

THE RETURN OF PHOTOGRAPHS AS GENUINE PROSTHESES:  
IN RESPONSE TO COHEN AND MESKIN'S PRINCIPLED  
DISQUALIFICATION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

INÉS DE ASIS

UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREWS

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Kendall Walton argues that photographs, like mirrors and microscopes, meet sufficient conditions to be considered a kind of prosthesis for seeing. Well aware of the controversiality of this claim, he offers three criteria for perception met by photographs like other perceptual aids which makes them *transparent* –that is, we see *through* them.<sup>1</sup>(II) Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin attempt to refute the transparency thesis by arguing that photographs cannot be genuine prostheses for seeing because they fail to meet another necessary condition, namely that of egocentric spatial information (ESI). Only devices that belong to a process type that carries ESI are, in principle, genuine prostheses for seeing.<sup>2</sup> (III) I will offer a two-part refutation of the proposed disqualification of photographs by 1) offering an example of a case where another instance of the process-type to which photographs belong carries ESI, establishing the reliability of the process type that allegedly precluded photographs from qualifying (IV) and 2) offering another example to illustrate how photographs can meet the ESI condition. (V)

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<sup>1</sup> Walton (1984), p.273.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen & Meskin (2004).

## II. WALTON'S TRANSPARENCY THESIS

Walton recognizes that direct seeing differs from seeing-through, but that nonetheless sight is often enhanced by seeing through devices (such as eyeglasses, mirrors, microscopes. And yet not all mediating devices are transparent so a criteria for qualification is required. Transparent devices will meet the conditions Walton outlines as the criteria for visually perceiving: to see is to have a visual experience that is caused by an object in a manner which is 1) belief-independent, 2) similarity preserving and 3) counterfactually dependent on the object of sight.

The belief-independence condition eliminates mediation which is filtered by intentional states such as beliefs. Consider that one difference between paintings and photographs is that paintings cannot be belief-independent because their content depends on what the painter sees. If the painter was hallucinating, the content of his hallucination would translate into his painting. But if a photographer's perception is compromised, the photograph will capture the scene *despite* what the photographer sees, despite what he believes.<sup>3 4</sup>

The second criterion is preservation of likeness. To illustrate, consider computer-generated descriptions which are belief-free but do not provide any visual access to what they describe: for example, a program that could take the image of my uncle and describe him with perfect accuracy would not give *visual* access to him. Similarity conditions are relative to the kinds of information exclusive to the sense in question and the kinds of mistakes one makes with respect to photographs differ from those made from descriptions – these same categorical confusions occur in ordinary seeing.<sup>5</sup> Read or heard descriptions easily confuse words like 'horse' with 'hearse' because they sound or appear similar *as words*. But their referents, horses and hearses, are not easily confused in first-hand seeing nor in photographs. Horses may be confused with ponies, donkeys and mules, but not hearses –those would instead be confused with station wagons and El Caminos.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Currie (1995) argues per Malebranche that all perception is mediated by God and that it is therefore, never belief-independent. However, this is not a counter-argument since gods are not beings that have beliefs (all-knowing-ness means there is no need for talk of true or false beliefs, and thereby beliefs at all) and so cannot be said to count as belief-dependent mediation.

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the photographer need not have first-handedly seen the objects of the photograph at all nor need there have been a photographer.

<sup>5</sup> This is not a claim that perception accesses the world as it actually is but that perceptual confusion or indiscriminability between objects is effected by real similarities between them in terms of how we perceive them.

<sup>6</sup> The same applies to auditory perception.

The third criterion requires that there be a counterfactual relationship between the object and subject so that had the object differed, the subject's experience would have also differed. When subject and object are mediated by a device, a transparent one will carry through the same counterfactual information from what there was to see to what is seen via device. The opaque kind will not because it either lacks this relationship or involves additional counterfactuals. For example, it does not necessarily follow that had the scene differed the painting would have differed because paintings also counterfactually depend on what was seen by the painter.<sup>7</sup> Photographs will differ if the scene had differed, so they meet this condition.

### III. COHEN AND MESKIN'S RESPONSE TO WALTON

Cohen and Meskin do not accept that photographs are genuine prostheses, and like Gregory Currie before them, they want to differentiate uncontroversial prostheses from photographs by arguing that visual perception also necessarily involves egocentric spatial information.<sup>8</sup> However, unlike Currie, Cohen and Meskin construe ESI availability in terms of simply carrying that information and not, as with Currie's *doxastic* expectation, in terms of viewer-*assessment* of this information. This allows them to avoid problem examples for the doxastic proposal where tracking one's relationship to the object is not always possible –e.g., in a room filled with mirrors displaying the image of a carnation, one cannot locate the carnation's position with respect to oneself.<sup>9</sup> Since this assessment is a necessary condition for seeing on Currie's view, we must counterintuitively deny that one sees the carnation.

Since this condition is too strong, Cohen and Meskin propose a *nondoxastic* version of ESI – that is, one on which there is no expectation that the viewer can form an evaluation of the ESI conditions. (From here on, I will use ESI to refer to nondoxastic ESI.) They propose we have an instance of seeing just if the device carries this information; information-carrying here is an objective probabilistic link between subject and object.<sup>10</sup> Qualifying devices will be those which preserve this

<sup>7</sup> A painting's content is in its own way counterfactually dependent on the scene it represents but rather than being exclusively scene-dependent, it would also be what we may call *seen*-dependent – i.e., had the painter seen things differently, the painting would have differed.

<sup>8</sup> Responses to Walton's challenge are not met exhaustively through arguments for the necessity of egospatial information. Other criticisms target Walton's criteria in sum or offer alternative accounts of seeing. For more on the former see Currie (1995) and on the latter, see Gaut's forthcoming "Opaque Pictures".

<sup>9</sup> Walton (1997). p. 70

<sup>10</sup> *Per* Dretske (1969).

link through a process that in principle carries ESI. And although processes that are disposed to carrying ESI will have tokens that typically carry ESI, a device belonging to a qualified process type will qualify as a genuine prosthesis even if some instances of those devices or of their process-type do not carry ESI.<sup>11</sup>

Since this account does not expect that a belief or judgment in virtue of ESI is a necessary byproduct of that information, it evades problem examples like the mirror one. A mirror counts as a genuine prosthesis because it carries the information of one's relation to its reflected object. Its carrying ESI is made obvious by changes in the image when I shift positions. Even though in some cases that relationship is not assessible, and in others unavailable, mirrors are genuine prostheses in principle because their process-type carries ESI.

By contrast, Cohen and Meskin claim photographs never carry ESI about their depicta.<sup>12</sup> When one moves around the room with a photograph, the image of what it represents remains fixed and no information is carried about where the object in the photograph stands in relation to oneself.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, photographs are disqualified in principle, not simply because of any given instance of photography, but because its process-type is ESI impoverished. This means the same goes for other devices that share this process-type such as films and monitors.

Photographs and films are produced by cameras and are thus products of the camera process. Because camera-based devices record scenes to produce images that are always fixed (onto papers or screens) they cannot offer information about where I stand in relation to the objects in the image. Since the camera-process cannot carry ESI, none of these devices – photographs, films and monitors – nor other constituent process-tokens, are in principle qualified to be genuine prostheses.

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<sup>11</sup> Cohen and Meskin mention that other nondoxastic ESI accounts, such as Noel Carroll's or Fred Dretske's, avoid the problems of this example but fall prey to others.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen and Meskin later explain that photographs nonetheless carry rich information about their visually accessible properties which secures them special epistemic value.

<sup>13</sup> ESI can be available in the link with the *photo image* but not the object it represents, unless by accident.

#### IV. TOWARDS THE QUALIFICATION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

To refute Cohen and Meskin's claim that photographs can be disqualified on this principled basis, I will provide a case here where a device of the same process-type carries ESI so that the condition of belonging to a qualified process-type is met. This example will require a two phase analysis dealing first with the qualification of the camera, whose process-type is one that can carry ESI and second, with the status of the products of that process.

Consider a Lewis-inspired case<sup>14</sup>: Arianne's head is enclosed in a helmet which has an exterior camera that records the world outside in real time and presents it to her eyes on a panoramic interior screen in a way that is indiscriminable from ordinary seeing and this allows her to interact with the world as if she saw it directly – for example, she can avoid running into trees. The image on her interior screen is not fixed and displays whatever the camera records of her shifts in position to, and occurring in, her environment. Is this a genuine prosthesis?

If not, what disqualifies the helmet-cam is not failure to carry ESI since Arianne's device carries this information – for example, if she turned 90 degrees right, the tree would then appear to be on her left and so forth. Since it must be for reasons other than lack of ESI, this alone renders the ESI condition inefficient in disqualifying the camera process. But if the helmet-cam is a genuine prosthesis, we have an instance of the disqualified process-type that precluded photographs from qualifying, carrying ESI.

This helmet device shares the same process-type as photographs and films in that all of these are produced by the camera device through the same process of transmission and recording of light information. The only difference between still and moving recordings is that video apparatuses put several images into motion, but quantity or motion do not adequately subdivide the process-type<sup>15</sup> nor, for our purposes, are they conditions that need to be met by genuine prostheses.<sup>16</sup> So, phase one is complete and the camera process is qualified.

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<sup>14</sup> David Lewis's discussion on camera eyes and the slippery slope of prostheses can be found in Lewis (1986), pp. 279-80.

<sup>15</sup> Those who resist the analogy between film and photographic equipment can insert instead a case where Arianne's helmet has a still shooting digital camera that captures images non-stop and displays them rapidly.

<sup>16</sup> Even if one argued that motion is a requirement, it does not defeat my refutation of the claim that the ESI requirement for seeing (*per* Cohen and Meskin) is enough to disqualify the camera process. It is instead a substitution for or amendment to their ESI proposal.

Various kinds of cameras belong to the same process-type but even if cameras can be genuine prostheses, it may not be clear that their products, namely photographs and video recordings, are qualified as well. So we move to phase two: Are the products of qualified process-types qualified? In the helmet case, the interior screen is analogous to a film screen or photograph in that it displays the images recorded by the camera<sup>17</sup> and is produced in virtue of the (helmet) camera process. If Arianne sees by the screen, then we hold that the process type can carry information through to its product. However, if the product of the camera process is not qualified in principle this means that the helmet-cam can carry information but the interior screen fails to, so that Arianne doesn't see.

Again, if she doesn't see it is not for lack of ESI because the interior screen carries information about where she stands in relation to her environment and, subsequently, ESI alone cannot disqualify the product of the process. Consider a general resistance to products of genuine prostheses where products are not necessarily qualified even though produced by a qualifying process. This is the same as saying that qualifying devices carry information reliably but cannot necessarily convey that information – e.g., mirrors may carry the necessary information but their reflections do not. While not necessarily a problem in general, per this discussion it is absurd since conveyance of information is the *function* of perceptual prostheses<sup>18</sup> –that is, any prosthetic device that fails to display information is practically unfit to perform the very task of a prosthesis for perception. This is because there is then no guarantee of carried information being perceptible. So, a device that can perform the prosthetic task must also in principle be able to convey information.

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<sup>17</sup> Even if one could find a principled account of why something about recording defeats transparency, this does not make the ESI condition any more efficient at disqualifying photographs.

<sup>18</sup> Display of information in a genuine prosthesis is not to be confused with the doxastic assessment of ESI. Here I am making a point on the necessity of information availability (to perception), not of *assessability*.

## V. THE RETURN OF PHOTOGRAPHS

We have established that products of processes are qualified in principle so that products of camera processes are qualified in principle. The helmet-cam also helped to establish that photographs can carry ESI when displayed rapidly and continuously in sequence (as that is what films do) but perhaps this leaves a problem for single photographs. It should follow from single instances of continuous ordinary seeing counting as seeing, that single instances of continuous seeing by (qualified) devices also do, if the condition(s) for ordinary seeing are met.<sup>19</sup> Here, I will establish how single photographs meet the condition.

Before I illustrate how photographs can carry ESI, recall that Cohen and Meskin want to preserve the ESI condition offered by Currie but eliminate the stringent requirement of *assessing* that information so that it is enough for ESI to be carried when assessment is not possible. They do not deny that when ESI is assessable this counts as seeing; only that seeing still occurs even when it isn't assessable.

Now, imagine being in a pitch black room with only a digital camera that cannot display anything on the screen until the picture is taken, at which point the camera lightens the image so that the room is visible by the display screen. You take pictures to obtain this information so to avoid obstructions in your path and take steps towards the exit. Is object-seeing obtained by this device? If so, then single photographs can perform the prosthetic task. If not, this is again not for lack of egocentric spatial information because in this case you can use the image to track where objects in the room stand in relation to you. Since you can track your relationship to objects, you have a device that meets Currie's doxastic condition; although too strong a requirement in general, no one denies that when it can be met, one sees.

Cohen and Meskin's last resort seems problematic: They must now hold that ESI is not carried by the device even though it is available for assessment by the device. Meanwhile, it is absurd to hold that any instance affords an assessment of information provided by the device that is not first made available by it. So Cohen and Meskin must accept that photographs can meet their condition to provide egospacial information and consequently, the condition fails to perform the task of disqualifying photographs.

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<sup>19</sup> One cannot deny that flash vision is seeing while accepting that continuous seeing is, because this suggests that moments of continuous seeing are not seeing which subsequently calls to question how it can sum up into seeing. And while sight is a general disposition for continuous seeing, a person who has been blind for years and gets a flash of sight briefly, sees for that moment.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Again, my goal here was to render Cohen and Meskin's proposal inefficient in a principled disqualification of photographs. While they say that processes that are disposed to carrying ESI will have tokens that typically carry ESI, Cohen and Meskin also explain that not all instances of a process-type need to carry ESI. A principled account only seeks to establish inherent ability and not incidental typical performance. Typical photographs may be ESI impoverished and thus not genuine prostheses, but they cannot be denied on *a principled basis* because some instances of photographs can carry ESI. Since it is not intrinsic to the camera-process that it typically fails to carry ESI but rather a matter of practical function, – that is, camera processes and products typically fix the images they display because this meets a need, otherwise unmet– typical-ness gives way to principled ability. Photographs can therefore in principle perform the prosthetic task and subsequently, the onus is returned to the opponents of transparency.



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