**Pyke’s portraits of philosophers**

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Hans Maes’ excellent book, *Conversations on Art and Aesthetics* (Oxford UP, 2017), features a collection of ten photographic portraits of philosophers of art by Steve Pyke. (These can also be viewed on the [website for the book](http://aesthetics-conversations.com/), where it has to be said they appear to better effect. The book also features one portrait by philosopher and artist Claire Anscomb, which appears on the website too.) Pyke, of course, is known within philosophy as a photographer of many of its leading lights. Nobody has documented philosophers in this way before, and few professions have the benefit of such a constant and accomplished portraitist.

So I want to take this opportunity to look more closely at Pyke’s portraits of philosophers. There is another reason why this is an appropriate occasion for this, for Maes spends some time in his book discussing with Cynthia Freeland her theory of portraiture, and this has helped spur my thoughts. Let me start by saying that I am not critical of the portraits themselves, but I do want to say some critical things about how they can be viewed. I’ve found that it’s often difficult to talk about Pyke’s portraits of philosophers critically. Like all photographs, and rather like perception I think, they have a *transparent* quality. Just as it is hard to talk about the qualities of our perceptions without ending up talking about the things one perceives, so it is hard to talk about the appearance of photographs without finding oneself talking about their subject matter. That’s especially difficult when the subject matter is people known to us, as it often is in Pyke’s portraits of philosophers. To speak of the appearance of these pictures is uncomfortably close to speaking of the appearance of our colleagues and friends. To try to avoid that, I’m going to focus on earlier work from Pyke’s series, showing subjects less familiar to me, and let the reader judge whether similar things can be said of Pyke’s new photographs.

With that same thought in mind, I begin with a portrait that is not by Pyke at all: a portrait of a long-dead philosopher and theologian by a long-dead artist, that seems to me rather Pykean: Dürer’s engraved [*Philip Melanchthon*](https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/800111/philip-melanchthon) (1526). Below Melanchthon’s image, the artist has inscribed the following statement: “Dürer was able to depict the features of the living Philip, but the skilled hand could not portray his mind.” Dürer is unduly modest. Although Melanchthon’s ideas and arguments are not represented, his personality is vividly shown: we have no trouble reading intensity, focus and mercurial energy in his expression. Freeland requires that a portrait’s subject poses – that they array themselves in some sense for the viewer. On that basis, it is not quite clear whether this picture even is a portrait. Melanchthon seems possessed by his own mania. The arched eyebrow, the bulging vein at his temple, the rictus smile, the turmoil of curled hair: he is not so much posing them, as they seem to pose him. Spying at him through a peephole, would we imagine him appearing any different?

Something similar is true of a handful of Pyke’s portraits of philosophers, which have something of the effect of Melanchthon. Consider [*Derek Parfit*](https://www.pyke-eye.com/Philosophers/51/caption) (1990). Pyke shows us a world of detail that we would not normally notice: the bulging eyes, profusion of curls, wrinkles, stubble and discolorations of skin. What is true of us is surely true of the subjects as well. Such features are not part of what one can array in presenting oneself to others, not only because they lie out of one’s control (like Melanchthon’s rictus expression), but because they are often too small to register in visual awareness. The bulging quality of the eyes (again comparable to Melanchthon), are also a feature invisible in life: they are a product of a photographic barrel distortion – effectively showing the subject from a very close point of view. (Compare Pyke’s picture with others of Parfit online if you doubt this – his eyes do not appear unduly large in other photographs.) As in Dürer’s portrait, there is a sense that personality is expressed: Parfit’s images suggests intensity, drive, fertility of mind. And more than Melanchthon he appears farsighted, those outsized eyes looking over and beyond us. But as with Melanchthon, I wonder how much these qualities are monitored and controlled by a conventional ego. I never met Parfit; by many accounts he was somewhat like this. But it is also the result of a construction on Pyke’s part. We see this in the way that these features and effects appear in other portraits of Pyke’s, such as those of David Lewis and Bernard Williams.

The textures and rugged forms produced by Pyke’s close-up views, raking lighting, and so on, more often produce an image of another kind of subject, a type I call ‘the resilient individual’. In portraits of the resilient individual, the imperfections and debilities of the flesh again appear in detail, but the subject is shown as having agency in the face of them. The resilient individual is tested by these debilities, and comes to wear them as a badge of honour. The subject can seem shrewd, resolute, and world-weary. Often they look strong-jawed (another product of the barrel distortion, which my colleague Hans benefits from). [*Michael Dummett*](https://www.pyke-eye.com/Philosophers/20/caption) (1990) is a powerful example of this type, as are the portraits of John Rawls and Karl Popper. The effect is of hard-won authority and character, born out of experience and worn with an unpretentious dignity. Again, it is something of a construction: the effect is seen equally in some of Pyke’s portraits of aging male rock stars, Keith Richards, Paul McCartney, and Iggy Pop.

It has to be said that women seem to benefit from these two modes of portraiture less often than men. I do not see any necessary reason why this is so, but I think it is clear that women, subjected to the same techniques – black and white, high detail, raking light, and so on, can appear very differently. When a man lacks awareness or control of his appearance there’s a risk he can be seen as a [hobo](http://www.somody.ca/quiz.html), but it can also be read as a sign of being unconcerned with unimportant things: being driven, inspired, or practical, even macho. When a woman is perceived as struggling to array themselves, they often don’t benefit from the stereotypes of the inspired genius, or experienced, resilient individual. Different stereotypes can come into play.

Take Pyke’s [*Philippa Foot*](https://www.pyke-eye.com/Philosophers/22/caption) (1990). I have come to think that it is a wonderful portrait, but I also think it risks giving the wrong impression of its subject – it certainly has to me in the past. The asymmetries of the face, the apparently startled eyes, the open mouth are apt, at first viewing to give a sense of a disastrously fractured individual, a mad woman. If you resist owning up to that perception, ask yourself who you would want to be your supervisor, or your department head – Foot or Dummett – on the basis of these portraits alone? Where a mature man in disarray can be seen as a genius, or resilient and experienced, a woman is more likely to be seen as unhinged or otherwise unreliable.

If you do see Foot’s portrait like this, there is an easy way to overcome it. Google Foot, and spend a little time looking at photographs of her from different points in her career. Then look again at Pyke’s picture. Coming to the photograph with this background allows one to identify those features of Foot’s expression that remained constant throughout her career: her sharp eyes, the kind but quizzical expression with which she engaged her interlocutors. Once you see these in other photographs, it is easy, I think, to see them in Pyke’s portrait too. At the same time, that will make other features of the portrait seem different too. Where before, the lines of her face might have seemed to express an irrational ire and contempt towards the viewer, now they are more easily seen as they in fact were: merely the outward signs of age.

I expect that those who knew Foot personally will not need to go on this journey to understand this portrait. They will immediately recognize the philosopher and person that they knew. Perhaps others too, with keener eyes and minds than mine, will immediately see her as she in fact was. But I think it is easier to misinterpret this image than it is to misinterpret images of Parfit and Dummett, whose images, as I’ve said, fit existing, familiar types. That is not to say that the viewer does not bear responsibility for interpreting an image; I think they do. Women should be under no special expectation to array themselves for the viewer where men are not. Nor does the artist bear responsibility for our failure to understand what he has presented to us. He has not staged what we see in a misleading way (or at least, no more misleading than in his images of male philosophers). Pyke, I am told, allows sitters to see his photographs during the process, and select their preferred image. One might ask Pyke to be an artist who more actively brings critical attention to bear on different stereotypes of femininity, *a la* Cindy Sherman, but that would be to ask Pyke to become a very different kind of artist, and to give up many of the pleasures and insights his work affords. So, it is the viewer who should ultimately take responsibility for their interpretation of Pyke’s work.

But that said, I worry that this picture, and some others Pyke has made of female philosophers, go out into a world where many will not take the trouble to see them correctly. I am reminded here that many of Pyke’s more wonderful portraits of philosophers did duty in a film as a photographs of “sad”-looking “strangers” (*Closer*, Mike Nichols (2004). Until viewers do become better interpreters of photographic portraits, Pyke’s portraits will not always serve the public image of philosophers, and philosophy, well. What does that mean in practical terms? As I say, I would not ask Pyke to change his practice. But I think we should also seek out – in an active way, perhaps through commissions – different kinds of images of our colleagues, especially of women philosophers. I hope we will do so in the future.