

## FIXING THE IMAGE: RETHINKING THE ‘MIND-INDEPENDENCE’ OF PHOTOGRAPHS

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### I. INTRODUCTION

We are told by philosophers that photographs are a distinct category of image because the photographic process is mind-independent. Furthermore, that the experience of viewing a photograph has a special status, justified by a viewer’s knowledge that the photographic process is mind-independent. Versions of these ideas are central to discussions of photography in both the philosophy of art and epistemology and have far-reaching implications for science, forensics and documentary journalism.

Mind-independence (sometimes ‘belief independence’) is a term employed to highlight what is important in the idea that photographs can be produced naturally, mechanically, accidentally or automatically. Insofar as the process is physical, natural, mechanical or causal it can occur without human agency or intervention, entirely in the absence of intentional states. Presented innocuously, the idea is that although photographs are dependent on natural or mechanical processes, they can be produced independently of human agency – particularly human beliefs. Presented in a stronger form, the claim is that even if human agency is heavily involved in the production process, the definitive features that make the photograph a photograph and determine its salient properties are nonetheless independent of human minds.

In epistemic debates, mind-independence is viewed as essential for explaining why photographs occupy a distinct category among images and justifying a variety of claims about their privileged epistemic and affective status in science, forensics, popular culture and journalism. But, in the philosophy of art, claims about mind-

independence have fuelled scepticism: it has been argued that photographs are unsuitable or inferior candidates for art because they are not intimately bound to the mind of an artist. I believe that we can address scepticism in the philosophy of art only if we recognise that it is linked to dogmatism in the epistemology of photography. This is the motivation for the present article. I argue that the epistemic debate is dogmatic when mind-independence is treated as a defining feature of photographs. Applied dogmatically, mind-independence stands in the way of a full understanding of photography as it restricts photographs to the category of image and obscures the fact that photographs can also be pictures. I use the terms ‘image’ and ‘picture’ to illuminate a difference that particularly needs to be recognised when photographs are discussed.

In what follows I endorse the idea that, in virtue of the photographic process, photographs are indeed a distinct category of image, with special epistemic and affective status; but I shall dispute the explanatory and justificatory priority accorded to ‘mind-independence’ in theories of photography. A better result can be achieved by a sufficiently substantive conception of photographs and the photographic process. After undermining the dogmatic definition, I defend the view that some photographs have significance because they are images that are not pictures; but some have significance as images that are also pictures. To establish the latter point, I offer a way to understand how photographers create pictures: a skilled photographer can employ the photographic process to create a picture by using physical objects and light sources, analogous to a painter using brushes and paint. Photographed objects are essential to the photographer’s work, but the picture is determined by the photographer’s intentions; it is not merely an image of the photographed objects. This conclusion extends to pictures of various kinds, including documentary journalism, propaganda, advertising and works of art.

In section II, I describe the special status of photographs and mention some contemporary philosophical theories which link this special status to mind-independence. In section III, I argue that a dogmatic definition of photographs leads to scepticism in the philosophy of art. In section IV, I offer a substantive account of the photographic process and, in section V, use this to formulate a mind-independence thesis. In section VI, I explain how, with a proper understanding of the photographic process, mind-independence need not be a defining feature of photographs, and, in section VII, discuss how photographs can be pictures as well as images. I conclude

that this can alleviate problems of both dogmatism and scepticism in the philosophy of photography.

## II. THE SPECIAL STATUS OF PHOTOGRAPHS

To begin, we must consider what motivates philosophers to claim that a photograph is mind-independent, or specifically that it has a mind-independent relation to the photographed objects. What is the special significance that photographs have for us, such that mind-independence seems necessary to justify their status?

When we look at a photograph, knowing that it is a photograph, we have a distinctive kind of experience: a visual confrontation with remote but actual objects and events. We scrutinise a photograph with a sense that we are scrutinising the actual objects themselves, although they are distanced from us in time and space. In this way, photographs enable us to gain information, to recollect details, learn new facts and correct mistakes. They can stimulate feelings of delight and disgust. They can cause us to react with shock or sympathy, surprise or recognition. They often sustain viewing attitudes of curiosity, nostalgia and desire; but also an attitude of indifference. These experiences have special epistemic and affective status because they can be legitimately understood as responses to real objects and events.

We find several theorised versions of this idea in contemporary philosophy of photography. In Kendall Walton's widely discussed account, photographs are transparent pictures: they facilitate actual, perceptual contact with photographed objects.<sup>1</sup> When you view a photograph of your long-dead great-grandparents, you are experiencing genuine perceptual contact; an experience which has epistemic and affective force. Mind-independence plays a crucial role in this theory: the relation between a transparent picture and the objects it depicts is, necessarily, one of mind-independent counterfactual dependence. According to Walton, photographs fulfil this necessary condition, but handmade pictures do not.

Scott Walden endorses Walton's commitment to mind-independence, arguing that the objective character of the photographic process provides viewers with special warrant for the acceptance of first-order perceptual beliefs formed as a result of viewing photographic images.<sup>2</sup> He argues that photographs offer a significant

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<sup>1</sup> Walton, K. (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Walden chooses the term 'objectivity' because it is 'commonly used to refer to standards or processes that are in some sense or other mind-independent'. Walden, S. (2005), p.261.

epistemic advantage relative to handmade images because the photographic process is ‘an optical-chemical mechanism that excludes direct involvement of the mental states of the image-maker.’<sup>3</sup>

Gregory Currie denies that photographs provide perceptual access to photographed objects. He claims that photographs are representations, rather than aids to perception, but, unlike handmade representations, they have natural counterfactual dependence because the ‘mechanical’ production process makes them independent of beliefs.<sup>4</sup> In a slightly different formulation Currie claims that photographs are special sources of information about the world, again because photography is belief independent. Like footprints and death masks they are causal traces of things in the world which record how the world is, rather than what someone thinks about the world.<sup>5</sup> In addition to their epistemic power, Currie agrees that photographs can have greater emotional and affective power than handmade images, though he believes that they have less than perceptual contact with the real objects. He concludes that, as traces, photographs lie midway between handmade pictures and reality.

Walton, Walden, Currie and others, argue from the claim that photographs are intrinsically mind-independent. Some philosophers argue from the claim that photographs are widely believed to be mind-independent.<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin have argued that photographs have significance as ‘spatially agnostic informants’: they provide visual information about objects and events in the absence of egocentric information. In other words, they enable us to acquire genuine visual information about objects even when we do not know our spatio-temporal relation to those objects. This requires an objective probabilistic correlation which supports counterfactual conditionals. Experienced viewers generally believe that photographs fulfil this condition and that paintings do not; hence, even if some paintings are also spatially agnostic informants, photographs have a greater salience in this role.

Barbara Savedoff claims that photographs are distinct from other pictures to the extent that viewers hold specific beliefs about the production process. She does not

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.259.

<sup>4</sup> Currie, G. (1991).

<sup>5</sup> ‘When I say that photography is belief independent, I mean that in this precise and restricted sense: the photographer or cinematographer who sets out to record the scene in front of him will record what is there; the painter with the same intent will paint what he thinks is there.’ Gregory Currie (1999), p.286.

<sup>6</sup> In Costello, D. and Phillips, D. (2009), we note that the ‘folk psychology’ of photography plays an ineliminable role in much of the philosophy of photography.

claim that a photograph *is* mind-independent, only that, for a viewer, ‘the photograph is seen as having a special relation to reality and independence from the photographer’s intentions’.<sup>7</sup> According to Savedoff, if belief in mind-independence is undermined – for example as alteration of digital images becomes more widespread – the special status of all photographs will be lost.

These accounts illustrate that it is a widespread strategy to justify a claim about the special epistemic or affective status of photographs by appealing explicitly to mind-independence. In different ways each account accords priority to mind-independence, as a fact or as a widely held belief, to establish that photographs are a category distinct from paintings, drawings and similar handmade images.

### III. DOGMATISM ABOUT IMAGES AND SCEPTICISM ABOUT PICTURES

We should notice that some accounts refer to ‘images’ where others refer to ‘pictures’. To illuminate what is at stake in the philosophy of photography, I believe that it is helpful to employ the terms ‘image’ and ‘picture’ with distinct senses.<sup>8</sup> Image is the broad category which includes visual images produced in nature as well as ones produced by human manufacture. Picture is a sub-category which includes only those visual images which have intentional content as products of human design. A mirrored surface may display visual images, but these do not count as pictures. The Queen’s head on a postage stamp is a visual image and also a picture. Pictures can be representational, abstract or non-representational. The category includes pictorial artworks, but not exclusively. Although pictures are defined by mind-dependent production, it would be inconsistent to define images by mind-independent production. Pictures are a sub-category of images, not a contrasting category.

The idea that photographs are mind-independent begins when we acknowledge that photographs can occur as naturally produced images. Some visual images, such as paintings and drawings, only occur as products of intentional agency. A photograph is a visual image that can occur without a photographer. This is a quick and straightforward route to the idea that mind-independence explains the distinction between photographs and other kinds of image.

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<sup>7</sup> Savedoff, B. (2000), p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> There are a number of theories which defend a highly detailed distinction between images and pictures e.g. Kulvicki, J. (2006). I am using a coarse-grained distinction which I believe has intuitive plausibility, rather than endorsing any particular theory.

The idea that photographs can be produced without a photographer is not itself a dogma, but only the basis for dogma. Epistemic accounts of photography regard the absence of any photographer as a benefit. Photographs, it is claimed, are more objective, reliable and accurate than hand-made pictures precisely because they avoid any potential for error that would be introduced with the involvement of human beliefs. Philosophers present this idea as an explanatory and justificatory thesis: photographs differ from other images in having these special qualities because they are mind-independent. However, once mind-independence is accorded this crucial role, it can assume a normative function. A particular image will count as a photograph strictly insofar as it is mind-independent; for the purposes of philosophical discussion, cases of images which are dependent on intentional states are to be discounted or treated as only partial photographs.

Thus the epistemic position is secured by treating mind-independence as a defining feature of photographs. This particular step is the target of my criticism: dogmatism is established when mind-independence becomes incorporated into the normative definition of photographs. The special and distinct status of photographs as images is established; but only at the cost of making it impossible for photographs to count as pictures. I will go on to argue that mind-independence should not be a defining feature of photographs; but first I explain why the dogmatic move needs to be avoided.

A dogmatic definition of photographs inevitably has implications for the philosophy of art. Overwhelming evidence of art photographs exhibited in galleries and their long-standing acceptance by many artists, critics, theorists and art historians has failed to entirely dispel scepticism among philosophers. If we believe that a photograph most saliently belongs to the category of visual images, then the central question in the philosophy of art is framed by asking: is it possible for a photograph to be an art work in virtue of being a visual image? To appreciate a visual image as an artwork, it is argued that the work must relevantly be the product of the intentional states of the artist. Thus the question is reframed: can a photograph be an art work in virtue of being a picture? To fully recognise photographs as art, philosophers want to be satisfied that photographs *qua* photographs can be pictorial art.<sup>9</sup> This makes it necessary to address a preliminary question: can a photograph be a picture?

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<sup>9</sup> Although the philosophy of art is concerned primarily with photographs as pictures, a photograph does not have to be a picture to count as an art work. Art history shows that photography has presented artworks in forms such as objects, documents, chance images, traces, records, indexes, relics, imprints and performances.

Scepticism lingers as long as it is difficult to give an affirmative answer, and dogmatic commitment to mind-independence is the main barrier. Faced with any hypothetical case, the dogmatic definition leaves only two alternatives: if the image is a picture, it is not really a photograph; if the image is a photograph, it is not really a picture.

We see this problem arise in the work of Roger Scruton, who has argued that it is not possible for photographs to be representational art.<sup>10</sup> A photograph stands in a causal relation to photographed objects, but it does not stand in an intentional relation. Scruton thus includes mind-independence in his definition of photographs. A photograph cannot depict the photographed objects as subject matter of a representation in a manner that would enable us to appreciate the thoughts of the artist. Instead, a photograph is merely an image that stands as a record of the appearance of the photographed objects. Hence, we take interest in the visual image displayed by the photograph only because it functions as a surrogate for the visual appearance of the photographed objects. Scruton thus offers the strongest formulation of the idea that, if photographs are defined as mind-independent, a photographer cannot create a picture and, moreover, a photograph cannot be an artwork in virtue of being a picture.

Even in accounts that oppose scepticism, there are indications that the problem caused by the dogmatic definition lies beneath the surface. The example that follows illustrates how mind-independence can force philosophers to adopt concessions which make photographs inferior to other kinds of pictures. Although weaker than outright denial, this is nonetheless a form of scepticism.

Nigel Warburton argues that a print of a photograph counts as an authentic artwork only if it has been personally certified by the artist. Although he believes that photographs can be pictorial artworks, the mind-independence thesis is evident in his account:

The act of conferring status upon a print is one of the ways in which photographers overcome the expressive limitations of a process that is largely automated.<sup>11</sup>

Only by means of such quality control can we be absolutely certain that a particular print fully embodies the photographer's intentions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Scruton, R. (1981) 'Photography and Representation'.

<sup>11</sup> Warburton, N. (1997) 'Authentic Photographs' p.135.

From these remarks, it is clear that Warburton believes that artistic practice successfully compensates for inherent limitations in the photographic process - but also that he believes that such compensation is necessary. The requirement that shapes Warburton's account has, at its heart, the assumption that the photographic process inherently divorces the photograph from the intentions of the photographer. A print must be supplemented by a special kind of intentional activity to make it count as a picture – otherwise it is merely an image. A print that lacks supplementary certification cannot grant reliable access to the artist's intentions.

Uncertified prints [...] can never be reliable indicators of a photographer's intentions, or at least cannot be known to be reliable indicators.<sup>13</sup>

In effect, then, only a certified print can be treated as a picture rather than just an image. This unhappily distinguishes photographs from other kinds of picture. Although there is a widespread convention of signing paintings in the art world, this is not a condition that must be met for the image to count as a picture; and for pictures outside the art world the convention does not exist. So, although it is an attempt to defend photographs as art, Warburton's account leaves us with the impression that photography is inferior to other ways of creating pictures.

I have suggested that scepticism lingers because philosophers have allowed mind-independence to become a defining feature of photographs. In section VI, I defend a different idea: even if mind-independence is a characteristic of the 'photo-object' or 'photo-image', it is not a defining feature of photographs. This makes it possible to argue, in section VII, that photographers can create pictures. The creative activity does not involve the photographer compensating for an otherwise mind-independent process. The photographic process allows a skilled photographer to use people, objects and light sources in creating a picture. Before presenting these claims, I must say more about the photographic process.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.134.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 135.

#### IV. A SUBSTANTIVE ACCOUNT OF PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PROCESS

Some versions of the photographic process standardly involve a high degree of human agency (e.g. gum bichromate printing); some versions are fully automated by mechanical apparatus (e.g. Polaroid photographs); some versions occur entirely in the natural world (e.g. sun-bleached patterns on wooden surfaces). The philosophical question of mind-independence will not be answered by addressing some particular version of the process and analysing the extent to which human intentionality is immanent in it. Rather, an enquiry must be based on the nature of the process as such. To this end, I offer a schematic account which aims to be both substantive and clarificatory.

‘Photography’ is best treated as a term for a collection of practices: the creating, storing, displaying and viewing of photographs. It makes little sense to ask whether or not ‘photography’ is mind-independent, so I take it that the question must be directed at the status of photographs and the photographic process.

A photograph is, necessarily, the product of the photographic process. ‘Photograph’ is ambiguous between at least two senses.<sup>14</sup> In one use of the term, ‘photograph’ refers to the numerically distinct material object which is the product of a photographic process. Examples of these objects include polished metal plates marked by raised chemical deposits; sheets of paper with uniformly glossy chemically-treated surfaces and LCD screens (Liquid Crystal Displays) which display an image when electronic pixels of the screen emit light of different wavelengths. Some products of the photographic process are valued just for their material properties.<sup>15</sup> However, a material object is properly called a photograph when it displays a photograph, in the second sense of the term.

In its second sense, ‘photograph’ refers to a visual image that is displayed.<sup>16</sup> Thus a photograph (image) is available to be viewed insofar as it is displayed by a

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<sup>14</sup> I later introduce the idea that ‘photograph’ can also be used with a third sense: as a term for photographs. The present account is neutral about this possibility.

<sup>15</sup> Computer chips are the products of a photographic process, but they do not display images. We would not standardly call them ‘photographs’, although it would be possible to do so. I suggest we instead acknowledge them as ‘photo-objects’ and reserve the term ‘photograph’ for photo-objects that display a photo-image.

<sup>16</sup> In highlighting a distinction between the photo-object and photo-image, I am influenced by Lambert Wiesing’s work on the Philosophy of the Image; though I am not employing these terms in ways that he has defined. See Wiesing, L. (2009).

photograph (object). In what follows, where it is important to distinguish these senses, I use the terms photo-object and photo-image.

Importantly both uses of the term presuppose a specific causal history: a photograph (in either sense) is the product of a photographic process. Whilst the photo-object has some of its material properties (e.g. size and shape) independently of the photographic process, the photographic process enables it to acquire the specific properties which cause it to display a photo-image. The visible properties of the photo-image are determined by the material properties of the photo-object after it has undergone the photographic process. If we are concerned with establishing that a photograph is mind-independent, then the basis for a thesis will emerge when we consider the photographic process.

The *photographic process* is a distinctive phenomenon. It is a multi-stage process which, in its entirety, can occur in nature independent from human agency.<sup>17</sup>

- i. A *photo-sensitive object* is positioned to receive light that is reflected from objects and/or emitted by light sources. I refer to the objects and light sources, jointly, as the '*photographed objects*'.
- ii. A *photographic event* occurs. The photo-sensitive object undergoes material changes when it is exposed, for a particular period of time, to light from the photographed objects. The new material properties are preserved in a form that constitutes a record of the photographic event.
- iii. The material changes in the photo-sensitive object produce, or make it possible to produce, a *photograph*: a photo-object which displays a photo-image.<sup>18</sup>

The technique for early Daguerreotypes fulfils the process with the following steps: a polished metal plate is coated with photo-sensitive chemicals. During the photographic event, chemicals react to light by hardening onto the plate. To produce a visible image, chemicals must be washed off the plate, revealing only the hardened deposits.

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<sup>17</sup> See Phillips, D. (2009) 'Photographs and Causation: Responding to Scruton's Scepticism' for further elaboration of this account.

<sup>18</sup> A photograph is necessarily the product of the photographic process, but not every product of this process displays a visual image. Cf. fn. 15.

Modern digital cameras fulfil the process differently: the photo-sensitive object is an electronic sensor. During the photographic event, individual photon-sensors react to light by building up electrical charge. The electrical charge is registered and stored as binary code. Computer processing converts the code to produce visual images which can be screened or printed.

The defining step of the process is the occurrence of a photographic event. It is important not to conflate the photographic event with the photograph. A photograph has a causal history that definitively depends on a photographic event. A photographic event is not itself an object – the event is the *recording* of light, which produces a record. Sometimes the record of the photographic event is used as the photo-object (as with a Daguerreotype). Sometimes the record of the event is used to produce separate photo-objects (as with a digital camera). The negative-positive process used in film photography is a further case. After chemical processing, the film record becomes a photo-object, a ‘negative’, which displays a visual image. However the negative is itself used as a photographed object in the occurrence of a second photographic event: photo-sensitive paper is exposed to the negative, thereby producing further photo-objects. These ‘positives’ at the final stage are what we call the photographs.

The photographic process can be fulfilled in many different ways, but all three steps of the process are essential. A photographic event cannot occur without the existence of photographed objects and a photo-sensitive object, in proximity to each other.<sup>19</sup> A photograph cannot be created without the occurrence of a photographic event. A photographic event alone does not count as a photograph. Thus, the photographic process, in its entirety, requires that there be i) proximity between photographed objects and a photo-sensitive object, ii) a photographic event and iii) the production of a photograph or photo-object.

There is a relevant difference between the photographic process as it occurs in nature and the process when it is harnessed by human design. However, this does not settle the question of the mind-independence of photographs. In nature the photosensitive object reacts to diffused light and when a photo-image becomes visible it has limited characteristics. Light direct from the emitting source has a greater effect than light reflected from objects, so the presence of non-emitting objects shows up most clearly as basic silhouette outlines – think of a swimsuit that leaves an outline on

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Proximity’ can mean thousands of light-years, so long as light from the photographed objects reaches the photo-sensitive object.

sunburned skin. By contrast, the photographs produced through human engineering can have complex characteristics. Versions of the process are capable of rendering subtle differences and detail, including differentiated colour and a high level of visual resemblance with the photographed objects. While natural and engineered photographs are both products of the photographic process, it is primarily the qualities of engineered photographs that inspire debate in the philosophy of photography. The qualities of both kinds of photograph are fully explicable in terms of the photographic process, and closer analysis shows that there is only a difference in degree, not a difference in kind.

The pioneers of photography introduced confusion when they popularly characterised the photographic process as ‘fixing’ the images found in nature. Rather than an original image, which becomes fixed, in fact there are two kinds of image involved in the engineered process. With optical devices – such as lenses or a concave mirror – it is possible to make a ‘light image’ appear on a surface. This is the kind of visual image that occurs inside a camera obscura. A light image can be sharply focussed, and shows sufficient reflected light to view details and colours of individual objects. A light-image is not a photograph but it can be used as the basis for a photograph if it is combined with a photographic event. The pioneer photographers harnessed together two natural processes for generating visual images: the optical process and the photographic process; thus making it possible to produce a sophisticated photo-image. This is how a photograph can acquire a high level of visual resemblance to photographed objects. Contrary to their own accounts, the pioneers did not ‘fix’ the light-image. Rather, they used a light image to produce a photo-object, and the photo-object displays a photo-image.

Joel Snyder has argued that engineered effects depend on intentional design with the consequence that these kinds of photographs are inherently pictures.<sup>20</sup> Although I will argue that photographs can be pictures, I nonetheless wish to retain the idea that there can be photo-images that are not pictures. In the following section I present a mind-independence thesis for closer consideration. I think that both natural and engineered photographs can be accommodated by the same thesis; hence intentionality at the level of engineering does not settle the question of whether photographs can be pictures.

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<sup>20</sup> Snyder, J. (1980) ‘Picturing Vision’.

## V. MIND-INDEPENDENCE FORMULATED AS A THESIS

I propose that any philosophical claim about the mind-independent status of photographs needs to be formulated with substantive claims about the photographic process. I offer the following as a plausible formulation of mind-independence as a thesis:

During a photographic event, objects and light sources (the photographed objects) stand in a particular kind of causal relation to a photo-sensitive material object. This stage may or may not include an optically produced light image. The causal relation is well-understood: light reflected by or emitted from the photographed objects causes a photo-sensitive object to undergo material changes. The changes are explained entirely as effects of the causal relation. When the reaction to light has occurred, the material changes are a record of the photographic event. The record is, or produces, an object (now a photo-object); in the latter case by giving new material properties to an existing object. The new material properties are explained entirely as effects of the photographic process. The photo-object has a causal history which relates it to the photographed objects, in virtue of the photographic event.

This entitles us to make the following claims: i) the photo-object is a mind-independent entity; and, ii) the photo-object stands in a mind-independent relation to the photographed objects.

The material changes undergone by the photo-sensitive object during the photographic event are changes that cause it to become, or to produce, a photo-object. The photographic process is unusual because the photo-object can display a visual image (the photo-image) and the displayed image can persist in a stable form. It is not common for an entirely causal process to have this quality, so we are right to be fascinated by the results of the photographic process. A photo-image is an unusual phenomenon, but it is explicable as the product of a photographic process. This is true of both natural and engineered photographs. Visual properties of the photo-image supervene on the material properties of the photo-object; most saliently those properties caused by the photographic event, along with properties acquired during the material production process.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> From the record of a photographic event, multiple photo-objects may be created. Where the photo-objects have different properties (e.g. a wallet sized paper print compared with a wall sized light box) the photo-images will have different properties. The images count as the 'same photograph' insofar as they share a relevant history to the same photographic event.

This entitles us to make further claims: i) a photo-image stands in a mind-independent relation to the photo-object and ii) a photo-image stands in a mind-independent relation to the photographed objects.

I take it that someone who asserts the mind-independence thesis will hold the following view: the photo-object acquires its relevant properties – the properties that enable it to display a photo-image - by standing in a particular causal relation to photographed objects thanks to the occurrence of a photographic event. The beliefs, or any other intentional states, of a photographer are not intrinsic to the photographic process. Hence the mind-independence thesis entails that:

- The *photographic process* is mind-independent.
- The *photo-object* is a mind-independent entity which stands in a mind-independent relation to photographed objects.
- The *photo-image* is a mind-independent entity which stands in a mind-independent relation to photographed objects.

I believe that it is possible to accept the mind-independence thesis without taking a dogmatic stance. Dogmatism occurs if we assert that mind-independence is a defining feature of photographs. But dogmatism is flawed, not least because it rests on a vague conception of ‘photograph’. A substantive account of the photographic process has clarified that mind-independence is a thesis that plausibly applies to photo-objects and photo-images. Dogmatism is the claim that ‘photographs are mind-independent’. I propose to replace this with the more accurate claim: ‘photo-images are mind-independent’. This helps us to avoid the problems associated with dogmatism. Every photograph is a photo-image, but not every photograph is just a photo-image. Some photographs are pictures.

## VI. PHOTOGRAPHS AS A DISTINCT CATEGORY OF IMAGE

In this section I argue that we can understand the distinction between photographs and other images without appealing to mind-independence as the defining feature of photographs.

Put considerations of photography to one side. Images can be created by a painting process and we can offer a substantive description of this process. Consider a painter who wishes to create a portrait of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. With Brunel sitting as a studio model, the painter can employ the painting process in order to create an image that will constitute a picture of Brunel. To achieve this, the painter will work with paints, brushes and canvas. When a brush loaded with paint makes contact with the canvas, it transfers paint to the canvas leaving a semi-permanent mark that corresponds to the movement of the brush. This phenomenon – a brush-stroke – consists of a mind-independent relation between the brush and the mark. It is a causal phenomenon that in its basic form can occur in nature: think of purple stains on the skin of someone eating blackberries. The mark caused by the occurrence of an individual brush-stroke does not, by itself, display a visual image. However, when the painter has applied many brush-strokes, the painted canvas can eventually display an image; an image that constitutes a picture.

We understand the phenomenon of a brush-stroke well enough without mentioning that it is a ‘mind-independent’ causal phenomenon. To draw attention to this fact, even though true, would be an unnecessary distraction. In the context of the painting process, what is most salient to us is that the final image – the painting – will not exist unless a painter is responsible. We are satisfied that the painted image would not have existed without the intentionally guided activity of the painter. The status of the brush-stroke is accorded no bearing on the status of the image. Mind-independence as a feature of the transfer of paint to the canvas would not lead us to claim that the image is not a picture; and to say that the image is a picture we do not need to insist that the causal transfer of paint is mind-dependent.

If we compare the painting process with the photographic process, we notice an important difference. A brush-stroke produces a mark, but the individual mark caused by a brush-stroke is not sufficient to display a visual image.<sup>22</sup> By comparison when the record from an individual photographic event is used to produce a photo-object, it

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<sup>22</sup> Japanese calligraphy might count as an interesting exception.

can already display a visual image. This makes a significant difference to the status of the two kinds of image. In the case of painting, it is not possible for a final image to exist unless a painter is responsible. In the case of photography, it is possible for a final image to exist even if no photographer is responsible.

I believe that this difference suffices to explain why photographs are a distinct category of image. Painted images are defined by mind-dependence. But, importantly, we do not need to define photographs as mind-independent in order to distinguish the types of image. The significant difference lies in the fact that the image is produced by a different kind of process. The photographic process is mind-independent but that fact isn't what makes a photo-image different from a painted image. I believe that philosophers who have drawn a distinction between photographs and handmade pictures have overlooked this point. Currie writes:

An accident in a paint shop may result in something startlingly reminiscent of Chartres, but no portrait of that cathedral is produced by the spillage. There might even be photograph-producing plants or animals, whose surfaces hold an imprint of focused light (perhaps our brains are a bit like that). But there cannot be paintings that are the product of nature below the threshold of intentionality.<sup>23</sup>

I agree with Currie that there cannot be paintings in nature below the threshold of intentionality. However, he goes on to use the facts that there are photo-images in nature and that accidental photo-images are possible, to make lack of intentionality a defining feature of photographs.

Instead, simply imagine that we do not prioritise the question of mind-independence. A photo-image is distinct from a painted image, owing to the substantively different processes involved. This is already enough to show that there is a substantive difference between photographs and other kinds of image without making mind-independence a defining feature of photographs.

In what follows I will address two further questions: can we account for the special significance of photographs; and, how can a photographer create a picture? I postpone for another occasion a third question: how can a photograph be a pictorial artwork?

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<sup>23</sup> Currie, G. (1999) p.287.

## VII. PHOTOGRAPHS AS IMAGES AND PHOTOGRAPHS AS PICTURES

In this section I consider how photographs owe their special significance to the photographic process. Some photographs are valued in virtue of being just photo-images; but others are valued insofar as they are both photo-images and pictures.

The photographic process, when harnessed to the optical process, is capable of producing images that are more detailed and precise than those produced by painting or drawing. Perhaps more importantly, mechanical automation of the photographic process often makes it much simpler – quicker as well as easier – to produce such an image. We admire photographs because these images have qualities that often exceed what is possible in painting or drawing. At the same time we object to photographs because images with these qualities can be produced so quickly and with little effort.<sup>24</sup>

Neither of these features fully addresses the special significance that photographs have for us. I have said that photographs are admirable for qualities of the image such as accuracy and detail. A high degree of visual resemblance to photographed objects, made possible by the sophisticated image, is also a major factor in what can give photographs significance. However even this does not justify our sense that photographs have a significance that other images lack. Importantly, a blurred faded photograph can sustain the kind of experience that we seek to explain.

The special significance of photographs can be explained in terms of the photographic process. When a photographic event occurs, it is essential that a photosensitive object must be in proximity to the photographed objects. We are right to feel that a photograph, whether sharp or blurred, stands in a special relation to the photographed objects. The actual objects and light sources were present as elements in the photographic event that defines the causal history of that photograph. This echoes descriptions of photographs offered by other theorists – such as the claim that a photograph is a kind of causal ‘trace’. However we can claim that any photo-object or photo-image has this significance without being led to the dogmatic step of defining photographs as mind-independent. The epistemic and affective significance of a particular image will vary according to specific visual qualities of the image: for example the extent to which it is possible to recognise the photographed objects. However, all photographs, just in virtue of being photo-images have a causal history that connects them to actual objects and events.

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<sup>24</sup> Notwithstanding the enormous time and effort invested in technological design to make modern cameras efficient and simple to use.

Every photograph, in virtue of being the product of a photographic process, stands in a relation to photographed objects. This can make it seem that the interest we take in a photo-image is entirely directed towards the photographed objects. When we value a photograph solely as a photo-image rather than a picture, this may be true. For example, a speed camera photo-image matters precisely if it enables us to read the licence plate number of the car. However, we can also value photographs as pictures and in these cases our interest is not only directed towards the photographed objects, but also to the ideas and intentions of the photographer.

When making a portrait of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the painter and the photographer will both use Brunel as a model. By looking at Brunel's visual appearance the painter will form intentions to use particular colours and to apply brush-strokes to areas of the canvas, eventually creating an image with intentional content – a picture. Thus through skilled employment of the painting process, Brunel's appearance will bear on the final appearance of the portrait. The photographer uses Brunel as a model initially in the same way, by looking at Brunel to form intentions about how to represent him in the final portrait. However, the photographer additionally uses Brunel in a manner radically different to the painter: Brunel himself, Brunel's body, is used as a physical object which reflects light onto the photo-sensitive surface. In order to create a visual image with desired features, the photographer must use objects and light sources, in this case including Brunel himself, analogous to a painter using brushes and paint.

Intentionally governed activity is required for the photographer to make a picture with the photographic process. The skilled photographer can form intentions to create a visual image that will have particular properties. The photographer is not simply at the mercy of the photographic process; but instead uses photographed objects, along with the camera apparatus, in accordance with a skilled understanding of the photographic process, to create photo-images that have those particular visual properties. In this way a photograph can fulfil the intentions of a photographer as much as a painting can fulfil the intentions of a painter.

Reluctance to accept that skilled photographers create pictures rather than just images is associated with the idea that it would be possible for a qualitatively indistinguishable image to come into existence by accident. Perhaps a Polaroid camera falling from a window ledge could produce an image that has all the same visual properties as an image that has been intentionally produced by a skilled

photographer. In response, I offer a straightforward point. The two images may be qualitatively identical as visual images, but they are not identical as pictures. The accidental Polaroid is an image, but not a picture. The Polaroid produced intentionally by a skilled photographer is a picture as well as an image.<sup>25</sup>

Currie claimed that an accident in a paint shop does not produce a picture of Chartres Cathedral. This is true even if the spillage creates a visual image which is qualitatively identical to a painted picture. The production history of the image matters, rather than just the visual appearance. This is also true of photographs. In an accidental case, no human intentions are involved in the production of the image. In the skilled case, human intentions are involved – a skilled photographer deliberately causes light from photographed objects to be recorded onto a photo-sensitive surface in order to create the desired final image. This is analogous to a painter who deliberately applies brush-strokes to create the desired final image. In both cases the final image is a picture when it fulfils the intentions of a skilled practitioner.

We underestimate photography if we assume that a photograph would have to be, necessarily, a picture of the photographed objects. If we understand the difference between image and picture, this can be dispelled. A photo-image stands in a specific relation to the photographed objects and, when we take an interest in a photo-image, we may be concerned with those objects. But a photo picture can have a subject, determined by the intentional states of the skilled photographer. Edward Weston's *Pepper* 1930 is a suitable example. This is a photo-image of a pepper, but it is a photo picture of a nude. With skilled and imaginative application of the photographic process, Weston used a pepper and light sources to create a picture of a nude. This is analogous to a painter who uses brushes and paint to achieve the same result. Brushes and paint are used in the production of a painting and leave their causal trace in the final image; but we would not insist that the painting is thereby only a picture of brushes and paint.

Photo pictures do not have to have the photographed objects as their subject; in fact they do not have to have existent objects as their subject. Like all pictures they can be representational, abstract or non-representational. Furthermore, they need not

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<sup>25</sup> Another version of this objection says that amateur photographers are capable of producing pictures that equal the professionals. An unskilled painter will be simply unable to produce a high quality image, so it seems to count against photography that an unskilled photographer can produce a high quality image. My point remains the same: even if the image is high quality, this should not lead us to assume – or force us to concede - that the unskilled photographer has produced a high quality picture.

be art. Perhaps more commonly, photographers create pictures for advertising, propaganda and documentary journalism.

When a painting is a mind-dependent picture, it is also a mind-dependent image. By comparison, if a photograph is a mind-dependent picture, it remains a mind-independent image. Hence the epistemic and affective qualities which are characteristic of photo-images remain true of photo pictures. Photo pictures are mind-dependent, but they are also photo-images. A photo picture is also a photo-image insofar as it is a product of the photographic process. Whereas the properties of the photo-image supervene only on properties of the photographic process, the properties of the photo-picture also supervene on the intentions of the artist.

Some products of the photographic process do not display images. These may hold interest or value as photo-objects. Some products of the photographic process are photo-images, but not pictures. As images they can nonetheless be detailed, informative and accurate which makes this kind of photograph desirable for purposes of science, forensic investigation, archives and some forms of documentary journalism. Other photo-images are pictures. They are cases where a photographer employs the photographic process with the intention of producing images with particular visual properties. When an attempt is successful, the visual properties realise the intentions of the photographer. The photographic process is often employed in this way in art, advertising and some forms of documentary journalism. Some photographs lack the detail and accuracy that would make them useful as images, and lack the skilled employment of technique that would make them valued as pictures, but nonetheless they are valued for personal reasons. Blurred, faded poor-quality snapshots are among the images that we treasure most. This is simply because we know that the photographed objects were elements in the photographic event that defines the causal history of the photograph.

### **VIII. CONCLUSION**

Even though the photographic process can be characterised as mind-independent, mind independence is not a defining feature of photographs. A photograph is defined as a product of a photographic process. As a product of the photographic process, a photograph is a photo-object that can display a photo-image. Some photographs are photo-images that are not pictures; other photographs are photo-images that are pictures. I have offered this account to explain how some photographs, but not all, are

mind-dependent pictures. A picture created by employing the photographic process will, at the same time, consist of a mind-independent image. This is why it is tempting although inappropriate to dogmatically define photographs as mind-independent. To avoid such confusion, I propose that it is useful to distinguish between three senses of the term 'photograph': photo-object, photo-image and photo picture.

Philosophers of epistemology can cease to treat mind-independence as a defining feature of photographs without harming the case for the distinctive and special status of photography. And there is good reason to do so because, as we have seen, it is vital for hopes of advancing discussions of photography in the philosophy of art. We should not let the fact that photographs are a distinctive kind of image lead us to think that no photographs are pictures.<sup>26</sup>

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