

Truth in Photography

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And while he who has true opinion about that which the other knows, he will be just as good a guide if he thinks the truth as he who knows the truth? Plato, *Meno*

Commonsense suggests there is a kinship between photographic images and truth. Several years ago the *Los Angeles Times* photojournalist Brian Walski was summarily fired after he admitted that he had used digital-imaging techniques to combine two images into a single, misleading one, which had then been printed on the front page of the newspaper. If there were not some sort of connection between photography and truth it is hard to see what all the fuss was about. Similarly, during the Cuban Missile Crisis it was aerial surveillance photographs that Adlai Stevenson confronted Valerian Zorin with at the infamous United Nations Security Council meeting. The ensuing debate was over the truthfulness of those photographs (Zorin insisted there were faked), an issue that would not have arisen if there had been no assumptions in play about the veracity of the medium. And even in contexts where truth is not necessarily a primary goal, photographs can have their value enhanced by their tendency to help us learn about the things depicted in them. The images made by photographers working for the Farm Security Administration during the 1930s, for example, owe a portion of their value to their ability to help us form true beliefs about period manners of dress, architectural styles, and home furnishings.

Commonsense notwithstanding, the idea of photographic truth has received some rough treatment over the past several decades. In the 1970s Susan Sontag described photography as producing works that are “no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth.” In the 1980s Allan Sekula referred to “the established myth of photographic truth.” In the 1990s Fred Ritchin asserted that “[p]hotography’s relationship with reality is as tenuous as that of any other medium.” Recently Vicki Goldberg has talked of “another nail in the coffin of photography’s truthfulness, which has been moribund so long it’s hard to mourn by now.”¹ And we do not need academics or journalists to tell us that photographs can be deceptive. A modicum of experience with snapshots or photographs in advertisements is enough to convince us that having a photograph is not necessarily having the truth.

What are we to make of this apparently contradictory state of affairs? How can we reconcile the obvious utility of photographs in helping us learn about the world with their equally obvious ability to deceive? Most of the elements of an adequate answer are, I believe,

already in the literature. But they are scattered in disparate areas—the philosophy of mind, aesthetics, epistemology—and need to be brought together and presented in a way that pertains especially to photography. I propose to do this here. I will begin with Jerry Fodor’s characterization of visual perception as a two-stage, inferential process, add to this both Dominic Lopes’s characterization of images as visual prostheses and Kendall Walton’s construal of the photographic process as one that importantly excludes the mentation of the photographer, and then infuse the mixture with some ideas that have been part of the epistemological literature at least since Plato. The result will, I think, make it clear why the air of paradox surrounding photography and truth has emerged, but at the same time will dispel it, as learning via photographs will be seen to be simply another mode of perceptual access to the world and, as such, a mode which is frequently reliable, but occasionally not. A bonus of this new perspective is several implications concerning the extent to which the widespread use of digital-imaging techniques might affect our confidence in the veracity of photographs, and I have accordingly appended a coda in which I render such implications explicit.

Limits of the Discussion

Contemporary investigations in the philosophy of mind distinguish between the *phenomenal* and the *intentional* aspects of mentation. The former include the raw feels of experience—pains and pleasures, for example—and the images that form in our minds as we experience the world in the course of day-to-day perception. The latter, by way of contrast, have as their essence propositional contents, contents that are truth-evaluable. Paradigmatic of these are the *beliefs* that each of us has regarding the world that immediately surrounds us. Typically each of these beliefs has a propositional content that is true, but—as famously imagined in the overture to Descartes’s *Meditations*—it is possible that each has a content that is false.

The discussion that follows is limited insofar as it wholly ignores the phenomenal aspects of our mental lives. This might seem serious omission. Clearly a substantial part of our appreciation of photographic images is grounded in the rich phenomenology that arises as a result of viewing them, and so any comprehensive understanding of such appreciation will require discussion of this phenomenology. But the discussion that follows does not aspire to comprehensiveness; rather, it aspires only to an understanding of the medium in relation to truth. Given that it is the intentional aspects of mentation that have direct commerce with truth, it is natural to focus on the relationship between viewing photographs and the intentional states that doing so engenders. Perhaps a subsequent discussion will investigate the ways in which intentional states might inform the phenomenology of viewing photographs, but this very complex task will not be undertaken here.

The discussion will as well be limited in that I have little to say about the nature of truth itself. This too might seem a serious omission. The nature of truth is controversial, and it might be argued that truth as manifested in photography cannot be discussed intelligently until controversies surrounding the generic notion are settled. However, such a methodological stance is needlessly stultifying. To see way, consider first of all that intentional mental states and their associated truth-evaluable propositional contents are components of a psychological theory that

is central to our concept of a person. According to our commonsense understanding of ourselves, we act largely on the basis of our intentional mental states, paradigmatically on the basis of our desires and beliefs. I, for example, might travel to Paris because I desire to see the Eiffel Tower, believe I can see it if I go there. This commonsense understanding of personhood was repeatedly challenged during the previous century (behaviorism, eliminativism, and even some proposed versions of cognitive science all questioned the idea that we typically act on the basis of our truth-evaluable intentional mental states) and yet, for all such efforts, belief-desire psychology remains as much a part of our understanding of what it is to be a person today as it was at the time of Homer. Given that it has survived such a crucible, it is a good bet that it will be with us well into the future, and such stability makes belief-desire psychology and the notion of truth embedded within it well suited to function as primitives in the current analysis. My aim will be to resolve some of the controversies surrounding photographic veracity in terms of the truth or falsity of the intentional mental states that are central to this picture. Admittedly success at this task will not result in a net gain in our understanding of truth in general, as no one has a wholly transparent story to tell about how the propositional contents associated with intentional mental states correspond (or fail to correspond) to the physical or social facts that constitute the world. But such an analysis will, I think, constitute a significant advance in our understanding of photography, and any unanalyzed residue will at least be part of a widely accepted—perhaps indispensable—conception of what it is to be a person.

Finally, the discussion will be limited insofar as it provides an understanding only of truths about the visible properties of people and objects depicted. Such confinement to the literal might seem a serious liability, as in viewing photographs we are typically interested in truths that emerge at a broader, often figurative level. For example, in appreciating Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans* series (in which she re-photographed famous images by Evans and displayed the results under her name) it is not truths about the manners of dress or home furnishings of the depicted sharecroppers that are of interest. Indeed, an exclusive focus on truth in relation to such matters would be thought to miss the point of her project.

But the operative assumption here is that the best methodology for understanding our appreciation of pictures involves first developing an understanding of their most literal aspects, and then proceeding to an understanding of the more complex aspects in terms of these relatively simple ones. In this regard the study of images is not unlike the study of language, where we attempt to understand how literally construed, present-tense, declarative sentences operate before we attempt to understand more complex linguistic phenomena such as metaphor or irony. The faith is that if we can understand truth in relation to the depiction of the simple, visible properties of people and objects depicted, we can then in terms of these and some other—as yet undetermined—principles governing the viewing of pictures arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the use of images in journalism, advertising, illustration, and art.²

Visual Perception

Beliefs constitute our representations of the environment and function along with desires and

several other types of intentional mental states to produce behavior. Typically the contents of our beliefs are true and the ensuing behavior is successful in terms of satisfying our desires. In the example above involving my imagined trip to Paris, my belief that I could see the Eiffel Tower by going there was true, and my desire to see the tower was duly satisfied. But beliefs can also be false and when they are the behavior they engender is almost always inappropriate. Suppose that unbeknownst to me they have moved the Eiffel Tower to London, and that my belief that I can see it by visiting Paris is therefore false. If I act on this belief my desire to see the tower will be unfulfilled, and will remain so at least until I revise my belief set so that it accurately represents the environment once again.

In this example my inappropriate behavior is essentially harmless, its costs limited to some disappointment in terms of my touristic ambitions. But often the costs of inappropriate behavior are much more severe, amounting to injury or even death—consider, for example, my false belief that there is no traffic coming as I am about to cross the street. Given this, one would expect us to have evolved with swift and highly reliable mechanisms of belief formation concerning our immediate environments. Indeed, this is what we find: our five sense modalities are not much help in forming beliefs about the past or the future, nor are they much help in forming beliefs about matters lying beyond the horizon, but they are very effective at causing us to represent quickly and accurately crucial aspects of the tiny spatial-temporal sphere in which each of us exists. As I approach the street I wish to cross, a quick glance left and right will, with a very high degree of reliability, cause me to believe that traffic is coming if it is coming, or that it is not if it is not.

Such perceptual capacities have received enormous amounts of research attention over the past seventy years. With regard to visual perception in particular, much is known about the process that begins with light being reflected from objects in the environment and ends with the formation of perceptual beliefs in the minds of persons looking at those objects. But this is not to say that there are no controversies regarding the character of the visual process; indeed, far from it. Perhaps the most divisive issues surround the question whether or to what extent visual perception is *inferential*. According to the non-inferential extreme, the process whereby perceptual beliefs are formed is wholly insulated from the large set of background beliefs a viewer brings to the occasion of viewing. On this extreme, a viewer may have a wide array of expectations concerning the character of the environment in which he or she is situated, but these will in no way influence the contents of the representations the visual system yields—each occasion of visual perception starts afresh, as it were; or, to adopt the art-historical terminology, we view the world through innocent eyes. According to the opposing, wholly inferential extreme, in practice *any* belief that the viewer brings to the occasion of viewing can act in conjunction with the character of the visual stimulus to help determine the perceptual beliefs which the visual system yields. On this extreme there is no such thing as an innocent eye—we view the world on each occasion in a knowing way, perhaps for the better, perhaps for the worse.

Jerry Fodor's highly influential construal of the visual process constitutes a compromise between these two extremes. According to Fodor, visual perception is a two-stage process. The

first stage takes as inputs the visual stimulus and a *delimited* set of background beliefs and uses inferential mechanisms to generate representations of the environment. These preliminary representations, while content-bearing, are not yet beliefs, as they do not interact with desires and other mental states to produce behavior. Instead these *proto-beliefs* function as inputs for the second stage of the visual processing system, which uses them in conjunction with *arbitrarily many* of the background beliefs possessed by the viewer to draw inferences about the character of the environment, inferences which then constitute the fully operational perceptual beliefs that are the outputs of the visual system.³

Consider the familiar illusion of water pooling on the distant roadway on a sunny day. A typical viewer brings to the occasion of viewing the firm belief that water is unlikely to be on the road under such conditions, and yet the visual system persists in representing the world as though water is present. Furthermore, while the system persists in this way, the resulting representation is not fully active in the psychology of the viewer—the driver does not slow down or swerve or perform any of the other actions typical of the full-fledged belief that there is water on the road ahead. Finally, appearances notwithstanding, the viewer does not develop the perceptual belief that there is water on the road ahead. All of this can be accounted for on Fodor's characterization. The persistence of the illusion is explained by the inability of the first stage to access the wider set of background beliefs possessed by the viewer, including, most relevantly, the belief that water is unlikely to be present under such circumstances. The relative impotence of the illusion is accounted for by assuming it is a proto-belief—a state with propositional content (that there is water on the road ahead) which is not fully functional in the viewer's psychology. And the ultimate failure to form the perceptual belief that there is water on the road is explained by the access that the second stage has to background beliefs (the beliefs that water is unlikely to be present, that this sort of illusion is common under these circumstances, etc.). Vision is at once innocent, as the unknowing eyes persist in their naive illusion, and yet knowing, as the simultaneously savvy visual system is not fooled in the end.

The division between the delimited set of background beliefs to which the first stage has access and the wider array of beliefs to which the second stage has access is non-arbitrary. The representations constituting the delimited set have contents pertaining to very general and stable characteristics of the environment, and are thus unlikely to be false (on Fodor's view, many—but not necessarily all—of these are innate⁴). The representations to which the second stage has access have contents pertaining to more specific and changeable aspects of the environment, and thus have a greater risk of being false. There is much to say about the details of this arrangement, especially about how it can maximize the chances of the system yielding true beliefs in situations where a person's expectations about the character of the environment are false. But such discussion would take us too far afield for present purposes. Here we can instead operate on the assumption that Fodor's characterization—or at least something close to it—is correct, and then investigate what implications the division between access to representations about general and stable characteristics and access to representations about particular and changeable matters might have for the formation of true perceptual beliefs when looking at pictures.

Visual Perception and Pictures

A recent trend in the philosophical literature understands pictorial competence in terms of our capacity for visual perception generally. In the most basic terms, pictures are regarded as arrangements of marks on surfaces which, when presented to our visual system, cause it to operate in many ways just as it would were it confronted, not with a picture, but with what the picture is a picture of. This similarity of operation includes acts of perceptual-belief formation.

Suppose that I am standing on the eastern observation deck of the Empire State Building looking out over the East River, Queens, Brooklyn, and Long Island in the distance. Myriad true perceptual beliefs result: traffic is heavy inbound on the bridges, but light outbound; tugboats with barges ply the river; planes approach JFK from the south; etc. Now suppose that I am instead in a gallery many miles from New York viewing photorealist paintings that were created from the same vantage point at the same time. The paintings are, let us suppose, by Rackstraw Downes, who creates on-site highly detailed images of urban infrastructure, frequently in New York. Under suitable conditions, the very same perceptual beliefs will result—I will likewise come to have true beliefs about the state of automobile traffic on the bridges, boat traffic on the river, and air traffic in the sky as they were at that same point in time.

As noted above, our perceptual mechanisms are ordinarily limited to the formation of beliefs about spatially and temporally proximate matters, and yet here is a familiar example of the formation of perceptual beliefs about matters spatially and temporally quite distant. How can this happen? In rough outline, the answer is that the chain of causal occurrences which in ordinary perception begins with light reflecting from distal objects, continues through the projection of images on the retinas, and eventuates in the formation of perceptual beliefs, can easily be extended, especially in the region between the distal objects and the images cast on the retinas.

Closed-circuit television as used for security purposes is a familiar example of this. Rather than placing a guard close enough to a gate to keep an eye on it, a camera can be placed close enough and, with the aid of complex electronics, an image made to appear on a monitor which in turn can be viewed by the guard at a remote location. Monitors are designed to cast images on the viewer's retinas that are sufficiently like those that would have been cast had the viewer been seeing directly to enable the process of perceptual-belief formation to take place in (more or less) its usual way. The guard can in this way form perceptual beliefs about matters at an arbitrarily great spatial remove or, likewise, with the aid of video-recording equipment, about matters at a temporal remove as well.

From the point of view of overall function there is nothing special about having electronics mediate between the original scene and the creation of an image which is then viewed by a person using his or her unaided visual system. From this functional perspective, what matters is that some sort of system cause the arrangement of lines and tones constituting the image to be correlated with visible features of the original scene in ways that, when viewed,

cause the visual system to be stimulated much as it would have been stimulated had the viewer been looking at the original scene directly. A talented painter or sketcher, of course, constitutes an instance of such a system.

Switching back to the example involving my viewing paintings of New York while in a gallery many miles away, we can think of Downes himself in purely functional terms as operating like the closed-circuit television system insofar as his skill insures an appropriate correlation between the visible aspects of what was going on in New York when he was making his images and the arrangements of oils on the canvas. Given that he fulfills this function well, in viewing his canvases, my visual system is stimulated in ways similar enough to the ways in which it would have been stimulated had I actually been viewing the scene to cause me to form the same perceptual beliefs I would have had I been there. In this way images can dramatically extend the range of matters about which persons can form perceptual beliefs. As Dominic Lopes has noted, pictures—still or moving—can function as visual *prostheses*, extending the spatial-temporal region about which we can learn using our visual system.^{5,6}

In order to properly flesh out this skeletal understanding of pictorial competence numerous details must be attended to. To take just one example, the images cast on the retinas by pictures are typically quite different from those cast by direct looking—light reflected by oils, acrylics, or gelatin-suspended particles of silver has quite a different character than light reflected by the persons or objects depicted—and a convincing story must be told about how the visual system has come to be sufficiently flexible to allow perceptual-belief formation to take place notwithstanding such differences.⁷ But all that is required for present purposes is the general idea that in looking at pictures we can and frequently do form perceptual beliefs about matters at spatial or temporal remove.

Obviously not every instance of viewing a picture leads to the formation of beliefs. Cartoons, doodles, and sketches of imaginary scenes are typically formed with aims quite at odds with causing true beliefs to form in the minds of their viewers. Indeed, the wide variety of roles pictures have in our society suggests that the formation of beliefs about the things depicted in them is the exception rather than the rule. How can an understanding of images in terms of perceptual capacities that function to form beliefs survive this fact about the actual function of images?

An answer emerges from consideration of the two-stage inferential perceptual process sketched above. Recall that the inferences that take place in the first stage of the visual system are based on background beliefs about very general and stable characteristics of the environment, rather than on the basis of particular matters of the moment. Typically, when one is looking at a picture one *believes* that one is looking at a picture (exceptions involve special cases in which one is, for example, viewing a *trompe l'oeil* canvas). This is a belief about a particular matter, not a belief about a general feature of the environment. As such, it is not one to which the first stage has access, and so the first stage is uninhibited from functioning in its customary manner, which is to say that it will generate proto-beliefs. But, unlike in instances of

ordinary vision, these proto-beliefs will frequently not become full-fledged perceptual beliefs, as the second stage of the visual system, which does have access to the belief that it is a picture that is being viewed, is liable to block the inference. The two-stage character of the visual process in this way allows for the formation of states with propositional content, and yet at the same time accounts for the fact that frequently those states are not fully operational in the psychology of the viewer. Pictures in this way piggyback on a system the overall function of which is the formation of true beliefs about the environment.

Clearly, the belief that one is looking at a picture is an ingredient in this decision, but this cannot be all there is to the story, for frequently a person, in looking at a picture and believing that he is doing so, will nonetheless form full-fledged beliefs about matters depicted. In such instances there must be extra premises being appealed to by the second stage, premises which allow inferences to beliefs to go through. Determining what these might be requires that we consider the formative conditions of pictures and, more specifically, the differences that frequently obtain between the formative conditions of handmade pictures and those of photographic ones.

Photographs and Truth

Photographic images are a species of images generally and, as such, operate in the manner discussed in the previous section. Photographic technology is a means of marking surfaces in ways that trigger the operation of the first stage of the visual system, thus leading to the formation of proto-beliefs and subsequent evaluation on the basis of arbitrarily many background beliefs. But is there a difference in the case of photographs? Do they offer advantages over handmade images in terms of the formation of *true* perceptual beliefs, advantages which might help us understand the paradoxical attitude toward truth and photography noted at the outset? The answer is more complicated than one might expect.

An obvious first thought is that there is a direct correlation between looking at photographic images and the formation of true beliefs, and that this correlation is absent or at least less pronounced in cases of looking at handmade images. But it is surprisingly difficult to come up with a clear statement of the nature of such a correlation that is plausibly true. On a very strong interpretation, viewing photographs *always* yields true perceptual beliefs, whereas viewing handmade images sometimes yields true beliefs and sometimes yields false ones. But this is obviously false. As noted at the outset, everyone agrees that viewing photographs frequently leads to the formation of false beliefs.

On a weaker construal of the correlation the claim is that, of all the perceptual beliefs ever formed as a result of looking at images, *more* of those formed by looking at photographic images have been true than those formed by looking at handmade images. However, obvious problems with its evaluation to one side, the claim thus construed, if true, would not necessarily reflect the substance of our intuitive sense that there is a connection between photography and truth. For, if it is true, it is likely so only because there are many more photographs than handmade images in existence (this is especially apparent if one considers all the snapshots in

existence) and because there are many more people viewing them. Many people viewing many photographs adds up to many true beliefs—and, no doubt, many false ones as well—simply as a result of arithmetic, and not as a result of anything special about the metaphysics of the photographic medium.

A more interesting interpretation of the claim construes the correlation on a per-image basis and then evaluates in terms of a counterfactual. The idea is that, for any given image of one sort, we consider the number of true beliefs viewing it yields in the mind of a typical viewer, and then compare this number with the number that would have been formed in the mind of that same viewer had the image been of the other sort. One compares, for example, the canvas depicting the view from the Empire State Building imagined above with a photograph taken from the same vantage point, and asks whether a typical viewer would form more true perceptual beliefs by viewing the latter than the former.

A tempting first thought is that the viewer would. It seems natural to say that a highly detailed, mechanically produced photograph must yield more true beliefs than a sketchy handmade image. But it is important to be careful in evaluating the counterfactual. Notoriously, the project of determining the truth conditions for counterfactuals is unruly philosophical territory, but if there is a consensus it is that when evaluating counterfactuals one must confine attention to “possible worlds” as similar to the actual world as is possible consonant with the changes required to make the assertion a counterfactual in the first place. In this spirit, the question is not whether the viewer would form more true beliefs by looking at a detailed photograph than a less-detailed handmade image, but rather whether he would form more true beliefs by looking at a detailed photograph than he would by looking at an *equally detailed* handmade image.

It is far from clear that the answer is yes. Consider an actual canvas, one meticulously formed by Rackstraw Downes at the Snug Harbor complex on Staten Island (Figure 1). In examining this image, the viewer forms myriad true beliefs about the ductwork, brickwork, flooring, and electrical systems that were before Downes when he made the picture. It is hard to imagine that a photograph made from the same vantage point—even one made with a large-format camera—would do a better job in this regard.

[Figure 1 about here]

Overall then, given that it is difficult to know how to interpret the claim that there is a better correlation between truth and photographs than between truth and handmade images, it is best simply to remain agnostic with regard to the issue. But such agnosticism does not render futile a search for truth in photography. For, I will argue, if the substantial difference between learning about the world via photographic and handmade images cannot be found here, it can be found in the greater degree of *confidence* that typically attends beliefs created as a result of looking at former sort of images. The central epistemic advantage associated with photographs lies at the meta-level of beliefs *about* beliefs. Second-order beliefs about first-order perceptual

beliefs formed as a result of looking at photographs frequently have as their contents that those first-order beliefs are true. And, as philosophers at least since Plato have noted, while there is tremendous value in having true beliefs, there is even greater value in having true beliefs *and* having reasons to believe that those true beliefs are true.⁸

The source of confidence in the truth of beliefs is no less than the issue of justification for beliefs generally, a perennial topic in epistemology and, as such, not one that will be dealt with comprehensively here. But enough can be said by way of bringing together the idea of a two-stage visual process presented above with some reflections on photography due to Kendall Walton to make it plausible, I think, that we generally have better reason to accept beliefs engendered by viewing photographic images than we do those engendered by viewing handmade ones.

Photographs, Objectivity, and Reasons to Believe

Walton's idea is one that had been noted in various nebulous ways almost since the invention of photographic technology, but which had not, so far as I am aware, been stated in a precise way until the publication of his 'Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism' (reprinted in this volume). Consider the causal path stretching between the scene to be depicted on the one hand, and the arrangement of lines and tones on the picture produced on the other. In the case of a handmade image, this path includes a large number of the mental states of the image-maker, including his perceptual beliefs regarding the scene before him. In the case of the photographic image, by way of contrast, such states might be equally present, but they stand outside of the relevant causal path (for the sake of simplicity, it helps to suppose the photographic image is produced by a Land camera). One consequence of this is that different counterfactuals are true of the two kinds of images. If the mental states of the painter had been different, then the arrangement of lines and tones on the image would have been different. But the analogous counterfactual is not true in the case of the photograph. The photographer might have been hallucinating wildly about the scene before her, and yet the image she produces—its mechanism of formation bypassing her addled mind—would remain the same.

There are several important objections that are typically raised against this construal of the difference between the two types of media: that the difference emerges only when the photographic images are produced by a Land camera, and that once the traditional negative-positive process is considered it evaporates; that decisions by the photographer regarding what kind of film to use, what sorts of filter to place over the lens, where to point the camera, when to trip the shutter, etc. constitute kinds of mental-state involvement that undermine the distinction; and that lack of mental-state involvement is not an essential characteristic of the photographic process. Each of these objections merits careful consideration and requires convincing response. I believe I have done so elsewhere, and refer the reader who wishes to press them there.⁹ Here I will assume that Walton is on the right track, and then investigate the extent to which his observations concerning the metaphysics of the two types of images may be placed into the service of the discussion at hand.

A preliminary terminological stipulation will prove helpful. The term ‘objective’ is frequently used to denote standards or processes that in some way exclude mental states. Objective standards in educational assessment, for example, bypass the thoughts a particular teacher has about a student, and instead evaluate on the basis of standardized tests. Likewise, an objective decision-making process adopted by an individual with institutional authority is one that bypasses his or her own personal interests and operates instead on a general principle (such as the greatest good for all affected). Given such ordinary-language usage, it is natural to adopt the term as a label for the photographic process as characterized by Walton. Photography, which excludes the image-maker’s mental states from the process that maps features of the original scene onto features of the image, is an objective process; painting and sketching, which include the image-maker’s mental states in this process, are subjective processes.¹⁰

Bringing Walton’s idea together with the two-stage visual process characterized above, the question becomes whether objectively formed images provide better reason for accepting the proto-beliefs they engender than do subjectively formed ones. Now, strictly speaking, the processes themselves cannot provide reason; rather, it is *beliefs* viewers have about those processes that will provide reason, if available. Thus it is the background beliefs that viewers bring with them when looking at the two kinds of images that must be considered.

The contents of such beliefs, by hypothesis, are that in the case of the photograph the image was formed objectively, and that in the case of the handmade it was formed subjectively. These are both beliefs about particular matters rather than general features of the environment. As such they will not be accessible to the first stage of the visual system, and thus will not affect the production of proto-beliefs. Photographs and paintings will equally be confronted with innocent eyes, at least in the first stage of visual processing. However, the second stage will have such access, and while there is no reason in principle why beliefs about direct involvement of mental states (as opposed to, say, optical or chemical states) should undermine reasons for accepting generated proto-beliefs, such beliefs, operating in conjunction with other background beliefs, can yield reason for resistance.

Consider, for example, the commonly held belief that persons viewing a scene are inattentive to details of that scene unless they have special reason to be otherwise. Armed with such a belief, the viewer of a subjectively formed image will worry that the image-maker might not have noticed a particular detail in the scene—a particular graffiti-artist’s tag on a lamppost, say—and that, therefore, that detail was not rendered in the image. A proto-belief produced by viewing such an image and having content to the effect that the tag was absent would consequently be treated with suspicion. No similar concerns arise in the case of an image believed to have been formed objectively. The photographer might have been as inattentive as the painter, and yet the photographic image, its formative process bypassing the photographer’s inventory of mental states, would nonetheless include the detail, if it were present.

There are many other background beliefs commonly held by viewers of images that function similarly: that people creating images are sometimes subject to perceptual foibles such

as astigmatism or color blindness, that people creating images are subject to fatigue, that people creating images often have aims far remote from causing true beliefs to form in the minds of viewers, etc. All these are as true of the photographer as of the painter, but they will typically remain inert in the psychology of a viewer who believes that the image at which she is looking was formed objectively.

Of course there are no certainties here. Many things can go wrong. For one thing, the higher-order beliefs about the formative conditions of images might themselves be false. An individual might believe that she is viewing an objectively formed image when in fact she is not (for more on this possibility, see the discussion of digital photography below). For another, even if the higher-order beliefs concerning the objectivity of the formative process are true, the mechanism mapping features of the scene onto features of the image might do so in unexpected ways. It might, for example, map green in the scene onto magenta in the image, thereby causing an unwary viewer to accept false proto-beliefs concerning the colors of objects in the original scene. And this list of ways things can go wrong can easily be extended. Photography can fail to live up to its aura of epistemic advantage both at the level of true perceptual beliefs engendered *and* at the level of confidence in such beliefs. But it is wrong on the basis of this to careen to the conclusion that there are no epistemic advantages associated with the objective, perceptual-prosthetic technology of photography. Such technology offers *relative* epistemic advantages, perhaps in terms of the number of true beliefs engendered, and frequently in terms of confidence we have in those beliefs. And, as noted, advantages along these dimensions are of enormous value to us.¹¹

The Paradox Revisited

With these distinctions in hand we can reconsider the air of paradox surrounding photography noted at the outset. On the one hand, photographs have always been used—and will continue to be used—to help us form true beliefs about the world. On the other, experience teaches us that the beliefs so-formed are frequently not true, and that our trust in them has often been misplaced. The reasons for these opposing attitudes should now be apparent. Many pictures function as visual prostheses enabling us to form true beliefs about occurrences that take place outside the range of our otherwise epistemically feeble perceptual capacities. As such they have value (but not *only* as such, or *always* as such). Of this subset of pictures, a smaller subset have been formed in objective ways, and these not only enable us frequently to form true beliefs, but as well enable us to have confidence in those beliefs. As such, they have additional value (but, again, not *only* as such, or *always* as such). Given that this smaller subset is *de facto* well correlated with pictures that are photographs, photographs are frequently of special value to us. But both subjectively formed and objectively formed images remain mere extensions of our perceptual capacities and, given that our perceptual capacities are never infallible, mere extensions of them are never infallible either—beliefs formed as a result of looking at pictures will sometimes be true and sometimes be false. Furthermore, while the characteristically objective photographic process lays the ontic groundwork for increased confidence in beliefs formed as a result of looking at photographic images, such groundwork subtends an epistemic arrangement that falls short of certainty. Hence the need to be wary when it comes to beliefs

formed via any sorts of pictures, photographs included.

Digital Photography and Truth

Echoing the paradox noted at the outset there is a paradox associated with the recent widespread adoption of digital-imaging technology in photojournalism and other activities in which the confident formation of true beliefs is a primary goal. On the one hand, the ease with which the new technology permits image manipulation should undermine our confidence in the objectivity of images formed by such means and, consequently, in the beliefs formed as a result of viewing them. On the other hand, the use of digital technology is now the norm, and yet the confidence we have in beliefs formed as a result of viewing photojournalistic images remains substantially undiminished. How can the grounds for confidence apparently be so radically undermined, and yet the confidence remain?

A worrisome answer is that we are simply being naive, that mere epistemic inertia lies behind our tendency to continue to believe that the images we are viewing were formed objectively and that, therefore, we can have confidence in the beliefs they engender. If this is the case we should revise the background beliefs we bring with us in viewing such images so that they accord with our new, epistemically more treacherous journalistic environment.

But there is reason to believe that this is not our current situation, and that various institutional pressures have had—and will continue to have—an inhibiting effect on the use of the new technology in ways that undermine photographic objectivity. We have noted that there is significant value associated, not only with the ability to form true beliefs, but as well with the ability to reason about the etiology of those beliefs in ways that give us confidence in their truth. This applies both to beliefs formed about spatially and temporally immediate aspects of our environment, as is the case in ordinary perception, and to beliefs about spatially and temporally remote aspects, as is typically the case in photojournalism. Given this, and given that digital-imaging techniques can easily be used to subvert the objectivity that subtends such confidence, it is in our collective interest to resist the implementation of such techniques, at least in certain contexts.

Examples can be found which suggest that we have indeed developed institutional structures that express such collective interest by punishing severely photographers who avail themselves of objectivity-undermining techniques. Consider the example of Brian Walski noted at the outset. Photojournalists regularly use digital-imaging techniques to sharpen or make “gamma” or color-balance adjustments to their images. But these function merely to compensate for various psychophysical idiosyncracies of human perception (without them images look fuzzy, dull, or tinted) and do not undermine the objectivity of those aspects of the formative process subtending rationale for confidence in beliefs we form regarding things that matter to us. Walski, however, in combining two images to create a third, caused viewers of the resultant image to form false beliefs about the direction in which a soldier’s gun was pointed relative to a group of civilians, one of whom was carrying an infant—certainly an occurrence of interest and concern to those perusing the newspaper. Furthermore, in doing so he rendered false

viewer's background beliefs about the objectivity of the formative process and (again, unbeknownst to the viewers) thereby removed grounds for their confidence in the perceptual beliefs they formed. In doing so he damaged a valuable process. The reaction on the part of the newspaper's administration, justifiably concerned about such damage, was swift and severe. Immediately upon the discovery of the manipulation the newspaper published an editor's note explaining what had happened, displaying the original and composite images, and announcing Walski's dismissal.¹² Walski's hitherto highly successful career as a photojournalist was ruined.

It is worth emphasizing that it was not the particular false beliefs that viewers of the image formed that merited the punishment, nor was it the single instance of undermining of the grounds for confidence in those particular beliefs. Both of these occurrences were unfortunate, but taken together they would probably not justify terminating a career. Rather, it was the threat that this isolated action posed for the *general practice* of confidently forming true beliefs when viewing photographs presented in journalistic contexts that constituted the rationale for the severe punishment. If Walski's example were to be widely discovered and yet not visibly punished, confidence viewers of photojournalistic images have in their background beliefs about the objectivity of the formative process would be eroded and, eventually, those background beliefs would be rejected. The result would be a loss of confidence in perceptual beliefs formed as a result of looking at pictures in newspapers and, consequently, the loss of a general practice which is of tremendous value to us.¹³

In closing I note that there are many uses of photography remote from those that have the confident formation of true beliefs as their primary goal. Photography as used in various artistic practices constitutes a source of many such examples. If the *only* reason for maintaining the objectivity of the photographic process arises from its role in relation to the confident formation of true beliefs, we can assume that there will be no institutional pressures to maintain objectivity in such contexts. It is an open question whether, absent such pressures, photographers working in such contexts will abandon objectivity and, if so, whether this will be harmful to the communicative practices in which they engage. This question merits sustained investigation.^{14,15}

Endnotes

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, NY: Picador, 2001), p. 6; Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973-1983* (Halifax, NS: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), p.5; Fred Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* (New York, NY: The Aperture Foundation, 1999), p.1; Vicki Goldberg, *The New York Times*, October 21, 2001.

2. Although I mention this methodological analogy with the study of language, the general orientation of the discussion to follow is opposed to an understanding of images in ways akin to an understanding of language. As will emerge, truth in pictures is a quality associated with the

contents of intentional states engendered in the minds of their viewers, whereas truth in language is a quality associated with the contents of the sentences themselves (although the latter typically eventuate in the formation of intentional states in the minds of hearers or readers).

3. For Fodor's most comprehensive presentation of these ideas, see *The Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983). See also 'Observation Reconsidered', in *A Theory of Content and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990). Fodor does not have a general term for the outputs of the first stage of the visual system. I offer 'proto-belief', as it will prove handy in subsequent discussion.

4. For further discussion see 'Observation Reconsidered', especially pp. 247-48.

5. See his *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), especially pp. 191-93. Lopes does not make the point in terms of perceptual-belief formation; rather, he emphasizes the ability of pictures to enable us to *recognize* persons and objects that are distant in space or time. But I assume that belief formation is frequently consequent upon such recognition.

6. Cohen and Meskin note that, while photographic images can in this way help viewers form perceptual beliefs about visual properties of objects remote in space, they typically do not enable viewers to form beliefs about the spatial locations of those objects in relation to their bodies (this volume and 'On the Epistemic Value of Photographs', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 62, no. 2 [Spring 2004]). While I think they are right about this, it is worth emphasizing that the point applies to *all* informative pictures—not just to photographs. Images *generally*, if they enable viewers to form beliefs about objects remote in space (or time), do so in "spatially agnostic" (or temporally agnostic) ways.

7. The most comprehensive treatment of which I am aware is in Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*. See also Arthur Danto, 'Seeing and Showing', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 59, no. 1 (Winter 2001), pp. 1-9, and Danto's discussion of the connection between the art-historical notion of an innocent eye and a Fodor-style characterization of perception in 'Animals as Art Historians', in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1992).

8. It is worth reflecting on the source of the value that attends our capacity to reason about our beliefs. No doubt there are many such sources, but a central one has to do with the maintenance of our belief set. We can wonder whether a belief we have is true and, in consequence of this, we can think about the reasons we have for accepting it. If such reasons turn out not to be good, we can reject the belief, thus reducing the danger of acting inappropriately in our environment. Conversely, if we find upon reflection that such reasons are good, we can behave on the basis of that belief with confidence—with greater resiliency in the face of the conflicting appearances that the flux of experience characteristically provides. Other creatures, lacking this capacity for higher-order thought, either slavishly continue to act on their false beliefs, or careen from one belief to another as the limited evidence arising from particular sensory contacts dictate, in

either case frequently at their peril.

9. See my 'Objectivity in Photography', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 45, no. 3, (July 2005), especially Section IV on the distinction between *primary* and *secondary* modes of mental-state involvement in the process leading to the formation of an image.

10. There is a tendency in the literature on photography to equate objectivity and truth. The discussion here will, I hope, make it clear that, while the two notions are *de facto* importantly related, they are nonetheless conceptually quite distinct.

11. There are technologies which likewise act as prostheses for our other sense modalities. As Cohen and Meskin note, audio recording is one such, as it enables us to form perceptual beliefs about the audible properties of occurrences remote in space or time ('Photographs as Evidence', this volume). However, they would not agree that it is the objectivity of the process that subtends such epistemic advantage (see 'On the Epistemic Value of Photographs', endnote 37).

12. *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2003. The newspaper withheld permission for the reproduction of these images, but they are easily located on the internet.

13. I note once again that the claim is not that learning about the world via photographs guarantees the formation of true beliefs or confidence in them. As has been noted at least since Hume, perceptual beliefs are *never* attended by complete confidence. Perceptual beliefs formed via photographs, as a species of perceptual beliefs in general, thus likewise never deserve unreserved confidence. But we are nonetheless better off—perhaps in terms of truth and frequently in terms of confidence—learning about the world via photographs than we are learning about the world via subjectively formed images. The advantage is a relative one.

14. For excellent examples of such investigation see Barbara Savedoff, *Transforming Images: How Photography Complicates the Picture* (Ithaca, NY: The Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 202-09, and Savedoff's contribution to this volume.

15. The participants at the 2004 American Society for Aesthetics Meeting (Eastern Division) made a variety of helpful suggestions from which this paper has benefitted. My thoughts on this topic have benefitted as well from numerous conversations with John Maturri.