

Philosophical Perspectives on Depiction

Edited by CATHARINE ABELL and KATERINA BANTINAKI

Oxford University Press, 2010. xii + 242 pp. £40 cloth

In their introduction, the editors of this book, Catharine Abell and Katerina Bantinaki, give an excellent account of the present state of play in the philosophy of pictures. Depiction, the mode of representation distinctive of pictures, has seen a growth in philosophical interest over the past few years, and Abell and Bantinaki think the field holds even more potential: 'While the philosophy of language has long been considered a philosophical discipline in its own right, the philosophy of depiction is usually thought of, when it is thought of at all, as a sub-discipline of aesthetics. This is like conflating the philosophy of language with the philosophy of literature' (1). That the study of depiction may grow to occupy a position comparable to philosophy of language might seem doubtful to us now, but Abell and Bantinaki are right to draw attention to the fact that the place of depiction within aesthetics is an historical happenstance. As the papers collected in this volume illustrate, there is usually only incidental concern with the aesthetic and artistic in the literature on depiction. The big issue addressed by that literature in the past is symptomatic of this unconcern with art and aesthetics: it has centred on finding a definition of depiction, one that applies equally to snapshots and Signorellis. This collection largely avoids the problem of definition to focus on issues that are only now beginning to attract substantial attention. It is telling of the state of the field just how much one such issue, the experience of pictures, dominates: it is the central topic of five of the book's eight chapters. But let me say something about the other three chapters first.

The first of these, by John Kulvicki, investigates the commonplace that there are many different ways – styles and systems – of picturing. Kulvicki argues that the situation is, in some ways, simpler than this suggests: there are many different ways of *producing* a picture, but rather fewer ways of *interpreting* it. The key is to recognize that it is not the multitude of different styles and systems of picturing that are significant for interpretation, so much as the representationally salient properties they instantiate – and these present much less diversity. Kulvicki goes on to argue, with some justification to my mind, that the constraints on interpretation are explained by the fact that pictures resemble what they depict, a central plank of his own (2006) theory of depiction.

Abell includes a paper of her own, investigating the epistemic value of photographs. Photographs are generally superior to hand-made pictures as sources of knowledge about what they depict. Abell argues, in the face of opposing views, that this fact has its roots in the reliability of the standardized, mechanical processes of photography. Abell's position has the appeal of common sense, and it does seem to me that this is one instance where common sense has it pretty much right. Dominic Lopes's chapter begins with a less commonsensical proposal. Looking at a picture of X, it often seems natural to say 'That's X', rather than 'That's a picture of X' – something we would never do in the presence of a description of X. Lopes holds that this 'image-based demonstrative' – 'That's X' – is literally, and not just figuratively, true. He argues that this is so because pictures perceptually ground such reference through *deixis*, an aspect of visual experience usually associated with actually being in the presence of

the object. This bold proposal leads on to a re-evaluation of Mohan Matthen's (2005) work on pictures and *deixis*, in a fascinating and original discussion deeply informed by cognitive science.

Moving on to those chapters that focus on the experience of pictures, John H. Brown argues that the literature on depiction has not paid enough attention to what are usually considered 'unauthorized' experiences of pictures. In the case of a sketch, for instance, this could be an experience of the subject as being constituted of (rather than merely depicted by) cross-hatched marks. Brown's superb exploration of a wide range of such perceptions enriches our understanding of a neglected dimension of pictorial experience, but his claims that these should be considered part of the authorized interpretation of pictures will be more contentious.

Richard Wollheim (1987) called seeing-in – an experience that seems to characterize much picture perception – 'twofold', since it involves having a visual awareness of the three-dimensional depicted subject and simultaneously being aware of the flat picture surface that depicts it. Two chapters propose to explain twofoldness. John Dilworth holds that twofoldness is not so strange as it might at first seem, since ordinary perception has, on his analysis, a comparable structure. This is an appealing idea, but whether Dilworth's 'double content' account of perception gives the right approach will be a matter of dispute. One disputant will be Bantinaki, whose chapter gives an alternative account of twofoldness. Drawing on Aristotle's doctrine of the unity of matter and form, she argues that the ordinary visual perception of matter and form as united in objects is akin to the twofold experience of (say) paint and the subject matter it depicts. To my mind, Bantinaki's lucid account seems better to illuminate not Wollheimian seeing-in, but the kind of pictorial experience Robert Hopkins draws attention to in his paper: inflected pictorial experience, which, as Hopkins argues, may not be twofold at all. Inflection occurs when, in viewing a picture, we experience its subject matter as having 'inflected properties', that is, properties 'a full characterization of which needs to make reference to that surface's design (conceived as such)' (158). For instance, this might involve seeing the subject of a heavily impasted Rembrandt as having some of the textural properties of the paint. Inflection was first discussed by Michael Podro (1998) and has more recently received attention from Lopes (2005); but it is this excellent paper of Hopkins that seems most likely to bring it to the forefront of attention of writers on depiction. This is not least because Hopkins casts substantial doubt on whether inflected pictorial experience is twofold (and therefore whether it is a species of seeing-in). Nanay's chapter takes up Hopkins's challenge, arguing that Hopkins is wrong to doubt that inflected pictorial experience is twofold. But the greater part of his chapter develops the work of Podro and Lopes in a different way, arguing that the differences between inflected and non-inflected pictorial experience can be understood using a bold account of seeing-in (Nanay 1998) that, like Lopes's essay, draws on ideas from Matthen's (2005) work.

This collection gives an excellent picture of work at the forefront of a vibrant area of analytic philosophy. It also plays an important role in developing existing debates, especially around pictorial experience, and as such is essential reading for anyone with a serious interest in the philosophy of pictures. The cover design, featuring Roy Lichtenstein's *Magnifying Glass* (1963), also marks this out as the best-looking book on depiction – a not inconsequential virtue, at least so long as depiction remains a sub-discipline of aesthetics.

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The Errors of Atheism

By J. ANGELO CORLETT

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The Errors of Atheism does deal with what Corlett suggests are the errors of atheism. It also deals with the ‘uninformed, dismissive, and bellicose dogmatism [of] many orthodox theists (14)’, for Corlett holds that ‘the orthodox Christian notion of God falls prey to the standard objections raised by various philosophers’ (90). However, it is atheists that Corlett is most insistent on castigating. Their main mistake is quite simple: they do not discuss Corlett’s favoured deity. This is also an error that traditional theologians make, but taking account of that in the title would, perhaps, not have the effect Corlett wants.

The Errors of Atheism is in two parts: ‘The Errors of Atheism’ (‘Analyzing Atheism’, ‘The Errors of Atheism’, ‘Dawkins’ Godless Delusion’, ‘The New Agnosticism’) and ‘Grounding God’ (‘Naturalizing Theism’, ‘Liberating Theism’, ‘Is Hybrid Minimalist Theism Plausible?’)

Corlett wants to blend some ‘of the basic features of process and liberationist theisms’ (4). He remarks, confidently, ‘One benefit of my analysis of the existence of God is that, unlike most philosophical accounts, mine is better informed theologically. And unlike most theological accounts, mine is well-informed philosophically’ (91).

The views of ‘some of [atheism’s] most philosophically sophisticated proponents’ contain ‘fundamental logical and conceptual flaws’ (14). The three major atheists Corlett considers are Antony Flew, John Mackie and Kai Nielsen (‘the most notable living atheist philosopher’ (41)). Recent and important works in the area, such as Graham Oppy’s *Arguing About Gods*, or John Schellenberg’s trilogy, *Prolegomena to*

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