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Las Meninas and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation

John R. Searle

Why after over three centuries does Las Meninas continue to bother us? Its fascination clearly extends beyond the interests of art historians and admirers of Spanish painting. Picasso, for example, painted no less than forty-five studies modeled after it, and Foucault begins his analysis of the classical seventeenth-century system of thought, in Les Mots et les choses, with a discussion of the work, concluding that it is perhaps "the representation, as it were, of classical representation."¹ For the philosopher of language it poses a special challenge in the theory of representation. It produces in me the same feeling of puzzlement that I get in pondering the set theoretical paradoxes or the antinomy of the liar, and in this discussion I want to make quite explicit the nature of its paradoxes. That this picture even contains paradoxical aspects is in part concealed from us by the fact that we live in an era when far more blatantly paradoxical pictures have become quite common. In addition to our awareness of entire movements such as surrealism and cubism that are paradoxical from the standpoint of classical pictorial representation, we are all used to Steinberg's drawings of men drawing themselves being drawn, to Escher's staircases that rise to end in other ascending staircases that yet rise to other ascending staircases, until we are back at the bottom of the original staircase, and to impossible three-pronged objects with only two bases. Here I am going to set all these radically paradoxical and nonsensical forms of pictorial representation on one side and concentrate on Las Meninas, from within the canons of classical pictorial representation.


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At first sight *Las Meninas*, or *The Royal Family* as it was called until the nineteenth century, appears to be a conventional, if spectacular, representation of royal personages and their attendants (fig. 1). The center of attention (and the physical center of the bottom half of the canvas) is occupied by the figure of the Infanta Margarita, then aged five. She was born in 1651; the painting was made in 1656. She subsequently was married off to Leopold the First of Austria and died at an early age in Vienna. On her right kneeling to offer a red *búcaro* on a silver tray—presumably filled with the perfumed water then drunk in the Escorial—is María Augustina Sarmiento. On the Infanta’s left leaning toward her is another maid of honor, Isabel de Velasco, daughter of the Count of Colmenares. Both girls are good looking young aristocrats, expensively dressed, wearing elegant wigs. All of the standard authors say that Isabel is bowing or curtseying deferentially toward the Infanta, but closer scrutiny reveals that she is not paying the slightest attention to the Infanta; she is looking intently at—well, we will get to that in a minute. On her left is the squat ugly figure of a palace dwarf, Mari-Bárboela, who as Trapier writes “came into the palace service in 1651 and received various favours throughout the years, including a pound of snow on each summer’s day in 1658.”* Palomino describes her as having an “aspetto formidable.” Beside her is another dwarf (some authors call him a midget as distinct from a dwarf), Nicolasito Pertusato, who has his foot on the back of a sleepy looking dog in the foreground. Behind María Augustina is the painter himself, Diego Velázquez, caught in the very act of painting; palette on his left forearm, brush in his right hand. He stands ready for action, but curiously he is several feet away from the huge canvas on which he is working, since doña María Augustina is plainly between him and the canvas. Furthermore the canvas on which he is working occupies almost the entire left hand edge of the picture: the blank back of the canvas, relieved only by the wooden framing and the leg of the easel, occupies more of the area of *Las Meninas* than do any of the figures. In most of the reproductions that one sees of *Las Meninas*, incidentally,

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the left hand edge of the picture is severely cropped, leaving out much of the canvas, no doubt because it seems to the croppers such a boring part of the picture. Behind Isabel is a woman dressed as a nun; she is in fact doña Marcela de Ulloa, guardamujer de las damas de la reina, and next to her is one of the guardadamas, or guards of the ladies. He alone of the human figures in the picture is anonymous. At the back of the room standing in a doorway is José Nieto Velázquez, aposentador or palace marshall to the queen, and among other things the keeper of the queen’s tapestries. Although he has the same maternal last name as Velázquez,
there is no reason to suppose they are related. The faces are all as impassive as the faces of Cézanne; they simply look at us.

Just to complete our inventory, the two pictures high on the back wall are Minerva punishing Arachne after a composition by Rubens and a copy by Martínez del Mazo of the contest between Apollo and Pan by Jordáens. Most of these identifications come from F. J. Sánchez Cantón's "Las Meninas" y sus personajes, but he in turn, like everyone else, apparently gets most of his information from Palomino.

I list the cast of characters to emphasize the excruciating realism with which this picture is painted. There is nothing fanciful or even fictional about it: one is left feeling that it is only an accident of the chroniclers that we do not know the names of the dog and the guardadam which the contemporaries must surely have been able to recognize them both. Furthermore it is obvious that we are supposed to be able to tell who these people are. That is not just a young girl, that is the Infanta of Spain, and that is not just any artist, that is don Diego Velázquez, and so forth.

So much for the surface features of the picture. Now our problems begin. On the back wall, above the head of the Infanta, is a mirror of medium size, perhaps three feet high. In the mirror, exactly opposite us, the spectators, is reflected the image of Philip IV and his second wife María Ana.

When we notice this mirror the firm ground of pictorial realism begins to slip away from us. The vertigo produced by this slippage is increased when we reflect on the relations between the mirror and two other puzzling aspects of the picture: the eyes of six of the principal characters of the picture, as well as the eyes in the mirror, are all focused at a point outside the picture, the point at which we, the observers, stand; and second, the face of the canvas on which Diego Velázquez is working, a canvas which is immense and prominent in the picture, is invisible to us. At one level the picture is indeed about Margarita and her entourage; at another level the picture is about two things, one of which lies outside the picture and the other of which is invisible.

2

The general problem of meaning is how the mind imposes intentionality on entities that are not intrinsically intentional. Our beliefs, fears, hopes, desires, perceptual experiences, and intentions are intrinsically intentional; they are directed at objects, events, and states of affairs in the world. But our utterances, writings, and pictures are not in that way intrinsically intentional; they are physical phenomena in the

world like any other physical phenomena. And the central problem of the philosophy of language is to explain how the physical can become intentional, how the mind can impose intentionality on objects that are not intentional to start with, how, in short, mere things can represent.

All forms of intentionality are under an aspect or aspects of the things represented. Nothing is ever represented tout court, but only under some aspect or other. In the case of classical pictorial representation, objects are represented under their visual aspects, and a crucial element in their representation is a visual resemblance between the representation and the thing represented, in precisely those aspects under which the thing is represented. A realistic portrait of a man represents him as looking like this, because this picture looks like him in this respect. I do not wish to imply by these brief remarks that such notions as resemblance and aspect are unproblematical. Quite the contrary—they seem to me immensely complicated and subtle. Nor do I wish to imply that pictures can represent only visual aspects. On the contrary, such aspects of an object or person as that the object is heavy or the person is sad can be represented pictorially. My point is rather that insofar as the representation is classical pictorial representation it must represent an object under visual aspects, and the other features represented are represented by way of these visual aspects.

Now visual representations of visual aspects of objects have certain special features not common to other forms of intentionality, and these features derive from the special features of vision itself. Most notably, all vision is from the point of view of one’s body in space and time relative to the object being perceived. The aspect under which the object is perceived is altered if one alters one’s point of view. But this feature of vision, that it is from a point of view in space and time, has important consequences for visual resemblance. Perception of a visual resemblance between any two objects will always be relative to a point of view: this object seen from this point of view looks like that object seen from that point of view. And since the intentionality of pictures, at least within the conventions of classical pictorial representation, relies on resemblance between the picture and the object depicted, the form of intentionality that exists in pictorial representation is crucially dependent on point of view.

The way that classical pictorial representation combines resemblance, aspect, and point of view is as follows: the artist (or camera) sees an object or a scene from a point of view, and that point of view must lie outside what is seen, since we cannot see the eye with which we are seeing; the artist then produces on a flat surface an object such that if the observer has the appropriate point of view in front of the flat surface he will have an experience like the visual experience the artist had. Diagrammatically:
The picture P looks to the spectator at B the way the scene looked to the artist at A, under those aspects F (that is, visual aspects) under which the scene is depicted by P. A is to O under F, as B is to P under F. The ideal artist sees the scene from point A in the real world space, and the ideal observer stands at B outside the picture space and relative to it in such a way that P from B looks like O from A under aspect F. This gives the picture its illusionist reading—the observer sees the picture as if he were seeing the original scene; and its illusionist reading is the basis of its representational reading—the observer sees the picture as a representation of the scene in virtue of the imposition of intentionality on its illusionist elements which are at the basis of the representational elements. Notice that it is a consequence of this analysis that for every standard representational picture there is a point of view B from which it is supposed to be seen, and B on the illusionist reading is as if it were identical with A. That is, we are to think of ourselves as if we were seeing the scene from the point of view of the artist, and this makes possible the representational reading where we see the picture as a representation of the original scene. And this is why incidentally the angle at which B subtends P will normally be more obtuse than the angle at which A subtends O. For most pictures we are supposed to look at the picture from much closer than the artist looked at the original scene. Furthermore it is a tacit convention of the institution of classical pictorial representation that, for example, we do not look at pictures while standing on our heads or with our noses pressed against the canvas. This convention can be violated, as in the various examples of anamorphosis, where in order to see the picture as resembling the object, we need to look at it from some weird angle, and not from in front.

Ambiguous pictures often derive their ambiguity from an ambiguity in point of view. Even though our location in front of the Necker cube pictured below is fixed, there are two positions the cube can be seen as occupying relative to us and hence two points of view:

5. For interesting examples and a discussion of anamorphosis, see Fred Leeman, Hidden Images (New York, 1975).
Formally speaking, to repeat, in classical pictorial representation the relations are as follows: O looks from A under F as P looks from B under F. This has the consequence that to see P from B under F is as if one were seeing O from A under F. And this in turn underlies our ability to see P as a pictorial representation of O under F. In the case of fictional or fictionalized pictures the artist need not have actually seen the object he is painting. Indeed the object may not exist, as when he paints a purely mythological figure, or even when he paints actual persons and objects he need not have seen them in the situations in which he depicts them. In such cases the artist paints as if he had seen such objects or had seen them in the situation in which he paints them.

What I have described above is so to speak part of the axiom system of classical illusionist representative painting. The problem with Las Meninas is that it has all the eyemarks of classical illusionist painting but it cannot be made consistent with these axioms.

3

The simplest of its paradoxes is that we see the picture not from the point of view of the artist but from that of another spectator who also happens to be one of the subjects of the picture. It is the first painting as far as I know to be painted from the point of view of the model and not from that of the artist. On the illusionist reading it is as if we were identical with Philip IV and his wife María Ana, who are posing for the painter (standing at his big canvas) and looking at the scene which includes an image of ourselves in the mirror. It is not as if B equals A but as if B equals some other point C from which one of the characters in the picture is watching himself in a mirror in the picture being painted by the artist on the left. Or to put it another way, it is indeed as if B equals A (the artist's point of view), but the artist has moved away from A and allowed one of the characters in the picture to move into A. The full import of the fact that A is occupied by the model and not by the artist is that the artist can't occupy the position he has to occupy according to the axioms of pictorial representation because the position is already taken. Imagine any artist you like painting this picture—or any camera taking it for that matter—and you have to imagine the artist or camera at point A; but in this painting they can't be at point A because that point is already occupied by the models Philip IV and María Ana.

Point A, which must lie outside any scene, just as point B must lie outside any picture, is in an important sense the subject of this painting.
Six of the characters and the two mirror images are all looking at it. Isabel is not curtsying, she is leaning over to reduce parallax. She is leaning forward, just as Velázquez is leaning backward, to reduce the angle at which she perceives us, Philip IV and María Ana, as we stand at point A perceiving ourselves in the mirror.6

This paradox becomes deeper if we ask the next obvious question: What is the artist painting on the big canvas whose working surface is invisible to us? But before answering that I want to contrast Las Meninas with two other sorts of paintings which bear some similarities to the Velázquez but where the axioms of pictorial representation are not violated. The point of the comparisons is to show that the resolution of apparent paradoxes in these other paintings will not work for Las Meninas.

First, when an artist using a mirror paints a self-portrait of a familiar and conventional kind, none of the axioms of classical representation are violated: though artist and object are identical on the illusionist reading, it is still as if A equals B; we see the artist in the picture as he saw himself in the mirror. This is made possible by the introduction of another representing device, the mirror; and in a sense the mirror image becomes the subject of the painting. The artist represents a representation. But the mirror in Las Meninas does not play this role—on the contrary, it makes this interpretation impossible because it shows point A already occupied by people other than the artist.

An interesting variation on the mirror self-portrait genre is the van Eyck of Arnolfini and his bride. We see van Eyck in the mirror but he is not in the act of painting, he is witnessing the wedding. Here we are, so to speak, halfway to the Meninas, because in order to resolve the paradox we have to suppose the picture was painted as the artist remembers the scene, or as he would have painted it if he had been painting what he was witnessing. Velázquez must surely have seen the van Eyck since it was in the Spanish Royal collection at the time; and though I know of no independent evidence, it is quite possible that it was one of the inspirations for Las Meninas.

A second type of representation of a representation is where we see a picture of an artist painting, and the picture is painted as if from the point of view of a second artist. When, for example, Courbet painted L’Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique, the axioms are not violated because we see the scene as if it were painted by another painter. But this resolution is precluded in Las Meninas because the persons in the mirror are not painters and they are

6. The fact that Isabel is interested in parallax and not deference was, as far as I know, first pointed out by Jonathan Miller, Sunday Times (London), 1975. X-ray photographs, by the way, show that in an earlier version of the picture on this same canvas Velázquez was leaning forward toward the canvas he is working on and not away from it as in the final version.
not painting. On the contrary, the royal couple is clearly posing for their picture to be painted.

Now, back to the picture. On the illusionist reading the spectators have become identical with Philip IV and María Ana. Given its position across the room and our position at the front of the scene, we would have to see ourselves in the mirror, but we see only the royal couple. Now what exactly is the painter on the left painting? Well it is quite obvious that he is painting us, that is, Philip IV and his wife. He looks straight at us, scrutinizing our features, before applying the brush to the canvas. We have plainly caught him in the very act of painting us. But in what sort of picture is he painting us? The standard interpretation is that he is painting a full length portrait of what we see in the mirror. But there is an objection to that interpretation which seems to me fairly convincing. The canvas he is painting on is much too large for any such portrait. The canvas on which he is painting is indeed about as big as the one we are looking at, about 10 feet high and 8 feet wide (the dimensions of Las Meninas are 3.19 meters by 2.67 meters). I think that the painter is painting the picture we are seeing; that is, he is painting Las Meninas by Velázquez. Although this interpretation seems to me defensible on internal grounds alone, there are certain bits of external evidence: as far as we know, the only portrait Velázquez ever painted of the royal couple is the one we are looking at, Las Meninas. Velázquez is plainly painting us, the royal couple, but there is no other picture in which he did that; and indeed he seldom used such large canvases for interiors. The Spinners is a large-scale interior but most of his big canvases are equestrian portraits of Spanish royalty.

We have already seen that the picture is paradoxical because point A is occupied not by the artist but by the model; and the full import of that is that the artist can’t occupy the point he has to occupy because the position is already taken. We can’t think an artist into the position as we can with the Courbet or with a standard self-portrait with a mirror because the position is filled with two people posing for the picture we are seeing but standing outside it at the point of view A. But now we uncover a second paradox. The artist has a point of view but it is an impossible one; he is inside the scene looking out at point A and painting the very same picture we are seeing from point A (that is, from point B which is identical with A on the illusionist reading).

One way to see the force of these paradoxes is to imagine changes in the picture that would remove them. Imagine that the royal couple and the painter trade places. We see Velázquez in the mirror working on the picture and the king and queen off to the left. Such a picture would be a conventional mirror self-portrait with a rather large supporting cast. The artist is back at point A where he belongs and the models are in zone O, where they are conceptually harmless. Or suppose we saw Philip IV in the mirror working on a canvas with a paintbrush in his hand. Then we
would have had a picture by Philip IV of Velázquez painting Philip IV painting Velázquez. Philip IV would then be at point A painting Velázquez painting Philip IV. The iteration makes that a complicated picture but not one that violates the axioms of pictorial representation. Yet a third way to remove the paradoxes is to take away the mirror altogether. Then we would be in exactly the situation we are in with the Courbet. One painter (imagined) is at point A painting another painter.

What these three fantasies demonstrate is that the heart of the paradox presented by the Meninas is in that mirror. The mirror shows us point A but it shows it occupied by impossible tenants. If we change the tenants, or change what the tenants are doing, or eliminate the mirror altogether, we remove the paradoxes, and incidentally make it a much less interesting painting.

Some writers have suggested that we can resolve the paradoxes by supposing that the artist is looking in a second mirror behind the king and queen and is painting the scene as there reflected. But that won't work, because any such mirror would have to show the king and queen from behind. We would have to see their backs in the painting.

I conclude then that there are two levels of paradox in Las Meninas. The following three propositions describe the first level.

1. The picture is painted from the point of view of the subject, not the painter.

2. We the spectators are seeing ourselves in that mirror and hence we are Philip IV and María Ana, in the illusionist reading.

   Neither of these propositions would need to bother us much if they were not underlain by a third.

3. The artist, and indeed any artist, is precluded from occupying point A.

   The second level comes from interpreting the painting in the picture as Las Meninas; then—

4. The painter having lost his point of view A is painting the picture from another point of view inside the picture zone O. From that point of view he is painting O, but he can't be painting O from that point of view because the point of view which defines O is A: strictly speaking O only exists relative to A. He is painting the scene we see, but he can't be because he is in it. From where he is in the picture, he can see and paint a different scene but not the scene represented in Las Meninas.

4

We know that the paradoxes must have a simple resolution because we know that the scene depicted is a visually possible scene. The painted surface represents a possible arrangement of objects in the world in a way that is not true of, for example, many of the pictures by Escher and
Steinberg or such puzzle pictures as that of the three-pronged object with only two bases. What part then of the classical axioms are we being asked to give up in order to render the picture unparadoxical? As soon as we have said that the picture depicts what the scene O would have looked like to the royal couple we have implicitly said that the resolution of the paradoxes is to abandon the connection between the creator and point A. With the classical axioms the painter paints what he sees or what he saw or what he could have seen or what he can imagine himself as having seen, and so on, and at least part of the puzzle I have been alluding to in this picture derives from the fact that the painter cannot satisfy this condition for this picture.

In the classical conception there is a connection between what is painted and the possibility of painting it, for the whole conception of art as imitation was a conception of the artist producing an imitation of what he saw. Leonardo, for example, goes to great lengths to explain to his readers how to paint pictures that look as much as possible like objects they see. And Pacheco, who was both Velázquez’s teacher and his father-in-law, minces no words in his textbook on art in telling us that the aim of art is imitation. “Pintura es arte que enseña a imitar con lineas y colores. Esta es la definicion”; 7 but in the case of the Meninas, what is imitated is not what the artist saw or could have seen but what the subject saw or could have seen. When we break the connection between point A and the painter we break the connection between what the picture is of and the act of painting it. Analogous dissociations between the point of view and the source of the representation are possible in other forms of representation as well. Just as every picture contains an implicit “I see,” so according to Kant every mental representation contains an implicit “I think,” and according to speech-act theory every speech act can be accompanied by an explicit performative, for example, “I say.” But just as in thought the “I” of the “I think” need not be that of the self (in fantasy, for example) and in speech acts the “I” of the “I say” need not be that of the speaker or writer (in ghostwriting, for example), so in the Meninas the “I” of the “I see” is not that of the painter but of the royal couple. Point A is after all not a natural point in the world; it is defined relative to whatever it is that can be seen. Thus any classical representational picture is already a representation of A; or rather since A is not in the picture, it is not represented by the picture but is still implied by the picture. In the Meninas A is reflected in the mirror and reflected in a way that breaks the connection between the “I see” of the picture and the “I see” of the painter of the picture. The artist stands outside A in the picture space O and paints the scene as seen from A. A is reflected in the mirror and six pairs of eyes are on A. It is because of these facts that in the Meninas A is in an important sense the subject matter of the picture.

What then is the picture of? Not just of a scene but of how the scene looked or could have looked to the royal couple. But what scene? Well, the scene that includes Velázquez painting a picture of the scene. And what scene is he painting? Well, the scene that includes Velázquez. . . . As with self-referential forms of representation generally we get a regress if we try to specify the content of the representation. But it is not a vicious regress. There is no way to answer the question What is the picture a picture of? that does not include reference to the picture. But that is simply a consequence of the fact that the picture is self-referential. On the representational reading, its conditions of satisfaction include it.8

8. I am indebted to several people for discussion of this picture and I especially want to thank S. Alpers, L. D. Ettlinger, A. Hannay, and D. Searle.