Velázquez's *Las Meninas* is paradoxical, according to John Searle. There has accumulated a staggering literature discussing the mysteries of this painting, and so, presumably, the contribution of Searle's essay is its quasi-technical exposition of the paradoxical character of the painting.

Searle's analysis of *Las Meninas* stands or falls with the truth of his assertion that "in the mirror, exactly opposite us, the spectators, is reflected the image of Philip IV and his second wife María Ana" (p. 480). Searle locates the significance of the painting in the rules of its construction, and its paradoxical character originates in its alleged violation of one fundamental rule of the "axiom system of classical illusionist representative painting" (p. 483). The broken rule is the basic "axiom" of perspective geometry that requires the painting to be projected as well as viewed from the viewpoint of the artist. Given this observation, Searle argues: (a) the painting is made not from the point of view of the artist but from...
that of the subject—the king and queen; (b) as viewers, we see ourselves in the mirror, and, therefore, on “the illusionist reading” we are the king and queen of Spain; (c) the viewpoint is “logically closed” to any artist, that is, the point of projection that establishes the picture cannot be occupied by an artist; and (d) because the viewpoint is closed, the artist must be painting this picture from within the picture area, but he cannot be at some other viewpoint because that would establish another picture. Las Meninas is thus paradoxical, and Searle resolves the paradox by asserting that the painting we see Velázquez composing in Las Meninas is Las Meninas itself.

We believe that all four assertions are mistaken and that the suggested resolution of the alleged paradox is, taken independently, very unlikely. At the level of its geometry, Las Meninas is not paradoxical. On the contrary, it is thoroughly and ingeniously orthodox. The construction of the painting violates no canon of “illusionist” representation. Searle’s error originates in a misconception of how viewpoint functions in the construction and interpretation of perspective painting and how a viewer identifies the point from which a picture in perspective is projected. Despite Searle’s effort, as it were, to formalize a description of the painting, it is precisely a formal, technical mistake which leads him to a paradox and then an attempted resolution.

* * *

The simplest paradox Searle finds in Las Meninas, and the one underlying the others he elaborates, is that the painting’s point of view cannot be taken by the artist. As Searle understands them, the axioms of pictorial representation require that from the spectator’s point of view the depiction present a view which is the same as (or looks like) the view presented by the scene itself to the real or imagined artist. The mirror in the painting shows the images of the king and queen, and it is the mirror which engenders the paradox. It does so, according to Searle, because the spectator’s point of view of Las Meninas is directly in front of the mirror. Searle formulates the axioms of pictorial representation in terms

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of a critical difference between the artist and the spectator: there are the spectator’s point of view (B) and the painting (P), the artist’s point of view (A) and the scene (O). The idea is that P is to look from B like O looks from A—with the understanding that it is the artist who looks from A. Some examples may clarify Searle’s conception.

Suppose Velázquez paints two pictures, each of a mirror, both with points of view appropriate to someone looking directly into the mirror: one with the mirror showing Velázquez (in the act of painting, if you like) and the other with the mirror showing, say, Searle (also painting, if you like). On Searle’s account, the first painting is not paradoxical but the second is. This is the reasoning: when a spectator looks at the Velázquez-in-a-mirror painting, he sees what the artist sees when he (the artist) actually looks into the actual mirror, and this makes the painting consistent with the axioms of pictorial representation. It is irrelevant that no spectator except Velázquez himself sees in the painting what the spectator sees when he looks on the actual scene. On the other hand, the Searle-in-a-mirror painting is inconsistent with the axioms because it permits no one to see in the painting what the artist sees in the scene. It is irrelevant that Searle sees in the painting exactly what he sees in the actual scene. It is irrelevant because Searle is not the artist.

This is a curious way of understanding things, for it makes the consistency of a painting depend upon the seemingly contingent matter of who happens to have painted it. (If the two paintings just discussed had been done by Searle, then the second would, after all, be consistent, but the first would become paradoxical.) Why not require the painting to deliver to all who occupy its point of view whatever they would see if they adopted the appropriate point of view on the actual scene? This would treat both Velázquez-in-a-mirror and Searle-in-a-mirror the same, which seems more agreeable to intuition; it would deem inconsistent all X-in-a-mirror paintings (except a trick painting which incorporated an actual mirror); and it would count Las Meninas inconsistent—if from its point of view the spectator looked directly into the mirror. Searle counts Las Meninas paradoxical specifically because from its point of view no one can see what should be seen. What should be seen is what Velázquez sees when looking at the actual scene, which is Velázquez himself in the mirror. On either account, the fact that someone other than the artist is shown in the mirror will be irrelevant, as will the fact, if it is one, that the mirror reflects something in front of the picture plane—unless the mirror is opposite the point of view. Searle says that it is.

2. We do not intend to subscribe to either way of understanding these paintings, for we do not agree with Searle’s formulation of the function of perspective in classical representation. Neither that disagreement, however, nor any difference between the two ways of dealing with X-in-a-mirror pictures has any bearing on the immediate question of whether Las Meninas is “paradoxical.”
Here are three propositions about *Las Meninas*:

1. The painting implies (or suggests, or indicates) that the king and queen are facing the depiction from before the picture plane.
2. The mirror reflects the persons of the king and queen.
3. The painting’s point of view is opposite the mirror.

Searle believes all three propositions are true. For the painting to be paradoxical in Searle’s sense, both 2 and 3 must be true. We think that neither 2 nor 3 is true. Proposition 1 is very probably true, but not for the same kind of reasons. It is useful to have the three propositions sorted out for they have sometimes been confused in discussions of *Las Meninas*.

Proposition 2 does not by itself imply 3. A mirror in a painting could reflect objects shown to be in front of the picture plane without those objects being placed at the point of view. The objects would only have to be placed at an angle from the mirror equal to the angle from the mirror to the point of view. It is only if the angle from the mirror to the point of view is zero—that is, if the point of view is opposite the mirror—that the reflected objects must also be at zero angle from the mirror—that is, at the point of view. Because 2 does not imply 3, our argument against 3 is not an argument against 2. Logic permits Searle to be mistaken about 3 while correct about 2. His belief in 2 is thus an additional mistake, and it takes an additional argument from us to show this.

Proposition 1 implies neither 2 nor 3. The king and queen could stand before the picture plane without being normal (that is, perpendicular) to either the mirror or the point of view. There is in the literature about *Las Meninas* a pervasive temptation to infer 2 from 1. Recently, for instance, Jonathan Brown has written:

The infanta has come to see the artist at work. Some moments before the “curtain” has risen, she has asked for a drink of water, which is now being proffered by the kneeling attendant at the left. Just as she hands a small pitcher to the princess, the king and queen enter the room and can be seen reflected in the mirror at the rear. One by one, although not simultaneously, the assembled persons begin to acknowledge the royal presence. The maid of honor at the right, who has seen them first, starts to curtsy. Velázquez has also noticed the intrusion and stopped in the midst of his work; he begins to lower his brush and palette. Mari Bárbara, like Velázquez, has just perceived the entrance of the king and queen, but has not yet had time to react. The princess has been watching little Nicolas Pertusata tease the dog, but suddenly glances to the left toward her parents, although her head remains turned in the direction of the dwarf. Hence the peculiar dislocation between her glance and the position of her head. Finally, Isabel de Velasco, intent on serving water to the princess, has yet to notice the monarchs, as has the
chaperone, momentarily involved in a conversation with the bodyguard, who himself has just noticed Philip and Mariana.

What follows from this generally admirable account of the “narrative” of Las Meninas? Brown goes on:

This description of the action not only explains the effect of instantaneity and clarifies the poses of the figures, it also confirms the fact that the mirror on the rear wall reflects the persons of the king and queen. They are physically present in the room.3

Brown here confuses 1 and 2. Suppose he is persuasive on the question whether the king and queen are physically present in the room: then his description argues well for 1 but shows nothing whatever about 2. When Brown says that the description “confirms the fact [of 2].” he goes awry. The question whether 2 is true is not confirmed but begged by the description, which says “. . . the king and queen enter the room and can be seen reflected in the mirror at the rear.”

* * *

Is proposition 3 true? What is Las Meninas’ point of view?—Searle’s claims about Las Meninas are stunning and wide-ranging. Given the pivotal role viewpoint plays in his argument, it seems fair to ask how he determined that we are standing “exactly opposite” the mirror. Searle’s reliance upon the axioms of classical painting leads the reader to expect that he will demonstrate the point of view more or less along classical lines. However, he provides no warrant at all for his location of the viewpoint. Perhaps he inherited the position from Michel Foucault’s essay on Las Meninas in Les Mots et les choses, but Foucault similarly fails to argue for the placement of the point of view—he merely asserts that it is exactly opposite the mirror.4

There is a simple procedure that allows us to establish, for paintings like Las Meninas that are projected in one-point perspective, the single point on the canvas that is, by definition, exactly opposite the eye that established the projection. This point, called the vanishing point, is located by extending all lines that are understood to be parallel to one another and perpendicular to the picture plane (the “orthogonals”) to the point at which, ex hypothesi, they must converge or focus. The point of focus is directly opposite the eye that established the projection.


4. See Michel Foucault, “Las Meninas,” Les Mots et les choses (Paris, 1966). We will cite the English translation, The Order of Things (New York, 1970), pp. 3–16, because it is more accessible and there is no further argument in the French.
Now if *Las Meninas* had been projected from a point exactly opposite the mirror at the back of the room, the vanishing point must be located at one point in the reflection. Indeed, it must fall on one eye of a figure reflected in the mirror. But the vanishing point in *Las Meninas* is not in the mirror at all: it is located at the bent elbow of the figure standing in the open doorway at the back of the room (see figs. 1 and 2).5

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5. The vanishing point of figure 2 is located by extending lines W-W', X-X', Y-Y', and Z-Z' that are given in the upper right-hand corner of the painting to the point at which they converge, V. P., located near the elbow of the figure at the back door. The horizon, H-H', is determined by running a line through V. P. that is parallel to the ceiling and floor. The limiting cases for the source of the reflection are determined as follows: for an observer standing infinitely distant from the plane of projection with his eye normal to V. P.—dropping perpendiculars from the right, center, and left of the mirror to the points

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FIG. 1.—Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*. The Prado, Madrid.
The point of view is exactly opposite this point at the distance in front of the canvas from which the projection was established. In terms of the space represented, this point is somewhere between five and eight feet to the right of where Searle locates it.\(^6\)

![Diagram](image)

**FIG. 2.**

at which the floor meets the back wall determines points A, B, and C. Extending orthogonals from V. P. through points A, B, and C makes the following apparent: line C-C' marks the rightmost area in the picture from which a reflection in the mirror might originate. This area coincides with the rightmost edge of the canvas. Thus from this viewpoint and distance, or any distance whatsoever, nothing to the right of the edge of the canvas can be seen in the mirror. If we extend the figure of Velázquez to the point on the floor at which his feet would appear, he is seen to be standing between A-A' and B-B'. In other words, he is standing normal to the mirror: if he were to turn around in place he would see his reflection in the mirror. In the second limiting case, the observer is assumed to be standing at the plane of projection in direct opposition to V. P. Point M is located as far to the left of the mirror as V. P. is to its right. A perpendicular is dropped from M to the point at which the floor meets the back wall: this is M'. An orthogonal from V. P. through M' extends outside the picture area to M''. Running a line from M'' to the horizon determines point R. This marks the leftmost region from which the reflection might originate. Since the distance taken by Velázquez in making the picture is about twelve feet from the plane of projection, the source of the reflection actually falls somewhat to the right of point R and distinctly to the left of the right-hand edge of the canvas.

6. The variable distance is due to Searle’s failure to locate a point in the mirror. The mirror is taken to be three feet wide, and so *Las Meninas*’ vanishing point is eight feet from the mirror’s left edge and five feet from its right.
The mirror in *Las Meninas* is not exactly opposite us: it is distinctly to the left of the vanishing point. This apparently small shift has major consequences. The vanishing point is to the right of the mirror and beneath the head level of the figures reflected. Had Velázquez stood peering into the room exactly opposite the doorway figure, at the distance from which the picture was projected, he could not possibly have seen himself in the mirror. Because the law of reflection requires that the angle of incidence equal the angle of reflection, the source of the mirror image must be well to the left of the viewpoint. How far left? Far enough that nothing standing to the right of the canvas depicted in the painting could possibly appear in the reflection. Thus the apparent paradox disappears with the location of *Las Meninas' point of view.*

* * *

We have been assuming that by “point of view” Searle means what is usually meant in discussions of perspectival painting. Perhaps he means something else, something like what seems to be the place from which the painting is likely (or intended by the artist) to be seen. In addition to the fact that if Searle does intend the usual meaning, then his analysis will fail for the reasons just given, there are at least three indications that Searle does have this something else in mind. The first indication is his remark about the “Necker cube”: “Even though our location in front of the Necker cube . . . is fixed, there are two positions the cube can be seen as occupying relative to us and hence two points of view” (p. 482).

In the traditional, technical sense of point of view, the question of our “location” is irrelevant, and the Necker cube does not have two points of view. There is *no* point from which it is projected: it is an orthographic projection, commonly regarded as not being in true perspective at all. In perspective drawing, at least one set of parallels must converge (and exactly one set if it is one-point perspective). If it is interpreted according to the “axioms of pictorial representation,” the Necker cube must be said to stand for nothing at all, much less one thing with multiple aspects or more than one thing.7

Another indication that Searle may intend an eccentric sense of point of view is his brief discussion of illusion and representation:

. . . the observer sees the picture *as if* he were seeing the original scene; and its illusionist reading is the basis of its representational

7. It is possible to take the Necker cube to be a kind of true perspectival rendering but not of anything like a cube. The possibility of straight projections of queer things will be discussed below, in the section dealing with proposition 2.
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. [P. 482]

This suggests that in order to discover what is represented the viewer must first find the illusion, and in doing so he will performe have located the point of view. This contrasts with the more technical sense, in which one could very well locate the point of view not only before finding the illusion but even if one could not master any “illusionist reading” at all. And one could go even further to calculate what scene is represented. This technical notion, which is congenial to Nelson Goodman’s analysis in which representation is altogether independent of illusion, seems rejected by Searle. 8

A final indication of Searle’s sense of point of view is his failing to locate a point and remaining content to locate it generally in the persons of the king and queen. This is reminiscent of Foucault’s failure to call a point a point; but Foucault is even more generous, requiring not even that the point be opposite the mirror but allowing that it is opposite the whole rear wall. 9

So perhaps Searle intends something besides the specific technical sense of point of view. But how can the point of view be established in this informal sense? By seeing how it looks? To whom? To whom does it appear that the point of view is directly opposite some point in the mirror? We submit, after informal research, that it appears this way to fewer than half those who look at Las Meninas and that the rest, like us, find the point of view more nearly opposite the opened, illuminated doorway to the right of the mirror. If we count only the way the painting looks to professional viewers, there is still no unanimity nor even a consensus. Marina Vaizey, for instance, has recently said, “Ingeniously Velázquez has included in the composition a large portrait of the king and queen on which he is working, which is reflected in a mirror at the back of the room.” 10 Perhaps Leo Steinberg agrees when he says, “Or else the foreground motif is a canvas in progress—as in Rembrandt’s Painter Before His Easel (Boston), and in Velázquez’s Las Meninas. In both pictures, our attention turns on the glance of the painter; behind the re-

9. See Foucault, “Las Meninas,” p. 6. Of course we are opposite the rear wall when we look at the painting. But Foucault uses “opposite” in a way that clearly implies that he takes the point of view to be opposite the entire wall. Then where is the vanishing point? It will not do, even if spoken very loosely, to say that we are opposite the whole wall when we are at our point of view, for then one would be obliged to admit that if, say, the mirror and one of the rear wall’s paintings were interchanged, “we” would still be reflected in the mirror.
verse of the canvas, we see its obverse observed.”11 We already know that Brown thinks it is the persons of the king and queen which are reflected in the mirror. Madlyn Millner Kahr dismisses as “extremely unlikely” the proposition advanced by Bartolomé Mestre Fiol “that a full-length double portrait of the King and Queen was the subject on the canvas and that the upper portions of the figures in this painting are reflected in the mirror.”12 Kahr does not say what is so very unlikely—the idea that a double portrait is on the canvas or the idea that it is the canvas (whatever is on it) which is reflected in the mirror—nor does she say anything about why it is unlikely. José Gudiol is much kinder to Mestre Fiol:

Palomino’s explanation certainly lends itself to confusion and it is hardly surprising that it has been misinterpreted by some art historians and critics, thus giving rise to the popular misconception that what we see in The Maids of Honour is what was seen by Philip IV and Mariana of Austria as they posed for Velázquez.

If we are to go by the rules of geometrical perspective, this cannot be the true explanation, as has been made clear in a recent study by Bartolomé Mestre Fiol. . .13

H. W. Janson once said, “Her royal parents have just stepped into the room. We do not see them, for the artist has put them and us in the same place; in the mirror where she should see our own faces we see theirs. We are being shown, then, a king’s-eye view of the studio.”14 Elsewhere, however, Janson says this:

The faces of her parents, the king and queen, appear in the mirror on the back wall. Have they just stepped into the room, to see the scene exactly as we do, or does the mirror reflect part of the canvas—presumably a full-length portrait of the royal family—on which the artist has been working? This ambiguity is characteristic of Velázquez’ fascination with light.15

In the first quotation Janson seems in the Foucault-Searle line, although he does not note a “paradox” wrought by this way of seeing the painting. In the second quotation he settles for an “ambiguity,” a less exotic logical crux. (The second quotation, however, does incorporate the error made

15. Janson, History of Art, rev. ed. (New York, 1977), pp. 518–19. (Because we do not know whether this passage was revised for the later edition, we do not know whether this remark or the one from A Basic History of Art is earlier.)
by Brown, among others, that is, the confusion of propositions 1 and 2: perhaps the king and queen have just stepped into the room and the mirror reflects the canvas.)

The point in assembling these diverse quotations is to show that the more one depends upon an informal sense of point of view and other notions in perspectival geometry, the less one is able to produce a well-grounded analysis. A persistent oddity in discussions of *Las Meninas* is the use of technical-sounding terminology ("paradox," "ambiguity," "self-referential," "axioms") to describe the painting, but with no serious effort to formalize an account of how the painting is to be viewed. It is as if a grammarian set out to apply the heavy machinery of formal semantics and logic to the explication of sentences in English but began by allowing that the sentences could mean whatever anyone wanted them to mean. One might then use the term "paradox" to describe any sentence that puzzled a few hearers or provoked disagreement as to its meaning.

Surely Searle must rely on a stable, formal conception of the point of view. He sets *Las Meninas* on a par with the antinomy of the liar and the paradoxes of set theory. (It is apparently because of what he takes to be its rather strict analogy with these conundrums that Searle goes on to say that *Las Meninas* is involved in self-reference.) But nothing is an antinomy or a paradox just because it seems so or just because it is confusing or difficult, even if it seems so to everyone. To deserve such a description, a thing must be, so to speak, intrinsically intractable, not merely resistant when looked at in a particular way. If a man says "I do not believe I am alive," that will be odd, and it will be hard to understand just what he means, and it may even be hard or impossible to believe that he is telling the truth; but there is no antinomy. If a man says "I am lying," then we have a primitive version of the antinomy of the liar. Given the meaning of this utterance—and nothing else—there is no way to get a grip on it. If what the man says is true, then it's false; if what he says is false, then it's true.

We may sharpen the point by moving to a less primitive version of this proto-antinomy, made by refining the problem of the liar. Consider this:

The sentence set in boldface on page 439 of the Winter 1980 *Critical Inquiry* is false.

If this sentence is true, then it's false; and if it's false, then it's true. Notice how this unpleasantness comes about. Two background assumptions are at work: (1) the sentence is in English and means that the sentence set in boldface on page 439 of the Winter 1980 *Critical Inquiry* is false; and (2) there is, in fact, exactly one boldface sentence on page 439 of the Winter 1980 *Critical Inquiry*. The first assumption is, so to speak, internal to the sentence, concerning its logical semantics. The second
assumption is “empirical,” concerning facts in the world.\textsuperscript{16} (If there were, in fact, no boldface sentence on page 439, or more than one, or one which was not the one which refers to the boldface sentence, then the trick would not come off.)

We contend that there are two comparable kinds of assumptions required about any painting it would be useful to call “paradoxical.” Comparable to the assertion that the sentence is in English and means what it means is the assertion that the painting is in standard perspective and presents the scene it presents. The calculation of what scene is presented incorporates identification of the painting’s point of view, just as the calculation of what the sentence means incorporates identification of the sentence’s grammar. Its point of view is thus internal to a painting; only after it is reckoned with is it time to look to the world, to check the state of affairs attested to by the painting, and to find a possibly unpleasant surprise if that state happens to include the painting itself (as the reference of the sentence turns out to include the sentence itself). There is no question of how the painting looks or what the sentence seems to mean to whom; and it must be this way with \textit{Las Meninas} if there is to be any point in bringing into its analysis the frightful equipment suggested by Foucault and actually deployed by Searle. The point of view must first be given; and it is—but Searle and Foucault get it wrong.

If there are such things as the axioms of pictorial representation, or what Goodman calls “the traditional Western system of representation,”\textsuperscript{17} then these axioms apply not to how a painting looks but to the painting itself. Nor is the point of view first (somehow) located and then the axioms applied. The axioms, or rules, apply from the outset, and their application determines, among other things, what the point of view is. In \textit{Las Meninas} the vanishing point is not in the mirror, and so no point opposite the mirror is the point of view.

\textit{Is proposition 2 true? What does the mirror reflect?}—It does not seem likely that the mirror reflects the persons of the king and queen, and it is impossible if the royal pair is supposed to be standing in front of the

\textsuperscript{16} The problem sentence can be further refined so that no empirical assumptions are necessary for it to cause trouble. This refinement is not required for the simple point we wish to make. A very helpful discussion of these matters is W. V. Quine’s “The Ways of Paradox,” \textit{The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays} (New York, 1966). A classic investigation is the elegant “Truth and Proof” by Alfred Tarski, \textit{Scientific American}, June 1969. For enthusiastic and enlightening conversations which led to clarifications in our own brief exposition, we are indebted to Leonard Linsky.

\textsuperscript{17} See Goodman, \textit{Languages of Art}, p. 226; the idea that traditional representational painting is to be understood in terms of a formal system is the leading idea in much of the book, and comparable phrases can be found throughout. Goodman, however, quite clearly believes that these systemic considerations apply to the paintings themselves, the “characters” in a “symbol system.” In fact, he mounts a powerful attack against any reliance in formal analysis on how paintings “look.”
picture plane.\textsuperscript{18} The reflection must originate roughly from the central region of the canvas upon which Velázquez shows himself at work. The determination of the source of the reflection is a relatively simple geometric problem, although its step-by-step description is tedious. Perhaps the best way to get a sense of the problem and its solution is to imagine walking about in the depicted room and looking at the mirror with the purpose of seeing the reflection of someone who is standing at the point from which the picture was projected. This area can be determined geometrically by establishing the theoretically limiting cases for the left- and rightmost boundaries of the surface from which the reflection originates (see figs. 1 and 2). There are two limiting cases: (a) for a point of view at an infinite distance from the canvas; and (b) for a point of view at the canvas itself. The geometry of the former case shows that no object to the right of the depicted canvas can be reflected in the mirror, no matter what distance is assigned to the viewpoint. The geometry of the latter case shows that the source of the reflection might originate left of center of the depicted canvas (using Searle’s estimate of the size of that canvas). At a distance of about twelve feet from Las Meninas, the most likely distance from which the viewpoint was taken, the center of the source of reflection is right of center of the canvas upon which Velázquez is seen painting. It may seem that if this is so, then at least part of Velázquez’s back should be reflected in the mirror. The diagram shows that the geometry of the painting precludes this. Velázquez is standing normal to the mirror (if he turned around in place he would stare directly into the mirror). He has been placed just outside the angle of incidence, and so he cannot be reflected in the mirror as seen from the point of view.\textsuperscript{19}

This kind of geometrically sanctioned reasoning about the painting depends upon an assumption: the room depicted is assumed to be a reasonably correct rectangle. This is not only an assumption standard in classical representation but one that certainly seems warranted by the

\textsuperscript{18} They might be standing, hidden from our view, in front of the canvas that is shown in the painting. And it might even be that Velázquez is literally painting the king and queen. It might be so, although this would carry “illusionism” to a new depth.

\textsuperscript{19} Searle reports a remarkable fact, previously unknown to us, which tends to confirm this construction. He remarks in a footnote (p. 484) that X-ray photographs have shown that in an earlier version of Las Meninas, the figure of Velázquez was shown leaning forward, toward the canvas. That placement would require his reflection in the mirror. Is that why Velázquez altered his painting?

An excellent aid to seeing the geometry of Las Meninas is Picasso’s Variation on Las Meninas, 1. In this painting Picasso has retained the general compositional form of Las Meninas, and the vanishing point’s placement (in the doorway), the mirror, and the canvas it reflects are rendered with an acute perspicuity which seems to make the correct “look” unmistakable. Picasso’s own recorded remarks about Las Meninas are a bit ambiguous. In any case, he has kept Las Meninas’ fundamental geometry in his Variation; and it then seems easier to see that geometry in the Variation.
painting. Can it be called into question? Perhaps this is what Brown had in mind. After noting Ramiro de Moya's contention that the mirror reflects a portion of the canvas, Brown sets this contention aside, in part because "... it soon became apparent that the perspective of the picture could be drawn in several ways" (p. 89). While we are not acquainted with de Moya's argument or the "refutations" of it cited by Brown, we are confident that they cannot establish the arbitrariness of the point of view and that they cannot remove the point of view from the doorway without abandoning assumptions about the shape of the room. Mestre Fiol's evidently similar geometrical argument was similarly dismissed by Kahr, although Kahr herself acknowledges that, "on the basis of the architectural and decorative features of the room as well as the sharply diminished sizes of the increasingly distant figures, a convincing linear perspective is produced." It certainly is—a one-point perspective. The only way to accept this fact and avoid placing the vanishing point in the doorway is to fiddle with the room. Before we consider that eccentricity, let us note that none of those who need to find the vanishing point in the mirror, including Searle and Foucault, show any sign that they take the room to be anything other than routinely rectangular. And let us also note that should we be wrong in our assessment of the viewpoint's location, that in itself would not lend Searle's thesis the support it needs. A supporter of Searle must first show that we are wrong to place the vanishing point in the doorway and then show that it belongs in the mirror.

Can we deny that the room is a regular rectangle? Let us try. Let us say that the room is queer in shape and that the line that joins the ceiling to the right-hand wall and the line formed by the molding beneath it are neither straight nor "really" parallel to one another. This assumption casts Velázquez in the role of perverse game-player or idiot. The point at which these lines join is then not the vanishing point for the picture. What now? What follows from this new construction of the picture? Absolutely nothing. We are blocked from determining the vanishing point, but so is everyone else, including Searle and Foucault. In light of this distinctly anticlassical assumption, no one can determine the point from which the picture was projected. Of course nothing in the picture leads us to suppose that there is anything strange about the room. And if

20. Brown accuses de Moya and others of making various assumptions about the relation of paintings to reality and the function of perspective in articulating that relation; and he may very well be right to question those assumptions. About their estimates of Las Meninas' geometry, however, he says nothing more than in the remark quoted. He does not himself take up the questions of perspectival geometry, apparently being satisfied that the perspective can be drawn variously. He does not show how this is done.

Searle is to rely upon the conventions of classical representation—and this reliance is the foundation of his analysis—he must also rely upon the honesty of the artist. The assumption that the picture is a straight projection of a crooked room finds no warrant in the picture.

Let us try, finally, against all evidence to the contrary, the assumption that the vanishing point is at the mirror. Let us say that the vanishing point falls at the king's right eye. We may then draw a "fan" of orthogonals from this point across the floor, walls, and ceiling. Not one of these lines overlaps with any of the apparent orthogonals drawn by Velázquez. He has not only misled us, he has totally botched the use of the axioms of representation. The space becomes irrational, and while we can give verbal expression to the consequences of this construction, it is not at all clear how to make sense of the description. For example, the new construction features spatial legerdemain: the right-hand wall meets the back wall and the floor at a point below the floor. Because of this pictorial oddity, the line that separates the right-hand wall from the floor is so situated that there is no floor at all upon which three and three-quarters of the figures on the right-hand side of the picture can stand. They are assimilated into the wall. What this means is not clear, but it is certain that this is not classical representation, nor is it modern. It is foolish.

Is proposition 1 true? Does the painting indicate the presence of the king and queen, in person, in the area just before the picture plane?—The answer to this question is yes. The most plausible way to understand the glances outward, some of them deferential, of two-thirds of the people in the scene is to suppose that they are looking forward (outward) at the king and queen.

In a full interpretation and analysis of Las Meninas it would be central and perhaps critical to discuss the truth of proposition 1—at least as important as dealing with propositions 2 and 3. It remains true, however, that 1 is essentially a different kind of proposition. Propositions 2 and 3 depend upon entirely formal considerations; 1 does not. In this sense 2 and 3 are purely internal propositions and 1 is not. Or, if the terminology of philosophical logic is appropriate, 2 and 3 concern the painting's "syntax" and "semantics," while 1 concerns its "pragmatics." Our arguments against 2 and 3 proceed from elementary geometry, optics, theory of perspective, and nothing else. No such argument will decide for or against proposition 1. It does not follow that 1 cannot be decided nor that it is unimportant. Quite the contrary; propositions like 1 seem bound to be at the center of the most interesting discussions, but these external, pragmatic propositions are likely to be muddled unless

22. The Necker cube can be dealt with in this way. It is left to the reader to imagine an object which, when projected in one-point perspective (or two-point perspective, if you like), comes out to be projected as the Necker cube. Such an object is physically possible, but it is one strange object; and it is not a cube.
the internal, formal propositions (like 2 and 3) are resolved properly at the start.

Is Searle's resolution correct? What is on the canvas?—With the paradox dissolved, Searle's suggested resolution is moot. His suggestion deserves independent consideration, however, as a speculation about what is on the canvas in Las Meninas. He thinks that it is Las Meninas itself, an ingenious and provocative idea.23 Nothing in the painting conclusively verifies or disconfirms this, but a combination of formal and pragmatic considerations argues against Searle's conjecture. In our (formal) discussion of propositions 2 and 3, we noted that the source of the mirror image must lie in the region of the canvas (of course Searle does not believe this). In our (pragmatic) discussion of 1, we accepted the usual conception that the persons of the king and queen are present to the scene from some position in front of the vertical picture plane. It follows that the whimsical supposition that the royal persons are between Velázquez and his canvas is untenable. If nothing else is concealed to Velázquez's right which could generate the reflection, then the canvas itself must be the source of the mirror's image. Could this be so if the canvas were Las Meninas itself? Las Meninas does contain a possible source of the reflection—the reflection itself. That is, the mirror in the real Las Meninas could be reflecting the unseen mirror in the unseen-canvas Las Meninas, couldn't it? Not quite, for mirrors reverse right-left, and so the canvas Las Meninas would have to be Las Meninas with its mirror figures transposed. (This transposed Las Meninas, however, would itself contain its own canvas Las Meninas which would retranspose to be identical with the real Las Meninas, and so on, making every other canvas correct.)

Searle thinks the source of the reflection is the persons of the king and queen, and so he has no formal reason for attributing any features to the canvas. We believe that formal considerations require the canvas to deliver the image to the mirror, and thus we (formally) require the canvas to contain depictions of the king and queen. Beyond that, we find no reason to support further speculations about the unseen canvas.

How important is point of view?—Once it is clear that its point of view is a function of a painting and not of how a painting looks, it is, perhaps, also clear that it is generally not necessary to compute the geometrically defined point of view, nor is it likely that many of the most interesting discussions of a painting will involve reference to point of view. If, however, one's analysis requires reference to a point of view, then it is essential that one understand that it is indeed a (geometrical and

23. See Kahr, Velásquez, p. 138: Kahr says that this suggestion has also been made by Enrique Lafuente, Martin Soria, Hugo Kehrer, and others. Their reasons are not given, but they are probably not the same as Searle's, for whom this suggestion constitutes a resolution of the paradox.
geometrically determined) point. As we have seen, Searle's analysis is entirely dependent upon locating this point, although he seems to think it unnecessary actually to do so. Ruskin is clear about this:

Every picture drawn in true perspective may be considered as an upright piece of glass,* on which the objects seen through it have been thus drawn. Perspective can, therefore, only be quite right, by being calculated for one fixed position of the eye of the observer; nor will it ever appear deceptively right unless seen precisely from the point it is calculated for. Custom, however, enables us to feel the rightness of the work on using both our eyes, and to be satisfied with it, even when we stand at some distance from the point it is designed for.24

But Ruskin goes wrong just after noting the importance to calculation of the one fixed position of the eye and joins Searle in an erroneous inference about how paintings are supposed to be seen. Searle says,

. . . 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. [P. 481]

A viewer can treat a painting as just one other object to be seen and then elect whatever position he likes as the point of view from which he will inspect the painting; but the whole point of taking the painting to be an instance of “classical pictorial representation” is to understand that the point of view is given by the painting. Once the painting is taken in this way, the viewer can no more choose a point of view than he can choose the painting's vanishing point.

A picture made strictly according to the rules of perspective con-

24. John Ruskin, The Elements of Perspective with Notes on its Theory and Practice and on the Proper Shapes of Pictures and Engravings (1859; London, 1910), pp. 3–4. Ruskin’s footnote to this passage reads, “If the glass were not upright, but sloping, the objects might still be drawn through it, but their perspective would then be different. Perspective, as commonly taught, is always calculated for a vertical plane of picture.”
struction (like Las Meninas, for instance) must be projected from one and only one point that, once set, defines the “aspects” of the objects represented and their spatial relations to one another—just as Searle says. It does not follow that a viewer is obliged to take the same point of view, or even one close to it, in order to find the picture significant. It is utterly unnecessary to place one of one’s eyes directly in front of the vanishing point. If this were not the case, the seats in a motion picture theatre would be placed only in one slim line from the front to the back of the theatre, on an axis with the projector. But they needn’t be; we do not have trouble sitting even substantially off-axis and at the “wrong” distance from the screen. Our children watch television while flat on their backs and, alas, miss none of the significance in what’s on the screen.

Some pictures are very delicately balanced on a viewpoint and look distorted when seen from a position even slightly away from the geometrically sanctioned point. But most pictures do not behave in this way, and we are free to wander in front of them without missing their significance. We do not approach paintings in the way that we approach problems in surveying, and our perceptual capacities are not, by themselves, typically equipped to inform us when we are at the right point of view. The error made by Searle and Foucault in seeing Las Meninas is an acute illustration.

Las Meninas regained.—Does this demythologizing interpretation diminish the greatness of Las Meninas? If the painting is not, after all, a paradox of self-reference (Searle) or a vision of pure unconditioned representation as such (Foucault), then is it too pedestrian to warrant this assessment by Brown?

Whatever the disagreements between the partisans in this debate, there always has been agreement on one point—Las Meninas is not only a great picture, it is also Velázquez’s masterpiece. Such unanimity about the production of a major artist is rare indeed, and perhaps it occurs because the painting was intended from the outset to be extraordinary. One can almost sense an intention to dazzle the viewer that makes the picture unique in the artist’s oeuvre. The size, the complex composition, the unrivaled technique all mark it as a deliberate showpiece. If this is so, then we have identified the most important question about Las Meninas—what did Velázquez hope to show by this prodigious display of his talents? [P. 90]

One part of that good question now becomes this: If he has indicated the frontal presence of the monarchs and has also shown their reflected image in the mirror, why has Velázquez not arranged for the mirror to be reflecting them in person?

May we assume Velázquez to expect that the first careless viewing will induce the mistaken opinion that the actual monarchs are reflected
and that the further realization that this cannot be so will excite exactly this question? There is, perhaps, a clue in the painting to the importance of thinking and seeing this through. One of the paintings on the back wall deals with the Arachne myth. Arachne, a mistress of spinning, succumbs to artistic hubris and competes with Minerva, only to be punished by being transformed into a spider—the emblem of the master geometer.

_Las Meninas_ is an audacious celebration of the painter’s mastery of his art. A gifted painter rivals nature; a great painter forces nature to rival art. Velázquez wants, and he wants the viewer to understand that he wants, the mirror to depend upon the unseeable painted canvas for its image. Why should he want that? The luminous image in the mirror appears to reflect the king and queen themselves, but it does more than just this: the mirror outdoes nature. The mirror image is only a reflection. A reflection of what? Of the real thing—of the art of Velázquez. In the presence of his divinely ordained monarchs, his Apollo and his Minerva, Velázquez exults in his artistry and counsels Philip and María not to look for the revelation of their image in the natural reflection of a looking glass but rather in the penetrating vision of their master painter. In the presence of Velázquez, a mirror image is a poor imitation of the real.