph I took on Tuesday. That would suggest that the photograph was produced on Tuesday, indeed that it came into existence as soon as the shutter opened and closed. But I object to this conclusion and will instead claim that, in the scenario described, no photograph exists on Tuesday. The print that is made on Wednesday is not a print of, or copy of, a photograph that existed on Tuesday. Rather, a photograph comes into existence when a visual image is produced on Wednesday. I will return to this example shortly.

I will now introduce my alternative account of the photographic process. This is also schematic as it can apply to all production methods, whether analogue or digital, manual or automatic, but it is more substantive and clarifying than the snap-and-print view. The multiple stages (which correlate with the stages above) are as follows:

3. If the scenario in your imagination features a film camera, the film will be developed and printed on Wednesday. If your imagined scenario features a digital camera the LCD screen will not immedi-

ately display an image: instead you will open the file on your computer on Wednesday. You may struggle to imagine a three-day scenario with a Polaroid camera, but the main point still applies.

I. A photosensitive surface is positioned to receive light that is reflected from objects and/or emitted by light sources. A light image is formed on the surface, consisting of light reflected from objects or emitted by light sources, typically directed and focussed by lenses. The light image changes in real time and has visual properties such as colour, sharpness and brightness. An example of a light image is the optical image that is projected in a camera obscura. The light image is not a photograph.

II. The crucial stage of the photographic process is the occurrence of a photographic event. The photographic event is the recording of the light image. The light arriving on the photosensitive surface is recorded over a period of time by bringing about material changes in the surface. An occurrence of this kind of event is the definitive stage in the photographic process. Without it there would be no photograph. Once a photographic event has occurred, what remains is a record from the event. A record is stored data. We will think of the record from a photographic event as a frame of undeveloped film or a digital file. These records do not display a visual image, so at this stage of the photographic process, no photograph exists as yet. A photograph only comes into being at the next stage of the production process, when a visual image is displayed.

III. Using the data stored in the record from a photographic event it is possible to produce a photograph, where a photograph is typically an object that displays a visual image.

IV. Photographs and/or the record from the photographic event can be stored, distributed and copied. Photographs can be displayed and viewed.

Sometimes the record from a photographic event can only produce a unique photograph; for example, in the daguerrotype process a photographic event begins when the plate is exposed to light and ends when the photosensitive material ceases to undergo change. This is achieved by preventing further exposure to light and applying chemical fixative. The fixed plate is a record from the photographic event that contains stored data, but at this stage it is not yet a photograph. When excess chemicals are rinsed from the plate, revealing a visual image in the altered residue, the plate is now a unique photograph. Importantly, in this example the plate that serves as a record from the photographic event is the same object that displays the photographic image. Here, a single object fulfils different roles during separate stages of a multi-stage process, but this is not true of the photographic process in every kind of technology. By contrast a digital camera produces a

record that can be used to create multiple photographs and the record itself can be reproduced and stored as multiple copies of the original file. During the photographic event, individual photon sensors react to light by building up electrical charge. The pattern of electrical charge is registered and stored as binary code; this file is a record from the photographic event but it is not a photograph. Computer processing converts the code to produce photographs, these are visual images that are displayed on various kinds of objects, such as an electronic screen, data projector or paper print.

The scenario previously presented can now be re-described to dispel the vagueness of the snap-and-print view. On Monday I set up the camera to form a light image (though the photosensitive surface is not yet exposed to the light). On Tuesday a photographic event occurs: the photosensitive surface is exposed to the light image for a period of time and undergoes material change which is stored as a record. On Wednesday the record from the photographic event is used to produce an object (such as a paper print, a projected slide or an LCD screen display) which displays a visual image: this is a photograph.

A comparison between the two accounts reveals ambiguity in the snap-and-print idea that a photographer 'takes a photograph'. The notion of 'taking a photograph' conflates two ideas that I separate in my account. I distinguish between the data stored as a record from the photographic event and the visual image. On Tuesday a photographic event has occurred and a record from this event exists, but no photograph yet exists. If I use the record from the photographic event to produce a visual image on Wednesday I have then produced a photograph. The photograph that exists on Wednesday has a causal history leading back to the occurrence of a particular photographic event on Tuesday. But the visual image is not a copy or print of a 'photograph' that came into existence on Tuesday. A photograph comes into existence only when a visual image becomes available to view. For this reason I am unwilling to say that a photograph comes into existence when a photographer 'takes a photograph' by operating the camera shutter. It is preferable to say that, on Tuesday, a photographic event occurs and produces a record which is not (or not yet) a visual image.

#### *The Photographic Event*

According to the account I have proposed, the photographic process involves a distinctive causal phenomenon – one I call the 'photographic event' – that is not found in other image-making processes. This phenomenon can occur in nature without human involvement, or occur in the form of

4. Stephen Makin suggested this useful comparative example.

humanly engineered technology. The photographic event is as distinctive and definitive as, say, the ceramic change that takes place during ceramic firing. In what follows I will elaborate on the notion of a photographic event and examine some significant implications, using two hypothetical examples. In the first example, we will imagine that two images have different visual properties, but we want to explain how they could count as prints of the same photograph. In the second case, we will imagine two images that coincidentally have the same visual appearance, though one is the result of human agency and the other is the result of a mechanical accident. Thinking through these in terms of the photographic event will not only make it possible to give a plausible account of both, but also to draw general conclusions about the artistic and epistemic characteristics of photographs.

For the first example: imagine that you are looking at two photographic images. One is a small, blurred, grainy, black-and-white image, printed on coarse-textured photo paper, which fits in your wallet. The other is a huge, sharp, high-resolution colour transparency on a glossy light box, which takes up the entire wall of a room. Now you are told that both of these images are 'prints of the same photograph' – perhaps a photograph of your pet dog. The snap-and-print view of photographs has little helpful to say about how two images with such different visual properties can both count as prints of the same photograph. I have already argued that a photograph does not actually exist when we say that a photograph has been 'taken', so we cannot claim that they are both the same as the photograph that was 'taken' by the photographer.

My account of the photographic process can demystify this kind of case. When we see the wallet image and the wall image, we are naturally inclined to say that they are two different photographs. Yet we are also inclined to say that they are two prints of the same photograph. But this is puzzling; for what photograph do we take these two photographic images to be prints of? We realize that in this second use of the word 'photograph', we use the term to refer to the record from the photographic event, even if it may not be anything we could look at prior to its being printed. These ambiguities in the way we use the word 'photograph' highlight confusions in the concept. It would even be possible to make the absurd-sounding claim that these two different photographs are prints of the same photograph. For philosophical purposes, I would rather use the word 'photograph' only to refer to the actual visual image created, and say that the two photographic images have a causal history leading back to a common object that I call the 'record' from the photographic event. It is, of course, unimportant which terminology we choose, as long as we are aware that a distinction must be made; one might prefer to speak of two prints of the same photograph, or two photographs produced from a single photographic record.

The wallet image and wall image acquired different visual properties

because a record from one particular photographic event was used in association with materially different production methods when the two visual images were produced. Given my account of the photographic process, it is obvious that photographs acquire many of their aesthetically interesting visual properties when the record from a photographic event is transformed into a visual image. The record from a photographic event, such as a digital file, is not itself a visual image, although some kinds of records become objects that display a visual image, such as a daguerreotype or a Polaroid photograph. Some camera processes automate the image-production stage to guarantee standard results across a range of photographs – for example, speed camera images. However, in principle there is enormous room for artistic creativity in devising novel ways to create photographic images with aesthetically varied visual properties using the record from a photographic event.

It is worth noting that the view that I have proposed does not only apply when the photographic images that are being compared have radically different visual properties. If a photographer asks Snappy Snaps to print ‘ten copies’ of a particular photograph, the result will be ten photographic images that have identical appearance. The solution that I have proposed is still applicable: in ordinary speech to say that these are ‘prints of the same photograph’ is really to say that these are ten photographs which share exactly the same photographic event in their individual causal histories. It is, however, significant that they also share an identical final production stage.

One implication of my account is that the visual appearance of a photographic image is not the sole or even primary consideration when asking whether photographs are relevantly related to one another. Instead, knowledge of the photographic event proves to be crucial. In many ordinary cases visual resemblance may be a good indication that different photographic images share a relevant causal history, but in other cases it may be misleading. In the following example, I will use a puzzle about visual appearance to return to the problem of philosophical scepticism about photographic art.

For philosophers, the primary question in relation to photographic art is whether or not photographers can create representational artworks. Can photographs be pictures that, like paintings and drawings, express human thoughts and emotions? Or are photographs merely non-representational images, like a reflection on still water? As this problem of depiction has proved to be an obstacle, to date philosophers have shown relatively little interest in other kinds of photographic artwork, such as imageless or abstract photographic objects. This helps to explain the gap between the interests of philosophers on the one hand and art historians on the other hand. Philosophers have tended to ask a narrow question: Is it possible for photographs to have depictive content? Art historians are interested in wider issues such as: Which products of the photographic process have become artworks? Examples from the art world include imageless photographic

objects and images with unintended properties, including photographs produced by accident, chance or entirely automated processes. In turning now to the question of photographic art, I am not opening debate about whether an artist’s intention is required to make something count as an artwork. Some art movements and theories have championed the role of artistic intention, while other movements have created art to deny or subvert that principle. Accepting that artworks of both kinds are possible, it is nonetheless relevant to address the question of how, if at all, the intentions of a photographer can be manifested in a photographic image.

For the second hypothetical example: imagine two photographs that have identical visual appearance. This time these are not two ‘copies of the same photograph’, in the sense that they stem from the same photographic event. Instead, the two photographic images have entirely distinct causal histories, but by coincidence they look exactly the same – perhaps the photographic image shows a woman seated with her back to the camera. One photograph is image, digitally screened on the left wall, was created by an artist who planned and visualised the work, carefully arranged the objects and light sources, made test shots to determine the ideal camera settings and, with one eye to the viewfinder, controlled the shutter release at the moment of exposure. The other photographic image, digitally screened on the right wall, was produced when a mobile phone camera accidentally fell out of a shoulder bag and bounced off a chair. The first, mind-dependent photograph is a depiction of its subject because its visual content depends on the beliefs and intentions of the artist. The second, mind-independent photograph is not a depiction at all because a depiction must be mind-dependent, yet there were no intentional beliefs relevantly involved when it was produced. Nonetheless, when the two photographs are screened opposite one another, it is impossible to tell the difference from their visual appearance alone.

This example illustrates how sceptical concerns about the status of photographic art can arise. Only one of the two digitally screened photographs is supposed to be a depictive artwork, the other is a mere mechanical accident. However, it is conceivable that by viewing the photographs we would have no way of telling which is which. Unlike a painting or drawing, which might show detectable evidence of human manufacture in brushstrokes, it seems that the visual appearance of a photograph does not reveal unmistakable evidence that it was created to manifest the imaginative or expressive ideas of a human being. If an image with exactly the same visual features could have been created by a detached and dispassionate mechanism, it raises doubt that either visual image is genuinely a depictive work. Scepticism of this kind might arise for other image-making processes but photography is particularly vulnerable to this objection, as so many examples exist of photographs that have been produced without human intervention.

My account of the photographic process presents a plausible way to overcome this route to sceptical doubt. To understand something as a photograph requires that we understand that it is the product of a particular kind of production process – a multi-stage process that includes the occurrence of a photographic event. Every photograph has a causal history that definitively includes a unique photographic event that occurs over a particular period of time. When a photographic event occurs, the light that makes up the light image is reflected from objects or emitted by light sources. When the recording of a light image takes place, this event includes all of the elements that contribute to the recording process, not just the objects that are in front of the camera. Contributing elements include the camera apparatus, objects and light sources in front of the camera and objects or relationships that are not in front of the camera – for example the presence of a photographer. Thus a photographic event includes relationships between many objects that do not appear in the image – for example the camera's position in relation to other objects and light sources may depend on a tripod, or it may depend on the stance of the photographer who holds it. The tripod, or the photographer's body, is part of the photographic event, though it does not appear in the photographic image.

If a photographic event is understood in this expanded sense, it is possible to understand why some photographs are mind dependent, whereas others are mind independent, even when they have an identical visual appearance. Simply put, the photographic event settles the fact of the matter. The photographs screened on the right- and left-hand walls respectively, have significantly different causal histories. In one case the photographic event was arranged and controlled by a photographer and the factors contributing to the event included the body and the consciousness and mental state of the photographer. In the other case the photographic event consisted of a random combination of factors that were not planned or controlled by the thoughts of a photographer. The fact that the camera was set in motion by a person is a relevant part of the photographic event, but does not mean that the photograph is mind dependent because the visual content of the photograph was not determined by that person's beliefs or imagination. I suggest that we can appeal to knowledge of the photographic event to legitimately conclude that one photograph is a mind-dependent depiction and the other photograph is merely a mind-independent image.

## Conclusion

When photographs are appraised as instruments for gaining knowledge of the world, it is never assumed that they possess special epistemic qualities such as objectivity, fidelity and accuracy solely on the basis of the visual properties of the image, independent of all other information. On the

contrary, a photograph is not epistemically, scientifically or forensically valuable unless we know relevant facts about the causal history of the photograph in addition to what we can learn from the visual content of the image. We might need to know details about how the camera was set up and that it functioned normally, or we might need to know the time and place of the exposure, or which one of a pair of identical twins was the person actually standing in front of the camera. Information about the production history and, specifically, information about the photographic event plays a vital role if we are to claim that photographs have special epistemic powers that other kinds of visual images do not possess.

Similarly, I suggest that when photographs are appraised as a medium for art, it would be unreasonable to base our evaluation of their aesthetic and artistic qualities on their visual appearance alone. Rather, it is appropriate and important to consider the causal history of a photograph in terms of its relation to a particular photographic event. The factors that are part of a photographic event are not just those objects that are visually recognisable in the final photographic image. For example, if a photograph appears to show a street that is empty of people and cars, we might make assumptions about the photographic event: assuming, for example, that there were no cars or people present when the event occurred. But we might then learn that in fact the street was full of people, yet the photographic event occurred over a long duration, so that the light reflecting from individual people left no distinct traces in the record from the event. I believe that, although the visual appearance of the image remains the same, a viewer's experience of the photographic image will be, rightly, changed by this information. The way that our experience can shift as we learn about the photographic event is part of the aesthetic power of photographs.

My conclusion is that gaining knowledge about the photographic event will enhance our comprehension of any photographic image. This is true when scrutinising photographs produced both by artists and speed cameras.

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