

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON VISUAL ILLUSTRATION: A RESPONSE TO MATRAVERS AND ANSCOMB

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Let me thank Derek Matravers and Claire Anscomb for their thoughtful and incisive comments on *Thoughtful Images*. They have given me a great deal to think about. I am very grateful that they have responded to my book in such interesting and challenging ways. I hope my responses do justice to at least some of their concerns.

Both Matravers and Anscomb focus on two themes: issues concerning my theorization of illustration and the question of their cognitive significance. I will discuss each of these issues in my responses to each of them.

1. Response to Matravers

1.1. The Theory of Visual Illustration

Matravers expresses concern about my advocacy for what I call *the similarity heuristic*. I introduce this principle as a constraint on the nature of

illustration. It is necessary because visual illustrations of written texts—Matravers initially focuses on text-based visual illustrations—necessarily include many features not specified by the source text on which they are based. The first page of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, for example, consists only of the following phrase, "the night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind," so there are only a few facts that the illustration on the facing page is required to include: a boy named Max wearing a wolf suit who is somehow making mischief. The illustration shows a frowning young boy standing on some books pounding a nail into a wall to create a cord upon which his blanket is hanging, perhaps to create a hiding place. Although my description of the illustration leaves out many details, it is sufficient to demonstrate how a visual image will include many elements left open by its source because a visual image is *informationally dense* in a way that a linguistic description is not. Creating a visual image for a text requires the artist's creativity in supplementing the description.

The similarity heuristic was an attempt to specify a guideline that explains what an artist does in creating a visual illustration of a text. Matravers thinks that the heuristic limits the creativity of the illustrator too much and uses the example of the conceited man from *Le Petit Prince* to prove his point. The illustration of the conceited man shows a man wearing a hat with a feather in it (though Matravers characterizes it as a straw). Matravers' objection is that the conceited man in the illustration does not look like any conceited man he has met, but that's not what I think the similarity heuristic requires. The features of the illustration Matravers mentions—that the man is wearing a top hat, bow-tie, and frock coat—are all images derived from real things. The elements of the illustration are all based upon reality and hence can satisfy at least one aspect of the similarity heuristic.

Matravers goes on to suggest two other constraints on visual illustrations of texts. The first is a variation of the similarity heuristic, only it

specifies that the world to which an illustration's features correspond is the fictional world of the story. The problem with this constraint is that we don't gain access to that world except through the text and its illustrations, so it's unclear how such a constraint would operate. Matravers' second constraint is that the illustrations need to be consistent across the book which is their source. This constraint can only apply to *series* of illustrations such as those found in picture books and not to single illustrations of which I give numerous examples in the book. But, in any case, I wonder if this might also be too constraining on the illustrator who might choose to vary illustrations for an artistic and imaginative purpose.

A constraint (or norm) that I would endorse is that of *aptness*. Given a text, a visual illustration of it must be appropriate (or apt) to the world created by the story. Returning to *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max's wolf suit is a sort of onesie, that is, a pajama that a young child might wear. It is not a realistic wolf costume such as an adult might wear on Halloween. This is appropriate to the story, for none of the images in the book picture scary creatures, despite the wild things being described that way.

Focusing on series of illustrations biases the case. It certainly is true that illustrations in a series normally exhibit consistency both to all of the other illustrations in the series and the fictional world being created. However, the more basic question with which I was concerned was what is true of single illustrations such as Titian's *Rape of Europa*, an example Matravers cites.

1.2. The Cognitive Import of Visual Works of Art

In his 1992 paper, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," Jerome Stolnitz criticized the claim that the novels of Jane Austen contained significant philosophical truths. Instead, he argued that works of art only make banal cognitive claims, such as "Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart." Matravers says that he is surprised to

find himself supporting Stolnitz' position, but this is the import of his objection to my claim that works of visual art can be philosophically significant.

Before looking at Matravers' specific concerns, let me put forward a couple of examples of philosophically significant works he does not discuss. The first is an etching, *Artificiosa totius logices descriptio*, made by Martin Meurisse and Leonard Gaultier in 1614. As Susanna Berger (2017) argues, the work makes a contribution to logic by showing two palm trees entwined and producing a fruit. The work visually asserts that a judgment is not just an association of two terms, but a synthesis that is something over and above the two terms.

A second example of a philosophically significant work of art is Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1985). The installation consists of three chairs: an ordinary wooden folding chair, a photograph of that chair displayed on the wall to the left and slightly above it, and a dictionary definition of the chair on the wall to the right of the physical chair. The work is an illustration of Plato's metaphysics, with its three-fold categorization of reality: appearances, mere semblances, and real things or forms.

Matravers is critical of my claim that a work like this is philosophically significant. He creates a dilemma: perceivers of the work who are not familiar with Plato will not understand its philosophical significance while those who are acquainted with Plato's ideas will not learn anything from the work. The two horns of the dilemma are meant to demonstrate that the work is philosophically trivial.

In framing his dilemma, Matravers does concede that the work is an illustration of a philosophical idea. This puts art and philosophy on a par in so far as each is able to present a complex philosophical theory, viz. Plato's metaphysics, even if interpreting the work in that manner requires previous acquaintance with Plato's philosophy. But there is

another dimension to this work that I think secures its philosophical significance. It shows that Plato's denigration of art in relation to philosophy is unjustified. In Book X of his *Republic*, Plato (2007) argues that art is inferior to philosophy because it deals with appearances rather than reality. But Kosuth's installation shows that art, because it is capable of displaying philosophical truth, does not deal only with appearances. This is the work's philosophical significance.

Clearly, it takes philosophical sophistication to interpret the work in this way. But the perceiver of the work who does so can learn something, for the acquaintance with Plato's metaphysics required for understanding the work does not include the critique embodied in the piece. It is a creative piece of philosophizing done through a work of art.

Something analogous is true of Mel Bochner's drawing, *Fourth Range* (1973). That work is able to show a perceiver the truth of Wittgenstein's contention that an error can only exist in the context of a rule (Wittgenstein, 1969). A perceiver of the work who knows that Wittgenstein made that claim might not accept it until they had seen how Bochner illustrates it. Such a knowledgeable person could still learn something from the work. (More on this work and its cognitive significance below.)

What I have said so far does not respond to Matravers' denial that Modern Art, especially Abstract Expressionism, does "philosophy in paint", as I contend. My account of Modern Art is dependent on Clement Greenberg's account of the trajectory of such art as creating works of art that exhibited the flatness he took to be painting's essence. For Greenberg (1982), the only property that all and only paintings had to have is flatness, for paintings involved applying paint to a plane surface. Although I criticize Greenberg's essentialism, I still maintain that Modern Artists were doing philosophy.

Is Matravers correct to reject the claim that the Abstract Expressionists were doing philosophy in paint? I don't think so, and part of the reason has to do with the complexity of the notion of flatness. In what sense might it make sense to say that an Abstract Expressionist like Jackson Pollock attempted to create paintings that embodied flatness?

First of all, paintings are not flat in a purely physical sense, though their canvases may be if they are stretched correctly. This is because the paint upon the surface of a painting is not perfectly smooth but has peaks and valleys, so to speak. Perhaps Helen Frankenthaler's color field paintings, which involved thinning the paint so that it would be absorbed into the canvas, come close to eliminating this feature. But the point is that flatness is not a physical property of a painting. Rather, to say that a painting is flat is to say that it is not amenable to what Richard Wollheim (1980) called "seeing-in," that is, taking a nearly two-dimensional object to depict a three-dimensional scene. All traditional Western paintings are not flat in this sense, for their flat surface also gives rise to a 3-dimensional view of the world. Pollock created paintings that are flat in their denial of any representational, 3-dimensional content.

Is this doing philosophy in paint? I think so. Recall Arthur Danto's (1993) claim that Andy Warhol did philosophy by creating a work that posed the question, "what makes something a work of art?", in a manner that philosophers had failed to grasp. Warhol posed the question "why is this object a work of art when its perceptually identical counterpart is not?" In a similar vein, I take Pollock and his fellow Abstract Expressionists to have created works that challenged the assumption that works of art had to be more than flat, that is, to indicate a three-dimensional world by means of paint of a "flat" surface.

Even if the claim that flatness is the essence of painting has been shown to be mistaken, that does not entail that the Abstract Expressionists were not doing philosophy in paint. Many philosophical theories have been disproven, but that does not mean that their authors were not

doing philosophy. Early in my career, I co-authored an essay with David Ross (Wartenberg and Ross, 1983) claiming that Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation was self-contradictory. But that claim, even if true, did not entail that Quine (1960) was not doing philosophy in *Word and Object* (or, indeed, that we were even if our claim was false.)

The same holds for the Abstract Expressionists. Although subsequent developments in painting revealed that it was a mistake to take flatness to be the essence of painting, creating works that exhibited that property was a way for the artists to do philosophy in their chosen medium. The fact that a theory has been disproved does not mean that those who articulated it were not doing philosophy.

2. Response to Anscomb

As a visual artist and philosopher, Anscomb is less skeptical about the philosophical potential of art than Matravers. Her comments are extremely useful because they point out some shortcomings in the theoretical framework I proposed for discussing visual illustrations of philosophy.

2.1. The Theory of Illustration

The deficits in the framework I develop in *Thoughtful Images* are more complex than Anscomb notes, though her comments got me thinking about how to modify what I presented in the book. I am grateful for her suggestion that I need to supplement my account. So, let me try to present a more satisfactory framework for discussing illustrations. It turns out to be more complex than it seems.

As I note in the book, illustrations have a *basic logic*. There is always a *source*, that which the illustration visualizes. The illustration itself is often conceptualized as the target, i.e., that at which the illustration aims. I don't find this term very illuminating. I prefer to talk simply of the art object, the illustration itself, that visualizes its source. The basic point is that an illustration is always related to a source to which it can

be traced.

The second element of the theoretical framework is one I emphasized in the book. It consists of the different *types of source* to which visual illustrations of philosophy can be related. In the book, I discuss four different types: text-based, concept-based, theory-based, and quotation-based illustrations. I would now describe these four types of illustration as distinguishing the different sources to which the works are related.

When people think of illustrations, they often think of a visual image that is related to a verbal description in a written text. *Texts* are a prominent source for visual illustrations including those of philosophy. Textbook illustrations of Plato's Allegory of the Cave are one example of illustration based on a textual source (see, for example, Plato, 1999, 316). Such visual illustrations will of necessity *supplement* the information provided by the text because of differences between language and images. They also will conform to the *similarity heuristic* I discussed earlier.

A second type of source is a variation on illustrations based upon a text. These illustrations are artworks that embody a *quotation*. This type of illustration was developed by conceptual artists beginning in the 1960s who created works that consisted of quotations of a philosophical work rendered in an artistic medium. The first such work I was able to discover is Bruce Nauman's *A Rose Has No Teeth* (1966), in which Nauman made a lead cast consisting of a phrase from Wittgenstein (2009). Unlike a text-based illustration, a quotation-based illustration takes a phrase from a written philosophical text and renders it in an artistic medium.

There are two other sources for works that visually illustrate philosophy: concepts and theories. Although I treat these as two different sources, in practice it is often hard to differentiate them. Consider, for example, a 15th century manuscript illustration of the three types of friendship Aris-

totle distinguishes in Book VIII of his *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹ On the one hand, the illumination can be taken to be an illustration of Aristotle's concept of friendship, but it also seems possible to treat it as an illustration of Aristotle's theory of friendship. The difference is this: sometimes a work can illustrate a philosophical concept used by a philosopher without incorporating further aspects of their theory. This makes its source a philosophical concept. Other times, the work incorporates further aspects of the theory, making its source the theory and not just a concept.

What really distinguishes these two sources is that, in some cases where the source of an illustration is a philosophical theory, the illustration does not have to be intended to illustrate that source. Instead, a philosopher can *use* the artwork to illustrate a philosophical theory. I argue that this is the case for a number of prominent philosophical discussions of artworks. The one Anscomb focuses on is Martin Heidegger's discussion of Vincent Van Gogh's painting, *Vieux souliers aux lacets* [Old Shoes with Laces] (1886). Since Heidegger's theory of equipment (*Zeug*) antedates the painting, Van Gogh could not have intended it as an illustration of Heidegger's theory. Nonetheless, Heidegger treats it as such. I will return to this work in a moment.²

As Anscomb notes, in order to create an illustration, an artist needs to use a specific *strategy*, making this another element in the framework for theorizing illustration. This is required to transpose the source—be it text, concept, theory, or quotation—into a visual artwork. It indicates the manner in which the artist presents the philosophical idea visually.

I discuss two strategies for illustrating philosophy in the book: *personi-*

¹ <https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/m-seemuller/the-three-species-of-friendship-miniature-from-ethics-politics-the-economy-by-aristotle-manuscript/nomedium/asset/515485>.

² Anscomb notes that I do not discuss the debate about Heidegger's claims. The reason for this is my focus on the nature of theory-based illustrations, not the validity of Heidegger's interpretation.

fiction and *analogy*. The illustration of Aristotle's theory of friendship is an example of personification, for the illustration shows the three types of friendships through depicting three distinct pairs of friends. The three types of friendship—friendships of utility, those of pleasure, and complete friendship—are personified by the three different pairs of friends.

An example of an analogical illustration is Meurisse and Gaultier's illustration of Aristotle's logic and metaphysics mentioned earlier in which Aristotle's theory is presented in the form of a formal garden. I will return to this work in a moment, explaining the rationale for using the analogy.

There are other strategies employed by artists to illustrate philosophy. *Picturing* is one. Consider the textbook illustration of Plato's Cave. It is a straight-forward picture of Plato's description of the cave. As such, it embodies a third strategy for illustrating philosophy. There probably are other strategies, but for now I think acknowledging three of them helps supplement the account provided in the book.

Anscomb points out that I do not discuss the notion of exemplification despite using it to describe some of the illustrations of philosophy in the book. This concept is part of what I call the *semantics* of visual illustration, the fourth element in my framework. A visual work can *refer* to its source, *exemplify* its source, or *embody* its source. These conceptualize different semantic relationships between a work and its source. I will return to a discussion of exemplification once I have finished discussing the framework for a theoretical understanding of illustration.

One feature of the framework that Anscomb does not discuss are the *norms* governing illustration. The primary ones I discuss are *fidelity* and *felicity*, norms derived from a theory of translation. An illustration needs to be faithful to its source but may also modify its source due to the shift from a verbal to a visual medium. Both of these norms are evaluative.

There are other norms that play a different role in the theory. Two of them are *aptness and adequacy*. A visual rendering of philosophy must be apt. Presenting Aristotle's logic and metaphysics as a garden is apt, even if quite unexpected. In the garden so pictured, all the different elements of Aristotle's philosophy have a place. I'm not sure that other objects would work as well. Perhaps, one could use an automobile engine to illustrate Aristotle's philosophy, but it's not at all obvious that this would be an apt way to do so.

Adequacy is the final norm I see as necessary for understanding illustration. An illustration must be an adequate version of its source, that is, it must contain all the elements present in the source. An illustration that fails to include significant aspects of its source would not satisfy the norm of adequacy. Dominic McIver Lopes' (2005) criticism of Gustav Doré's illustrations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* for failing to represent *contrapasso* treats Doré's work as failing to satisfy the norm of adequacy.

Let's return to the element in my framework that Anscomb emphasizes, exemplification. Anscomb quotes Catherine Elgin explaining exemplification as "the referential relation by means of which a sample, example, or other exemplar refers to some of its properties [...] An exemplar highlights, displays, or makes manifest some of its properties by both instantiating and referring to those properties" (Elgin 2018, 29). A paint sample of a particular color, say Navajo white, not only refers to that color but has the very property it refers to. Anscomb thinks using this concept for discussing illustrations of philosophy is important for it explains various aspects of illustration that require a theoretical explanation.

Perhaps the central one is the cognitive significance of certain illustrations. She has in mind two works that I discuss: Mel Bochner's *Fourth Range* and Joseph Kosuth's 276. *On Color Blue* (1990). In discussing both of these works, I suggest that viewing them yields important cognitive benefits in relation to the philosophical ideas they illustrate. Both these

works are analogical illustrations. *Fourth Range* uses a numbers-game analogous to Wittgenstein's language-games (2009), 276. *On Color Blue* gives the viewer an analogous experience to that described by Wittgenstein (1977) involving looking at the blue sky. I will discuss this latter work further in a moment.

Anscomb argues that "working out or recreating the artist's creative decisions and beholding the visual manifestations of these, can serve as a means to convey experiential knowledge that is cognitive in content." I agree. It's also true that both of these works exemplify one of their properties.

I'm not so sure that Anscomb's extension of the notion of exemplification to other works is equally successful. I don't think that Van Gogh's painting of shoes exemplifies the properties Heidegger finds in it, interesting as that claim is. Relativizing the properties that a work exemplifies to an interpretation also requires more justification.

In any case, in response to Anscomb's discussion I have developed a more adequate framework for understanding illustration. The categories in this framework are: type of source, visual strategy, visual semantics, and norms. I believe this newly articulated framework advances our understanding of visual illustration.

2.2. The Cognitive Value of Illustrations

Anscomb invites me to say something about the cognitive and artistic value of illustrations of philosophy. First, we should acknowledge that many illustrations of philosophy have heuristic value. This is clear, for example, in the 17th century broadsides of Aristotle's philosophy, for they were used by students to help them prepare for their examinations. By presenting the key notions in Aristotle's philosophy by means of an analogy with a formal garden, these works functioned as mnemonics that assisted students in remembering the key concepts in Aristotle's metaphysics and their relationships to one another.

There is more to the cognitive and artistic value of illustrations of philosophy than their pedagogical and heuristic value. As Anscomb suggests, I think that the cognitive value of illustrations of philosophy can enhance their artistic value. The best example is one that she quotes from my book: the different attitude I have towards two very similar works by Joseph Kosuth. Both of these works are quotation-based works that render a quotation from a philosophical work in neon. The first is 276. *On Color Blue* (1990). The quotation in that work comes from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Color* (1977): "276. But don't we at least mean something quite definite when we look at a colour and name our colour impression? It is as if we detached the colour impression from the object, like a membrane. (This ought to arouse our suspicions.)" This quotation is rendered by Kosuth in blue neon tubing. In the quotation, Wittgenstein is discussing the philosophical temptation to think of color as something that exists in our minds. To counter this, he suggests we look at the sky. When we do so, he says, there is no temptation to think of the blueness of the sky as something in our mind. The remark in paragraph 276 follows this thought experiment.

The cognitive value of Kosuth's work is that it gives its viewer an analogous experience to that suggested in the thought experiment: Anyone looking at the intense blue of the electrified neon tubing will not be tempted to think of blue as, in the first instance, a property of one's sensations. To do so would be to "detach the color impression from the object." (Wittgenstein, 1977, 276). The artwork supports Wittgenstein's view by providing a viewer with an experience that accords with the philosopher's claim.

Kosuth's *Intellect to Opinion* (2017) is a very similar work. The work consists of "warm white" neon tubing shaped into a quotation from Plato's Divided Line section of the *Republic* (2007) (534a):

As being is to becoming, so is pure intellect to opinion. And as intellect is to opinion, so is science to belief, and understanding to

the perception of shadows. But let us defer the further correlation and subdivision of the subjects of opinion and of intellect, for it will be a long enquiry, many times longer than this has been.

The pure white of the neon in this work is striking. One might see it as an analogue to the “brightness” that comes from viewing the world with the intellect, so different from perceiving “shadows.” But on the whole, I don’t think that perceiving the work sheds much light on the claim Plato makes about the distinction between intellect and opinion because it doesn’t present a visual analogue to Plato’s distinction. As a result, I think that this work does not have the same cognitive value as 276. On Color Blue. It also has less artistic value despite the similarity between the two works and the striking color emitted by the neon in them both.

My feeling about the relationship between the cognitive and artistic values of these two works is confirmed by my experience of Fourth Range. As I studied that work and came to understand how it illustrated Wittgenstein’s contention that Cartesian hyperbolic doubt was impossible, I not only realized its cognitive value: I came to appreciate it more fully as a work of art.

So, in answer to Anscomb’s question, I am an artistic cognitivist in regard to illustration. And the works that have the greatest cognitive value are ones that provide their viewers with experiences that allow them to better understand philosophical theories.

3. Conclusion

Both Matravers and Anscomb raise significant issues about the claims I make in *Thoughtful Images*. I have not addressed all of their concerns, but I hope I have made some headway in resolving the disagreements between us. Once again, I am grateful for the attention they have paid to the book and their assessment of its significance. I have been able to clarify my views as a result of their astute discussions.

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