

Thinking with the Camera Obscura

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Let me start by saying how wonderful it is to be here today: really wonderful—a thing of wonder. It is invigorating, but more than a little disorienting, to have been working on something in the dark for so long, and then suddenly, to see it dragged out into the light. Thanks to the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies for making this possible; thanks also to Professor Spang for all her work in putting this event together. And thanks to all of you for investing your time in this book, which I hope you found was worth it.

Darkness and light are my themes, but what is my text? I have been asked to read no more than a paragraph from page 99, and discuss its relationship to the overall argument of the text. As it turns out, I'll be reading much less than a paragraph. My text is the last sentence from the first paragraph on page 99: "The camera obscura was turning up in a different way, not as technique, but as arrangement or design." Okay? "The camera obscura was turning up in a different way, not as technique, but as arrangement or design."

The argument of *The Mind Is a Collection* is simple. We have long known that dualisms are philosophically suspicious. They have been out of style since at least the 1930's (since Arthur Lovejoy and Gilbert Ryle differently pronounced them bad epistemology). But we—professionals and lay-people alike—continue to think as though they were true. Dualisms refuse to go away. The book wants to establish why this might be true, and it does so by turning to the moments, and the traditions, where dualisms sprung into being. It is an attempt at historical epistemology (which, to my mind, is the only kind of epistemology), treating some of the key questions of twentieth-century philosophy as legacies of particular moments in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. And so, while its questions are thoroughly dualist, philosophical in a tradition of philosophical epistemology, its approach is one of networks, of tracing thought to ecologies of persons and things. If I may put it this way—roughly as I put it elsewhere in the book—"dualism" is a name for certain kinds of networks. It is the name for certain situations or arrangements in which people recognize themselves in their environments: a curator in his cabinet, a philosopher in his library, a numismatist among his coins and medals. And I should say that even the notion of a person in an environment is already such a situation—an artificial distinction registered in what the book calls cognitive ecologies.

The usual way to think of this relationship, the one between people and environments, is to imagine us modeling cognitive processes on physical arrangements: the mind is a cabinet, or a repository, or a microcomputer. But, in the special case of the spaces of thought, of cabinets, repositories, or microcomputers, what we repeatedly find is people organizing their worlds according to how they understood their minds to work. This is a clear case of a dialectic, or, if you like a feedback loop: people organize spaces to match the mental processes that have already been theorized according to their spaces of thinking. This is what I mean by dualism as the state of a network, a name for the state of an ecology. The fundamental split between mind and matter, or thinker and thoughts, is established through a counterintuitive embeddedness, a complex set of relationships in co-evolving ecologies of persons and things.

So. How does the camera obscura fit in? Camera obscura of course means "dark room"—but it is not the darkness, or the room, that is the crucial thing; it is the particular way that it handles light. This is what was important, historically speaking, about the camera obscura; it was one of the earliest gadgets to produce a phenomenon by very carefully restricting the amount of light

that it admits. It is about as simple an optical device as can be imagined: first a pinhole, then, in later versions, a single lens, which throws an image upon a white sheet. Its history as an optical device is well known; the camera obscura gives way to the much brighter camera lucida, which, in turn, gives way to early versions of silver-plate daguerrotypes, celluloid photography, and so on.

The history of the camera obscura as a thing to *think* with has also, somewhat more recently, been established; first offering a model for the human eye, important in the slow phasing-out of neo-Aristotelean hylomorphism, it came slightly later to offer a model for the human mind. Its crucial innovation was to split the observer from what is observed; it offered a visual field as an object to be contemplated. The structure is the crucial thing—or, as I put it at the top of page 99, “the work of the camera obscura is not in capturing details; it is in the design.” The crucial idea, the core concept of its design, is the way that it separates the observer from the sensory field that is observed. This separation produces sensation as something “objective”—itself an object on a screen. And this separation, in turn, gives rise to a model of mind, a model which commits what is now sometimes called the homunculus fallacy: the philosophical position which posits a little experiencer inside the brain, as though sitting inside a theater, pulling controls to make the body move. In such a system, knowledge is understood as *content*. It is precisely for this reason that the camera obscura is among the first technical spaces underwriting the sorts of dualisms which are at the heart of *The Mind Is a Collection*.

Gadgets like these are important to the book and museum that together pose the argument of *The Mind Is a Collection*—and let me invite you, if you haven’t yet, to visit the museum, which can be found at www.mindisacollection.org. Each of the objects in the book, each of the museum’s exhibits, offered scaffolding for one or more British thinkers to think about themselves. Of course, here (exactly *here*, on page 99) my point is a different one—the other half of the dialectic that *The Mind Is a Collection* sketches. And this is what is less well known, what I take to be the original insight pursued by museum and catalogue alike. When the camera obscura turns up as an arrangement, it is because its work is the work of scaffolding—the closest term for which, in the eighteenth century, was design. I am thinking here, in an immediate sense, of the layout of images like Jan van Kessel’s many gallery paintings, one of which can be found on the facing page—and it was not just Jan van Kessel who arranged things like this, but others, such as Jan Breughel and Peter Paul Rubens or, arguably, Vermeer or even Alexander Pope. The question here is less about how people imagined the mind to work but, imagining it to work this way, how did they develop rules of aesthetic composition? Or, considering that composition means to “put together,” how did they arrange things—i.e. *design*—in pursuit of one or another aesthetic end?

This question bears on the arts—on the question of how one arranges objects of the senses, according to ideas about how they will be rearranged in experience. But it also bears on the active spaces of thought: how do we arrange concepts or ideas, books or museum objects? What does it mean to turn to a set of representations, rather than looking at the thing itself? For this painting (on page 98) could either be of a physical space, like a collector’s cabinet, or it could be of a mental cabinet; either scenario stages a lone thinker turned away from the scene framed in two eye-like windows, contemplating, instead, a collection of representative objects. This is either mentation or its parable, either the pleasures of witnessing or of remembering—what, in a phrase, Joseph Addison summed up as *The Pleasures of the Imagination*. What does it mean to think of thoughts as little nugget-like things, and little things as thoughts? Answers to questions like these help explain why we call a collection of objects a “museum,” a favored site of the muses; arrangement is one way of making sense of a whole range of mental faculties—from rea-

son to creativity. In fact, arrangement is one way of making sense of mentation as faculties in the first place.

In closing, let me just zoom out for a moment. It is a paradox of modern epistemology that that thing that should be most available to us (the spark of consciousness that, after Descartes and Locke, is the seat of reason and experience) is absolutely unspeakable, except through vocabularies borrowed from the sensible world. There are alternatives, which are (I think) worth exploring. But once we have committed ourselves to thinking of the mind as a structure, then we've committed ourselves to adopting various versions of metaphorical scaffolding. Scaffolding is the structural vocabulary or deep knowledge borrowed from repeated experiences with various kinds of technical gadgets. Speaking historically, then, if we are to seek the scaffolding itself—I mean, seek it in a sense of an archeology, of attempting to recover a way of thinking that would otherwise be lost—we can't look for it simply in the content of what people have spoken. It is a special feature of our habits that they don't enter into the content of our experiences. Rather, it has to be looked for in the structure of what has been thought, said, drawn, or built, especially in material habits. This is what I think *The Mind Is a Collection* is all about, and it is why I attempted to form my argument through a museum of exhibits. But, having published a book, I know that it is no longer mine; if I had been asked to speak from page 249, rather than 99, the otherness of ideas would have been my theme. And so, it is with curiosity and not a little trepidation (in other words, with wonder) that I'm going to stop speaking—and I look forward to finding out, finally, what I have been up to when compiling *The Mind Is a Collection*.